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Bad News From Venezuela

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the Degree of PhD in Sociology

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Social Sciences

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Abstract

This is a mixed methods research thesis on how the Western press covers Venezuela. It found a pronounced to overwhelming tendency for all newspapers to present the country, its economics and politics in an extremely negative light, presenting minority opinions on highly-contested and controversial issues as undisputed facts while rarely acknowledging opposing opinions existed and displaying an overwhelming aversion to the Venezuelan government and its project in the majority of articles, especially editorials.

Drawing on Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Gramsci's (1971) theories, it found the coverage shaped by the cultural milieu of journalists. News about Venezuela is written from New York or London by non-specialists or by those staying inside wealthy guarded citadel enclaves inside an intensely segregated Caracas. Journalists speak mainly to English-speaking elites and have little contact with the poor majority. Therefore, they reproduce ideas that are largely attuned to a Western, neoliberal understanding of Venezuela. Facing intense financial pressure, newspapers have outsourced their coverage to local journalists affiliated with the virulently partisan opposition, leading to a highly adversarial newsroom culture that sees itself as the "resistance" against *chavismo*. Journalists sympathetic to *chavismo* practice self-censorship and experts sharing differing opinions about Venezuela are commonly blacklisted from mainstream media.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Alan MacLeod

Spanish Words Used in this Thesis

Barrio- Spanish for neighbourhood, but has come to refer to the dilapidated working-class districts of a city, synonymous with crime, violence and poverty.

Bolivarian Circles- Loosely-knit political social and community organizations supported by the government.

Caracazo- An event in 1989 where the Venezuelan government violently cracked down on a popular protest. At least three hundred, but possibly up to three thousand people were massacred.

Chavistas, chavismo- *Chavismo* is the political ideology of Hugo Chavez. “*Chavistas*” refers to those who support him.

Guarimbas- Street barricades. In this thesis, it refers to the 2014 anti-government demonstrations as a whole.

Miraflores- The Venezuelan presidential palace.

Primero Justicia- Justice First, an opposition political party.

Pueblo- Spanish for “the people.”

Punto Fijo (period)- A forty-year period between 1958 and 1998 where two elitist parties shared power in Venezuela.

Abbreviations

AD- *Accion Democrática*, the more liberal of the two main *Punto Fijo* parties.

AP- Associated Press

CARICOM- The Caribbean Community

CELAC- Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States).

CEPAL- See ECLAC

CEPR- Center for Economic Policy Research

CIA- Central Intelligence Agency

CNE- Consejo Nacional Electoral, (The Venezuelan National Electoral Council).

COPEI- Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente. A right-wing Venezuelan political party.

DIA- United States Defense Intelligence Agency

ECLAC/CEPAL- United Nations’ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. In Spanish, the initials are CEPAL.

FAIR- Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting

FAO- United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization

FARC- *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, a Colombian guerilla movement.

FBI- Federal Bureau of Investigation

Fedecamaras- The Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce

GDP- gross domestic product

GNI- gross national income

GUMG- Glasgow University Media Group

HDI- human development index

IMF- International Monetary Fund

IRI- International Republican Institute

Latinobarometro- a respected Chilean polling organization

MERCOSUR- Mercado Común del Sur- The Southern Common Market

MUD- *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, (Democratic Unity Roundtable). The main opposition coalition.

NED- National Endowment for Democracy

NGO- non-governmental organization

NSC- United States National Security Council

OAS- Organization of American States

OECD- Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development

PDVSA- *Petróleos de Venezuela*. A huge, government-owned oil company.

PSUV- *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*. United Socialist Party of Venezuela. The largest *chavista* political party.

UN- United Nations

UNASUR- *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* (Union of South American Nations).

UNDP- United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNODC- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USAID- United States Agency for International Development

Introduction

Since the election of Hugo Chavez as its President in 1998, there has been a great worldwide explosion of interest and controversy in the country of Venezuela. This is due in no small part to the *chavista* movement's opposition to the system of neoliberalism that, since the end of communism, dominates how the world is structured.¹ In 2005 Chavez outlined an alternative, that of "21st century socialism"- a socialism based on fraternity, love, liberty and equality and different from the state-dominated socialism of the 20th century (Wilpert, 2006). This idea took hold across much of Latin America, with waves of new governments, such as those of Bolivia and Ecuador, espousing it. The concept also spread to Europe, with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras calling Hugo Chavez his hero while PODEMOS leader Pablo Iglesias worked as an advisor to him in Venezuela and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn outlining his own 21st century socialism model for the UK.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse how the Western, English-language media has presented Venezuela since 1998 and to try to explain why it has covered it in such a fashion. Thus, the two most basic, fundamental questions it hopes to answer are as follows:

1. How has the Western press covered Venezuela since 1998: what themes consistently arise, what positions do the media take on key issues and where do they fall on the spectrum of opinions on the country?
2. Why is it covered this way: what factors influence the output of the Western media?

To answer these questions a mixed methods approach has been constructed. In order to primarily answer question one, 501 articles from seven of the most influential Western publications (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*) have been studied using thematic analysis and content analysis. This

¹ Chavez himself labeled neoliberalism "the road to hell" (Comas, 2002).

² The *Punto Fijo* period is often labeled as ending in 1993 with the election of the independent Rafael Caldera. However, Caldera had previously been President from 1969-1974 as a COPEI

can be found in chapters 3-7. Question two has been explored by conducting interviews with twenty-seven journalists covering Venezuela or experts on the topic, the results of which are discussed in chapters 8-11. A more detailed description of the structure of the research can be found in the methodology chapter.

This new interest in Venezuela is in contrast to the forty year *Punto Fijo* period (1958-1998) that preceded it.² In those years, where two elite parties shared power, the country was considered a rather boring backwater; an island of stability and democracy amid the economic and political chaos engulfing the other countries of Latin America (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 12, Ellner and Tinker-Salas, 2007), commonly referred to as “America’s backyard” (Livingstone, 2009).

This changed with Chavez’s election, the first non-white President in a majority non-white country (Cannon, 2008). A great number of biographies about the charismatic ex-military officer have been written, both from a sympathetic, progressive perspective (Gott, 2011, Gonzalez, 2014, Kozloff, 2007) and from a negative, conservative one (Corrales and Penfold, 2011, Marcano and Barrara Tyszka, 2007, Carroll, 2013). Likewise, many documentaries have been commissioned about the country, with some (*South of the Border* (2009), *The Revolution will not be Televised* (2003)) presenting the changes in Venezuela as being a shining example to follow and others (*The Well-Oiled Revolution of Hugo Chavez*, (2006), *The Hugo Chavez Show* (2008)) arguing the country is slipping into a dictatorship. Thus, Venezuela has become the centre of great interest and controversy for those of all political persuasions. While nothing about the country’s history or politics is uncontested, the one thing all agree on is that Venezuela is a truly remarkable country. One example of this is in 2013, the people elected Nicolas Maduro, a bus driver and union activist to become President.

Part of the reason for the great controversy around Venezuela is that the *chavista* movement has challenged neoliberal economics and Western models of

² The *Punto Fijo* period is often labeled as ending in 1993 with the election of the independent Rafael Caldera. However, Caldera had previously been President from 1969-1974 as a COPEI politician and was still a political insider. Indeed, the *Punto Fijo* pact was signed at Caldera’s home. Furthermore, the period 1993-1998 offered more in the way of continuity with previous administrations than divergence. Therefore, this thesis uses the dates 1958-1998 for the period.

democracy and claim to be building an alternative model for others to follow. It is in this context that the interest and controversy surrounding the country must be understood.

Neoliberalism can be defined as a political economic and social ideology that stipulates that human well-being can be achieved most fully by reducing as many barriers to free trade and free markets whilst removing regulations on businesses and reducing the size of the state and its interference in the economy and society. It eschews collectivism and instead promotes a culture of individualism and consumerism as the path to happiness. As one of the chief figureheads of neoliberalism, Ronald Reagan (1981), said, “Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

Starting with Chile in 1973, Latin America became a testing ground, the “Empire’s workshop (Grandin, 2006) for the neoliberal ideas of the University of Chicago, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who were free to dictate policies to states. Across the region, wages fell, with the minimum wage declining by 26 percent between 1980 and 1999 (Klein and Tokman, 2000:10). Inflation and unemployment were rampant but a small sector at the top of society became much wealthier, leading to greatly increased economic and social inequality. Neoliberalism was taken up in the 1980s by that Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan administration in the US and quickly became the dominant ideology of the elite across the world and the policies had similar economic effects. For a more detailed discussion of neoliberal globalization, see chapter one.

Going against neoliberal paradigm, the *chavista* government intervened in the economy in order to help the disadvantaged marginalized majority and greatly reduced poverty (CEPALSTAT, 2016a, 2016b) and inequality (ECLAC, 2013: 91). UNESCO declared Venezuela illiteracy free in 2005 and the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2013) gave Venezuela special commendation in 2013 for reducing malnourishment.

However, it has also been criticized as an increasingly authoritarian state (Weyland, 2013b) that eroded checks and balances on the power of the majority

(Corrales and Penfold 2011: 1). Some have also claimed Chavez stifled freedom so much he became an autocrat in a dictatorship (Toro, 2013, Carroll, 2013) and the *chavistas* nationalizations had destroyed the free market and the economy (Carroll, 2013, Anderson, 2013).

Venezuela has also taken a lead internationally. In 2016 it became president of the non-aligned movement while it reinvigorated OPEC in 1999, with the first OPEC summit in 25 years taking place in Caracas in 2000. As a result, the price of oil jumped from \$9 per barrel in 1999 (Raby, 2006: 161) to \$140 in 2008 (BBC, 2008), much to the chagrin of oil importers like the US and many European countries.

The country has also presented a strong and lasting challenge to American dominance of Latin America, spearheading a Latin American independence movement aimed at developing a unified, independent region free from foreign- particularly US- control. It has been crucial in setting up a great many new organizations such as UNASUR, CELAC and ALBA that aim to replace discredited American-dominated organizations. This is further discussed in chapter one.

Thus, Venezuela became the centre of great controversy between those that saw 21st century socialism as an inspirational challenge to the status quo and those that saw it as an authoritarian ideology threatening democracy. It has also become something of a proxy war between right and left inside countries with political movements with ties to Venezuela. Furthermore, it is leading a geopolitical struggle between Latin American nations claiming they were freeing themselves from Western control and the United States, who saw the movements as dangerous, aggressive nationalism. How the media report from and about this ground zero of political turmoil is very important.

And yet the media themselves have been accused of being the chief ideological warriors for neoliberalism (Herman and McChesney, 1997, Read, 1999, Sainath, 2011) and criticized for presenting alternatives to neoliberal policy poorly, as to suggest there are no credible alternatives to the status quo (GUMG, 1980). For instance, Berry (2012) found that the views of the City of

London dominated coverage of the 2008 banking crisis, limiting debate and ignoring points of view that may not conform to neoliberal doctrine, such as those of trades unions. Kay and Salter (2013) found that the BBC framed the government's 2010 spending cuts as inevitable and common sense, thus "discursively normalizing neoliberal economics."

This neoliberalism as common sense can be found across media reporting of Venezuela. For instance, *The Daily Telegraph* (Sherwell, 2006a) reported that Hugo Chavez "lavished" state funds on his supporters. Two of the examples of this the writer chose were free eye operations for the blind and soup kitchens for the homeless. Thus, these were not seen as the most basic functions of state welfare, but transgressions against common sense, neoliberal, economics, transgressions that trapped the poor in a "dependency culture." This neoliberal bias can be seen in local reporting too. For example, The Daily Mail reported that nearly 80 percent of residents in English border town Berwick-Upon-Tweed wished to be part of Scotland. The reasons for this were the "lavish perks dished out" by Edinburgh, which included care for the elderly and free tuition fees. And yet, the majority of English people support scrapping tuition fees altogether (YouGov, 2003) and eighty-four percent favour free, nationalized healthcare (Dahlgreen, 2013). Thus, the institutions seen by the majority as the cornerstone of a decent society are treated as extravagant indulgences in the media.

While this research is focused on how the media portray just one country, it has a much broader resonance. This research will explore how the media portrays one country presenting a notable alternative to neoliberalism. However, it also gets to the heart of the nature of contemporary media, how they operate and how any alternative to the *status quo* is presented. As such, it can tell us as much, if not more, about the media itself than about Venezuela.

The media has a profound effect on how we see issues, how we understand the world and what society understands to be possible. It has genuine and far-reaching implications for how we live. The power of the media in reflecting and constructing culture, politics and society is difficult to underestimate. As Bagdikian (1992: Preface, 26) says, the mass media have become,

“The authority at any given moment for what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is fantasy, what is important and what is trivial. There is no greater force in shaping the public mind.”

It is therefore crucial to understand how the media operate.

Especially since the crash of 2008, there has been an increase in disillusionment with neoliberal politics and economics. The period since has been characterized by great political volatility in the West, with the public moving away from the traditional parties and gravitating to newer ones proposing alternatives. Some to the aforementioned left but we have also seen the rapid rise of the right and far right, like, for example, the Freedom Party in Austria, The National Front in France, UKIP in the UK and Donald Trump in the USA. How the media present alternative possibilities to neoliberalism in other countries will have massive implications for the future of the world.

Therefore, how the media present Venezuela has important ramifications for key questions at home. The media could use its power to inspire and enliven debate about the future direction of society or it could stifle and shut down debate and knowledge of alternative opinions and possibilities.

Unfortunately, there has been considerable criticism (or, more accurately, condemnation) of how the Western media portrays the country (Bhatt, 2013a, Boykoff, 2009, Delacour, 2005, Young, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013), with these sources claiming the media has been overtly hostile to the changes in Venezuela and portrayed the country excessively negatively.

However, all studies on the issue of the media and Venezuela have been limited latitudinally (only looking at one or a few media sources in one country (e.g. Salter and Weltman, 2011, Chernomas and Hudson, 2012)) or longitudinally (looking at only one specific event (e.g. Ali, 2006, Wilpert, 2003)). This study analyses a wide range of Western media’s portrayal of the country across the entire *chavista* period (1998-present) and fills that gap.

Latin American History

Venezuela, like much of Latin America, achieved formal independence from its European parent in the early half of the nineteenth century when disgruntled creole elites, who had been effectively shut out of political power, in favour of Iberian-born nobles, turned to nationalism. However, after independence, the basic structure of the economy, and therefore society, changed little (Vanden and Prevost, 2002). Latin America was still an export economy, shipping primary goods to the developed countries and an importer of luxuries and industrial products. Thus, their societies were still heavily dependent on the industrialized countries. This was acutely felt after the Great Crash of 1929, when demand for Latin American primary goods such as coffee and sugar fell precipitously (Thorp, 1998).

The Great Depression and particularly World War Two gave Latin American countries opportunities for economic expansion and development. Until the mid-twentieth century Latin America had continued to be economically colonized by Europe and North America to the extent that countries like Argentina were considered to be informal parts of the British Empire (Bulmer-Thomas, 1994: 14), while the United States continued to interfere in the internal politics of its own 'backyard,' a policy it had followed since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, over a century earlier (Chomsky, 2004: 63-64). The Venezuelan revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar had stated that the United States seemed destined to plague Latin America with misery under the guise of liberty (Petras, Erisman and Mills, 1973). His prediction was proven prescient.

To this day, many argue the US maintains a succession of authoritarian regimes around the world tasked with maintaining the status quo, which privileges US business elites at the expense of the population and the country as a whole (Chomsky, 1992, Blum, 2003, 2006). The goal of the US government was to allow only development that was complimentary, and not contrary to US business interests. Challenges to that order are not appreciated, and are attacked in the press and even militarily. After the Cuban Revolution, the Kennedy administration switched its goal in Latin America from "hemispheric

defence” to “internal security” (Chomsky, 2008). The Office of Public Safety and the School of the Americas trained tens of thousands of military and security personnel (Brandford and Kucisnki, 1990: 53), and the scale of repression is well documented (Harbury, 2006, Perkins, 2004). Therefore many saw the West as much as a foe as a friend.

In this spirit, the post-war period gave birth to the development of economic-nationalist theories, most notably developmentalism and dependency theory. In contrast to modernization theory, which advised developing countries to lift restrictions on international trade to boost growth, a school of thought emerged around the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Its leader, Raul Prebisch (1950), argued for high tariffs on foreign goods and import substitution as a means to industrialization (ISI). These policies directly contradicted the edicts of the international finance institutions and the US government and set the stage for conflict.

Dependency theory became an influential school of thought in Latin American academia (Kay, 1989: 9). The theory saw the primary obstacle to an affluent Latin America as the unequal relations with foreign powers (Bulmer-Thomas, 1994: 13, Frank, 1969). Dependency theorists argued underdevelopment was not the natural state of Latin America, but one imposed on it from outside. As Galeano (2009: 2) stated,

“Everything, from the discovery until our times, has been transmuted into European- or later United States- capital...the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources”.

In other words, the reason for the wealth of Europe and the US was the suffering and poverty of the poor countries. For Frank (1969), the solution lay in countries on the periphery severing ties with the exploitative rich countries and following the Japanese model, which industrialized without Western interference. Hindsight has shown that some of the more remarkable predictions of the dependency theorists have not been proven correct. Nevertheless, their

work still provides a valuable framework for understanding the relations inside Latin America and between rich and poor.

Developmentalism and the ISI period brought economic success and industrialization to Latin America. Continental GDP grew at more than five percent per year for three decades, leading to some to characterize the era as outstanding (Thorp, 1998: 159). However, others have criticized the strategy as producing persistent inflation (Armijo and Faucher, 2008). But the ISI period ended because of Latin American debt, not because of their ineffectiveness (Kirby, 2003: 40-50). Furthermore, the neoliberal policies were strongly and indeed even violently introduced by the IMF and World Bank, in conjunction with the US government (Brandford and Kucinski, 1990, Klein, 2007).

Modern Venezuela

The academic and media literature has, in recent times, been dominated by a focus upon the controversial figure of Hugo Chavez and his “Bolivarian Revolution”. A great number of biographies have been penned. Some have painted him as a positive, revolutionary figure (Gonzalez, 2014, Jones, 2008) who took over Simon Bolivar’s mantle as “liberator” of the land against imperialism (Gott, 2011). Still others portray him as a negative divisive character and his Bolivarian movement as undemocratic (Corrales and Penfold, 2011, Carroll, 2013). However, the emphasis on the figure of the former president has obscured the dynamics of change and marginalised the role of the grass roots in the process (Buxton, 2011, Ciccariello-Maher, 2013). Thus, both positive and negative biographies have characterized Chavez as super-human rather than simply as a figurehead of a wider movement.

Part of the difficulty of describing modern Venezuela is the evolving nature of Bolivarianism. The government can be split up into numerous stages, each progressively more radical than the last (McCarthy-Jones, 2014). The radicalization of the government was not planned, but due to the persistent overconfidence and miscalculation of the political right (Smidle, 2011: 10). The right's resorts to putschist strategies has pushed the government leftwards (Kitzberger, 2012). Chavez did not talk of socialism at first, but rather focused

on progressive institutional reform, only outlining a model for twenty-first century socialism in 2006. Thus, as Buxton (2011: 21) has argued, Venezuela arrived at socialism by default.

Bolivarianism does not eschew liberal democratic norms. Indeed, great emphasis has been placed on elections. Rather seeks to compliment them with participatory democratic practices and to build a welfare-state (Buxton, 2008). It is these participatory democratic steps and social gains that have led some to characterize Bolivarianism as deepening democracy by raising levels of popular participation and empowering people and given them a new sense of self-worth (Brouwer, 2011).

Much has been written about the “anti-American” rhetoric of the regime (Aponte-Moreno and Lattig, 2012). The US' interference in Venezuelan politics has also been highlighted (Golinger, 2007). Many (Chomsky, 2004: 63-64, Livingstone, 2009) have argued the US' dominant role in the region considered its “backyard” has contributed to and perpetuated the underdevelopment of Latin America since the Monroe Doctrine was proclaimed in 1823. Therefore the creation of an alternative model of development is considered an unforgivable sin by the US establishment (Blum, 2013, 189).

Venezuela has taken the lead in creating new regional bodies, such as the Petrocaribe, Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). While some (Acuna, 2014) have lauded these ventures, others see it as “giving away” oil irresponsibly (De La Barra and Dello Buono, 2012). Pearce (2013) claims that the purpose of these creations is not to be anti-American, rather to create a “Latin American consensus” that can replace the discredited Washington Consensus.

There have been numerous studies of the missions of the Chavez government, designed to improve socio-economic conditions for the poor of Venezuela (Muhr and Verger, 2006, Brouwer, 2011, Muntater *et al.*, 2006, 2008). Poverty halved and extreme poverty decreased by three quarters (CEPALSTAT, 2016b) under Chavez and 1.5 million Venezuelans were taught to read (Hawkins, Rosas and Johnson, 2011). While they have been criticized for corruption and

waste (Garcia-Guadilla, 2011: 77), they remain very popular and are a key explanation in the sustained popularity of the Chavez administration (Ellner, 2013, McCoy, 2010: 90). However, there has been a marked reluctance to study the Venezuelan case, despite the administration's success in tackling poverty (Buxton, 2011). Rather, much more emphasis has been placed on civil society organizations opposing the government.

Venezuela has become a politically polarized country (Roberts, 2003). While some have pointed to Chavez as the prime cause of polarization, stirring up the beehive of social harmony (Marquez, 2003), others have pointed to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s as the answer to the question (Ellner, 2003, Buxton, 2003). In other words, rising economic inequality bred political polarization.

There is also a racial undertone to the polarization. Despite the popular myth that Venezuela was a racial democracy, a “coffee with milk” society, where all Venezuelans are a mix of coffee (black) and milk (white) (Wright, 1988, Tinker-Salas, 2009: 133), racism had been apparent in Venezuelan society since the time of Columbus (Salas, 2005). Thus, there exists simultaneously both the use of openly racial language and the denial that racism exists (Ciccariello-Maher, 2007). As Duno Gottberg (2011) has argued, Venezuela was not so much colour blind as blind to racism due to its ethno-populist ideology. The arrival of Chavez rudely interrupted this narrative. Chavez is both of non-white origin and from a modest socio-economic background, and has re-politicized social inequality and highlighted his own racial background. There now exists a notable class and racial correlation to voting in the country (Cannon, 2008).

The class and racial undertones came to the surface during the 2002 coup and the 2002-3 oil strike/lockout, in which sections of the upper classes tried to wrest power away from the government. Samet (2013) has argued that this represented an attempt to regain the upper-class’ rightful authority, which had been usurped by what they saw as “a gang of poor, dark and dangerous thugs.” However, *Chavistas* believed that the white elites had stolen power and exploited the country for centuries. Sympathetic observers have characterized the coup’s failure as due to the widespread support the President enjoyed from

the lower classes (Ali, 2006, Stoneman, 2008), whereas others have challenged the idea of Chavez enjoying popular support, focusing in on the liberal constitutional framework that preceded him as the prime factor (Coppedge, 2005).

The nature and quality of Venezuelan democracy is much debated. One interpretation is that the “almost flawless” (Mayobre, 2002) constitution of 1961 set Venezuela on a “solidly democratic path” (Norden, 2003). However, Chavez’s arrival soured this democracy (Weyland, 2014). Nevertheless, others (Lievesley and Ludlum, 2009) have characterized the Chavez era as profoundly deepening democracy and challenging a stagnant and undemocratic system of exclusion, whilst simultaneously providing a positive model of change to follow in a world of dominant yet deeply unpopular neoliberalism. There is little middle ground between the two viewpoints, so it is important to understand the ideological underpinnings of the argument.

During the late 20th century, the ideas of Joseph Schumpeter became extremely influential. Schumpeter argued for a limited form of democracy, stating, “Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them” (Schumpeter, 1994). It was argued that an “excess of democracy” was a dangerous thing (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975). However, those not subscribing to Schumpeter’s thesis and arguing for a more inclusive form of democracy pointed to the exclusion and inequality of the system, and the Punto Fijo system represented a minimal version of democracy (Garcia-Guadilla, 2003: 182). Some (Ciccariello-Maher (2013: 10), Munck, (2003: 37)) claim Venezuela was hardly democratic at all. Thus, many argue for a more all-encompassing version of participatory democracy, including economic democracy, which the present government tried to implement (Buxton, 2011). It is, they argue, therefore a much more qualitative, bottom-up approach to what represents true people power in the 21st century. Thus, Venezuela represents a new and exciting experiment in democracy, hence the international attention. The Venezuelan case forces one to nail his colours to the mast and question what is meant by democracy. These competing perspectives on political issues are vital to keep in mind when reading chapters 3-7 while what the Western media think of

Venezuela's democracy will be discussed in the main body of the thesis (chapters 3-11). The next section deals with how the media have covered Latin America.

The Venezuelan Socio-geographic landscape

Residents of Caracas likely live in one of two worlds. Like most of Latin America, Venezuela's socio-economic structure where a small, light-skinned, Westernized elite are at the top of society (Vanden and Prevost, 2002: 105). These people are fortunate to live securely and are very well off, even by Western standards. Chacao, in Eastern Caracas is home to the headquarters of multinational corporations, prestigious international private schools such as the British School, Caracas³ and Ferrari dealerships. They live in spacious apartments and have opportunities to travel and study abroad. They are largely of European descent. Meanwhile, a large, mostly dark-skinned lower class lives in or on the edge of poverty, eking out an existence, often in informal employment.

The inequality in Latin America is considerably greater than that of Europe or the United States and in Caracas there was a large section of the population living in opulence and another chronically malnourished. By 1998, Venezuela was one of the most unequal countries in the most unequal region in the world.

Throughout the late twentieth century, neoliberal policies exacerbated inequality across Latin America, and Venezuela was no exception to this (Klein and Tokman, 2000). Neoliberalism brought increased urbanization, and the population of metropolitan Caracas grew rapidly. This put huge strain on the city's housing stock. Shantytowns called *barrios* grew around the hillsides of Caracas. The city is built in a narrow valley, with steep mountains all around. By 1998 around fifty percent of its residents lived in these *barrios* (Ciccariello-Maher, 2007). Ignored by the authorities, residents live physically and legally precarious lives, living in poor-quality accommodation perched precariously on hillsides. Many *barrio* residents lack phone connections, televisions, or even potable water. The *barrios* are notorious for their lack of sanitary conditions,

³ The school's fees are up to \$18,000 yearly plus an \$8,000 registration fee (Bingham, 2009: 636). In 2013, a third of Venezuelans earned less than \$700 per year (World Bank, 2016).

poverty, and, above all, crime. Few well-to-do Venezuelans venture into them because of their fearsome reputation.

During the 1980s austerity measures imposed on Venezuela by the World Bank and IMF hit the lower classes particularly hard. In 1989, Carlos Andres Perez was elected for his opposition to neoliberal austerity. However, once in office he performed a great about-face and implemented measures he had opposed. In response to a one hundred percent rise in the cost of transport, the poor protested, and riots broke out. The poor, many of who felt they had been squeezed to breaking point, descended from their *barrios* and protested in the street. There was a good deal of looting. For many, what made the situation more unbearable was their proximity to the ostentatious wealth of residents of East Caracas. On the *Caracazo*, the hierarchy of the conservative Venezuelan Catholic Church said that, “The luxury of the few has become an insult to the misery of the masses” (Jones, 2008: 125). For both the government and the well-to-do residents of Caracas, the political mobilization of the *barrios* was deeply disturbing; something no doubt was many’s worst nightmare. It was remembered as “the day the shantytowns came down from the hills” (Briceno-Leon, 2007: 201). The government met the movement with violence, sending the army in to “pacify” the *barrios*. The army used high-powered weaponry to spray the *barrios* indiscriminately. By the end of the massacre, dubbed the *Caracazo*, as many as three thousand may have been killed, ninety-seven percent inside their own homes (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 97). This was a turning point in Venezuelan history. After this point many *barrio* residents put their efforts into political change, eventually electing a dark-skinned Hugo Chavez to the presidency in 1998. Data has shown that half of those voting for Chavez had never voted before (Buxton, 2001: 79).

Journalists may not come into contact with many people from this side of Caracas. Virtually without exception they live or stay in the wealthy side of the city. The east side of Caracas, specifically Chacao, is an exclusive area full of expensive hotels, transnational corporation headquarters, and gated apartments, a “Tropical Mayfair,” according to one interviewee. Chacao has the highest private jet ownership in Latin America and likely the highest single-malt whisky consumption in the world in addition to one of the lowest poverty rates

on the continent (Grant, 2009). Residents are literally sealed off from outside by fortress-like security, complete with armed guards and private security. Chacao spends a quarter of its budget on its own police force (Ciccariello-Maher, 2007), even more remarkable considering the large business tax revenues the area generates. It is a bastion of opposition support and is home to those who made their careers and fortunes during the *Punto Fijo* period. Opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez was mayor of the municipality. Residents of Chacao often speak English and live part-time in Miami. However, residents rarely venture even into the city centre, let alone the *barrios*, due to fear of crime. It starts from birth and continues until old age. The Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano (2000: 11-12) described the situation thus,

“In some Latin American cities where kidnappings have become commonplace, rich kids grow up sealed inside bubbles of fear. They live in fortress like mansions or groups of homes ringed by electrified fences and guardhouses, watched day and night by bodyguards and closed-circuit security cameras. [Young rich people] don’t live in the city where they live. They’re not allowed to set foot in the vast hell that threatens their tiny private heaven. Beyond the walls lie regions of terror filled with ugly, dirty, envious people. They grow up rootless, stripped of cultural identity, aware of society only as a threat.”

Likewise, unless *barrio* residents work there, they will not venture into Chacao. In any case, it is largely walled off from the outside world. One street vendor said that the security is so tight it is like trying to enter a foreign country (Ciccariello-Maher, 2007). The city is effectively segregated on class grounds.

One of the great problems of Venezuelan society is that the rich and poor are divorced from the realities of each other’s lives. Rarely are cities divided so clearly among racial and class lines, leading to a breakdown in social cohesion and an increased tension and polarization. It is this cauldron that foreign journalists are thrown into when arriving in Venezuela, and this research posits that this divide makes itself apparent in the reporting of the country. This is will explored more fully in chapter nine.

The Geopolitical Background of the Coverage

The coverage of Venezuela is not happening in a geopolitical vacuum, of course. Dating back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 the United States has claimed the Western hemisphere as its own sphere of interest, often described by US officials such as Henry Kissinger as its “backyard.” Controlling Latin America and its vast resources has involved the US government sponsoring authoritarian dictators who abused their subjects. Western corporations were given remarkable leeway and controlled extraordinary amounts of land and resources in these states, resulting in the moniker “banana republic” being used to describe them. These corporations did not care about building up the country and their affairs distorted the economy. This prolonged export structure left a massive majority in poverty with a small, collaborationist elite in opulence. It is important to appreciate how vast the wealth was siphoned from Latin America to the core countries of Europe and North America. For instance, one mine in Bolivia, Potosí, produced more than half of the world’s gold and silver for over a century (Farthing and Kohl, 2014: 25), yet the miners live in unimaginable poverty. Even today, the life expectancy for a miner at Potosí is thirty-five (Cardenas, 2010). Likewise, Galeano (2009: 166) stated,

“No country has yielded as much for world capitalism in so short a time: the wealth drained from Venezuela, according to Domingo Alberto Rangel, exceeds what the Spaniards took from Potosi or the English from India.”

Even today Venezuela has more proven oil reserves than Iraq, Libya, Qatar, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain *combined* (OPEC, 2014). There is an extraordinary amount of wealth in Venezuela that largely went to Western businesses. *Chavismo’s* policies directly threatened that.

The success of the Cuban Revolution sparked a new chapter in US-Latin American relations. Worried that successful Cuban defiance of the United States would be a virus that spread to the rest of Latin America, the Kennedy administration passed National Security Action Memorandum 177, which shifted US attention from hemispheric defence to “internal subversion,” a definition

that Charles Maechling, who led internal defence planning during the period, admitted could be construed to mean almost anything (Maechling, 1999). He further noted the decision represented a change from toleration of “the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military” to “direct complicity” in their methods which closely resembled “the methods of Heinrich Himmler’s extermination squads (Chomsky, 1985: 216). The US government paid for the training of some 40,000 Latin American military and police by 1989, including in torture techniques, in order to maintain its preferred governments in power (Stokes, 2005: 52-62). Graduates were taught their motherlands were under attack from a communist menace. Signs of communist insurgence included joining trade unions, strikes, increased student activities, criticism of the government, petitioning the government, writing letters to newspapers, denouncing poverty and even simply talking about politics (*Ibid.* 64-65). In other words, any political or democratic actions in Latin America were a threat and stamped out.

Many democratically elected leaders were overthrown with the help of the US government, for example the Arbenz administration in Guatemala in 1953, the Goulart administration in Brazil in 1964 and the Allende administration in 1973, while neofascist military dictators were supported, such as Bolivia’s General Banzer, Paraguay’s General Stroessner and Chile’s General Pinochet. In the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, the region saw the end of these military dictatorships but also the birth of neoliberal economics. Latin America was the “empire’s workshop,” according to Grandin (2006) where neoliberal economic theories were first tested. At the insistence of the Washington-based World Bank and IMF, countries opened up their economies and embraced free trade. The result was spiraling debt, drastically increased inequality and a huge rise in poverty (Klein and Tokman, 2000) and an era referred to as “the lost decade.” However, those at the top of the society, and, crucially, Western businesses, profited greatly from neoliberalism.

Beginning with Venezuela in 1998, new movements appeared in Latin America to elect progressive governments to oppose what was called the “Washington Consensus.” Eighteen countries in the region elected left-of-centre governments critical of neoliberalism. They vary in their goals, but all share a

distrust of neoliberalism and a desire for increased equality and independence. This has concerned both Western governments and transnational corporations, who are worried their power, profits and influence are at risk. Many governments have nationalized key industries, threatening their profits.

The United States' government responded in various ways. It has tried to isolate the more radical governments from the moderates with little success. It also supported coups against these governments in Venezuela (2002) and Honduras (2009). The government aided and supported those who kidnapped President Chavez in 2002. It has also resurrected the Fourth Fleet of its Navy, inactive since 1950, to make its presence felt in the region. The US government drastically increased its military presence on Curacao, an island just to the north of Venezuela, and in 2006 carried out a wargame on the island simulating an invasion of the Venezuelan mainland to capture a terrorist leader called "Hugo Le Grand."

The US has also continued to fund oppositional movements inside Venezuela lavishly. According to Wikileaks documents, it is following a plan to "divide" and "penetrate" *chavismo* from within by funding, training and supporting oppositional parties, individuals, media and social movements (Main and Beeton, 2015, Beeton, Johnston and Main, 2015: 518). This is covered in more detail in chapters four and seven.

Latin American politics has profoundly shifted in the last twenty years. For centuries, Latin America was a *de facto* colony of the United States or a *de jure* colony of European states. However, it has, in recent years, managed to free itself to a remarkable degree from foreign influences. For example, Latin America was the only region in the world where no country co-operated with the United States' program of extraordinary rendition. South American countries are willing to grant asylum to Western dissidents such as Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, indeed, Uruguay has granted asylum to survivors of Guantanamo Bay. A further example is recognition of Palestine. In 2009, no South American country recognized the state but by 2015, all bar US-ally Colombia have done so. Likewise, every country on the continent bar Colombia

has rid itself of IMF debt. Today, the United States does not have a military base on the continent.

It has achieved this through unified action. The dream of continent-wide unity has obsessed Latin Americans since at least the time of revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar (1783-1830). New regional organizations have been created that allow deeper integration. UNASUR, the Union of South American Nations was launched in 2008 and CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States was inaugurated in 2011. The latter constitutes all American countries except the United States, Canada and the British and other European colonies in the region, which were excluded from joining. Its goal is to supplant the US-dominated OAS. This has not been widely reported in the Western press. Likewise, the Bank of the South, introduced in 2009, is designed to replace the discredited IMF. ALBA, a Venezuelan-backed eleven country alternative organization to the US' Free Trade for the Americas (FTAA), was created in 2004. While the FTAA promotes neoliberalism, ALBA was specifically designed to promote mutual social development, solidarity and trade outside of standard market principles. Latin America, particularly South America, is in a state of open rebellion against Washington and neoliberalism. And it is understood on all sides that Venezuela is the principle driving force of these organizations (McCarthy-Jones, 2014, Anderson, 2014). Thus, the US government is locked in an economic and ideological struggle to maintain a hold of Latin America. This geopolitical background is particularly relevant to chapter eleven.

Oil Politics

Venezuela is an important oil-producing state. And understanding how the politics of oil influence geopolitics is crucial. The 1973 oil embargo had a profound effect on the United States. As a result of the US and Western Europe's support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War, the OPEC countries declared an oil embargo. In the US, energy prices soared and electricity was rationed. It also played a part in a prolonged global recession. More importantly, the unified actions of the OPEC countries meant that there were checks and consequences on the United States' military actions abroad. The US government was determined to break the power of the OPEC cartel. It found a way to do this

through a pliant Venezuelan government. Whenever oil prices risked rising, the Venezuelan government would pump extra oil, thus crucially undermining the quota system designed to keep oil prices high and therefore increase profits for oil producing nations. Venezuela's actions ensured oil prices remained low throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It should be noted that this policy was deleterious to Venezuela itself, crippling the price of its major source of revenues. Thus, the actions of the Venezuelan government were directly contrary to the interest of the country and its people, but helpful to its other constituencies, the US government and international business. The actions of the government helped keep oil prices low for decades and undermined Arab unity and independence. The Venezuelan government also began the process of privatizing PDVSA, the state oil company, selling off component parts. This was to change with the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998.

One of Chavez's first actions was to instruct his Energy Minister, Ali Rodriguez, to reinvigorate OPEC. Chavez himself went on a whistle-stop tour of the Middle East and Russia, meeting with heads of state to gauge interest in the project. The first OPEC summit in twenty-five years took place in Caracas in 2000 and Rodriguez was elected Secretary General of the organization. The actions of the Venezuelan government in reviving OPEC and increasing the price of oil are well documented (Hellinger, 2011a: 214, Gonzalez, 2014: 74-75). The price of oil rose from \$9 a barrel in February 1999 and rose to over \$25 by years end (Raby, 2006: 161) and peaked in 2008 at over \$140 per barrel (BBC, 2008). The revival of OPEC was strongly opposed by the United States and this action, it has been argued, sealed Chavez's fate (Buxton, 2008).

Thus, Venezuela went from being the United States' loyal lieutenant in undermining OPEC to its greatest champion. The increased tensions between Venezuela and Western oil-consuming nations are a key factor in understanding the Western media's portrayal of the country. This highly salient information is in the open, cataloged in many of the best-selling English language books on Venezuela, yet is rarely mentioned in media accounts of the country. One cannot understand the reporting of Venezuela without understanding the politics of oil. In recent times US-ally Saudi Arabia began increasing production during the slump in prices, further dragging down prices. This particularly hurts Iran,

Russia and Venezuela, three of the United States' government's principle *bête noires*.

These geopolitical factors may explain the United States' government's hostility towards Venezuela, but what about the liberal European press? Since the 1980s, there has been a pronounced shift in liberal and left-wing politics towards unquestioning support for neoliberalism. The Labour Party, while still officially committed to nationalization in its charter, swung to the right in the 1990s and particularly with the Blair government. Typifying this trend in Europe is Dominique Strauss-Kahn. While still a high-ranking member of the French Socialist Party, he became the Managing Director of the IMF the figurehead organization of neoliberal capitalism. Likewise in Spain, the Socialist PSOE party imposed austerity on the population. Ali (2006) has suggested that this new wave of progressive politics in Latin America is a danger to these former left-wingers, who see in the movement their previous hopes and aspirations and reminders of their own duplicitous turns to the right.

Finally, the events in Venezuela are beginning to directly influence European politics and European political movements. When Alex Tsipras of Syriza was asked what political leader he admired the most his answer was "Hugo Chavez." Likewise, the Secretary General of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias worked closely with the Venezuelan government, and has taken many ideas to Spain, where he is directly challenging the PSOE party and the media that is associated with it. It is with this context in mind we must evaluate the reporting of Venezuela in chapter eleven.

Thesis Structure

Chapter one reviews the relevant literature to the thesis, including theories on how the media operate and modern developments in the field of journalism, neoliberalism and globalization.

Chapter two is the methodology chapter, where the structure and theoretical grounding of the research is laid out.

Chapters three to seven lay out the findings of the analysis of 501 articles from British and American newspapers, from 1998 to 2014. Five peak periods of coverage have been chosen, representing five of the most important events in recent Venezuelan history.

Chapter three deals with the 1998-9 sampling period, which covers the election and inauguration of Hugo Chavez as President of Venezuela. It focuses primarily upon questions over the nature of the *Punto Fijo* system and the subsequent quality of democracy in Venezuela post 1998. In general, the media presented Venezuela as a democracy being threatened by a dictator. This analysis completely jars with the view of the Venezuelan population, who, when polled, felt there had been a great increase in the quality of their democracy and their institutions. Thus, a highly contentious, minority opinion was presented as an uncontroversial fact. This builds upon and expands Young's (2014) study of Venezuelan public opinion.

Chapter four focuses on one of the most important events in modern Venezuela, the April 2002 coup against the Chavez government, how the media chose to define the event and whether the US government or local media played a role in it. Although others (Ali, 2006, Wilpert, 2003) have commented on the media and the coup, none have studied a wide range of media quantitatively. This study found that the Western media strongly supported the event, noting that true democracy was no longer threatened by a "would-be dictator" (*The New York Times*, April 13th, 2002). The media downplayed or ignored altogether the

US and the Venezuelan media's involvement. They also framed the extraordinary uprising of Venezuelan people against the coup as mere rioting.

Chapters five and six deal with events of 2013. Chapter six covers Hugo Chavez's death and funeral and centres around debates over what sort of legacy Chavez left. The study found that all newspapers displayed a strong to extreme aversion to Chavez and everything he stood for and argued his legacy was that of poverty, inequality and a failed society, a picture that contradicts empirical data from the UN and World Bank. Of the thirty-three heads of state attending Chavez's funeral, those of three countries- Iran, Belarus and Cuba- were mentioned as much as the other 30 democracies put together, giving the impression Venezuela was a friend only to tyrants.

Chapter six analyses the subsequent April presidential election between Nicolas Maduro and Henrique Capriles Radonski. It found that the media sided with the US government, who were completely isolated in the world in calling into question the veracity of the results while presenting the Venezuelan media as state-dominated and cowed, which contradicts even US-government funded observation missions' reports that noted the media was private-dominated and biased *against* the government.

Chapter seven covers the 2014 *guarimbas*- the wave of violent anti-government demonstrations. The media presented it as a widespread protest of ordinary people being violently suppressed by an extraordinarily violent government. It denied that this was an attempt to force President out of power unconstitutionally, despite that being the stated objective of the leaders and despite the fact that that was precisely what demonstrators told them they were attempting to achieve. While its recency precludes academic studies from having been published, it adds weight to the arguments of Tinker-Salas (2014, 2015) and Ciccariello-Maher (2014a, 2014b, 2016), who write that the *guarimbas* were an attempt by rich students to overthrow the government and that their scope and popularity were exaggerated by the media.

Chapters eight to eleven attempt to explain the phenomena that chapters three to seven uncovered; the remarkable similarity between newspapers and

the overwhelming tendency to produce stories highly antithetical to the Venezuelan government.

Chapter eight attempts to explain the phenomena by looking at the backgrounds of the journalists. Journalists come from an increasingly narrow, elite background, and this has implications for the content.

Chapter nine highlights how journalists in Caracas live and work segregated from the majority of the people in elite bubbles of wealth, living in exclusive, walled off areas of wealth- islands of luxury in a sea of poverty. These areas are bastions of opposition to the government and therefore those coming to or living Venezuela largely see only one side of the country- the opposition side.

Chapter ten explains how recent structural changes in the news media have decreased the quality of and the range of opinions in reporting. Due to the drastic reduction in advertising revenue for newspapers, they have been forced to severely reduce staff and production expenses, to the point where there is only one full-time correspondent in Caracas for any English-language Western newspaper. Instead, reporting has been outsourced to local journalists, most of whom hold extremely hostile positions towards the Venezuelan government. Furthermore, journalists are under heavy pressure to produce content very quickly and limit their reporting to a few hundred words, at most, further reducing their ability to challenge conventional narratives.

Chapter eleven assesses the applicability of two theoretical explanations of how the media and society function: the propaganda model and hegemony. The thesis argues that Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, which states that the content of the media can be explained by ownership of the media, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communist or pro-neoliberal bias are key factors in understanding why the media produces content with such a strong anti-Venezuelan government stance. It also presents the remarkable similarity of the content through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony⁴ and finds that there is an

⁴ For detailed discussion of the propaganda model and hegemony, see chapter eleven.

overwhelming anti-Venezuelan government sentiment in newsrooms, leading to a hegemony of thought among journalists.

The last part of the thesis lays out the conclusions from the findings while the appendix details all the references made to the articles in chapters three to seven.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Media Theory

The power of the media in reflecting, constructing and expressing culture, politics and society, to manipulate and control what we think, is difficult to underestimate (Smith and Bell, 2007: 85). Today, we get most of our images of the world and its inhabitants from mass media. The media have become, in one writer's words,

“The authority at any given moment for what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is fantasy, what is important and what is trivial. There is no greater force in shaping the public mind; even brute force triumphs only by creating an accepting attitude toward the brutes” (Bagdikian, 1992: 26).

A critical understanding of how the media operate is, therefore, essential.

At the forefront of understanding and critiquing the British media, the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) developed their own methodology for understanding how the media cover controversial subjects: thematic analysis. Thematic analysis posits that for any controversial issue or event there will be a range of competing arguments and explanations. The first stage in the method is to identify these arguments in the public debate to produce a “conceptual map” of the spectrum of understanding on the issue. News media is subsequently analysed in order to ascertain how often these competing explanations are mentioned or used. The GUMG (1976, 1980, 1993, Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011) has used thematic analysis to highlight shortcomings in the media's coverage of controversial issues like the miners' strike, HIV/aids and the Israel/Palestine conflict.

The Propaganda Model

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is perhaps the most widely read theoretical critique of the media today. The model posits that news is systematically distorted to reflect the interests of state and corporate power. Chomsky often quotes Walter Lippman, who argues that ordinary people are unfit to govern themselves; they are but a bewildered herd who must be governed by a group of "responsible men" for their own good (Chomsky, 2000: 22-23, 45-46). The media's societal purpose therefore is to engineer, or manufacture consent for the elite's decisions. In *Manufacturing Consent*, the authors attempt to explain how public opinion is manipulated through the five systematic biases, or "filters", the for-profit, private media have. These five filters are,

- 1) Elite ownership of the media, whether through single media barons or through a large group of wealthy shareholders;
- 2) Reliance on advertising from big businesses as the primary means of income;
- 3) Reliance on official sources, credible 'experts' and government officials;
- 4) Flak, negative responses to media that have the effect of chiding journalists into compliance with the 'official' line;
- 5) Anti-communism, how any organization or government Western governments label as 'Communist' will be attacked (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 2).

The authors tested their hypothesis through case studies of similar events happening in different countries at the same time. For example, comparing how massacres by Indonesia (a US ally) in East Timor and by Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia (an enemy of the US) were covered in major publications. They found that the media tended to ignore the violence in East Timor while giving a great deal of attention and condemning that in Cambodia.

These five filters will be discussed one by one.

Ownership

The concentration of media ownership is of great concern to media analysts. Bagdikian's 1992 work, *The Media Monopoly*, and subsequent updated versions detail the consolidation of media into a few, huge conglomerations. It also bemoans the lack of diversity in the media and chronicles the death of local media. Today, six multi-billion dollar corporations control the majority of what Americans see, hear and read. These are, in order of gross revenues, Comcast, Disney, News Corporation (Murdoch), Time Warner, Viacom and CBS.

While many felt the Internet age would liberate America from the grip of old media monopolies, Curran (2011: 116-118) has argued that the online situation is even worse and that the online market is characterized by even greater monopolies than in old media. In markets such as books (Amazon), email (Gmail, Yahoo, Hotmail), social networks (Facebook) and search engines (Google) just one or a small handful of massive companies saturate the market.

There exists a similar situation in the United Kingdom. The Media Reform Coalition (2014) published a report detailing the concentration of media ownership in the country. Just three corporations, News UK (Murdoch), DMGT and Trinity Mirror control 70 percent of newspaper circulation. Furthermore, for all the talk of new media, the majority of the most frequently visited news websites in the UK and USA are the online arm of the dominant national news corporations (Curran, 2011: 85). The *BBC* accounted for three-quarters of all national and international television news watched in the UK,⁵ while *ITV* accounted for more than half of the rest (Media Reform Coalition, 2014). It is a similar story on the radio, where the *BBC* dominates. One owner controlling such a great amount of our media has profoundly negative effects on the state of democracy and the breadth of information and views the public are exposed to. For instance, all one hundred and seventy five of Rupert Murdoch's news editors around the world supported the US/UK invasion of Iraq. Murdoch publications have also been supportive of the war against Syria but have not disclosed that

⁵ The BBC is publicly owned. However, some (Mills, 2016) have argued that it is a mistake to see a fundamental dichotomy between the BBC and privately-owned media and that there is a well-established neoliberal culture at the broadcaster, with departments having to conform to profit-making rules and that managers are brought in from private news companies and govern in the same fashion as before.

their owner has significant interests in Genie Energy, a firm granted rights to explore for energy in the Golan Heights. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi used his media empire to become Prime Minister.

While today media is less likely to be owned by press barons and more likely to be a corporation owned by thousands of anonymous shareholders, it is no less problematic. Corporate shareholders have no interest in the veracity of the news, only in short-term profits. Furthermore, media corporations have become vast conglomerations with interests in many different sectors. For instance, at the time of the invasion of Iraq, *NBC* was owned by General Electric, a huge weapons producer who stood to make massive profits from the war. *NBC* supported the invasion uncritically. Editors and managers are aware that their prime responsibility is to increase profit for shareholders and it is unclear why journalists should see themselves as working for a different company to workers on an assembly line in the weapons factory. Are news corporations to be trusted to impartially report on Venezuela when some have considerable interests there?

The great Indian journalist P. Sainath (2011) worries about the ramifications of the extension of the media into every imaginable sector of industry and commerce,

“Large media companies are big players in fields ranging from agriculture to aviation, from sugar to stock markets, from finance to fashion, from management to mining. For the rest of it, it is very hard to tell the difference these days between fourth estate and real estate. Plus, there are the extremely complex interlocking directorships and interlocking ownerships that see many top corporate leaders sitting on the boards of media. The short point is this: the media are not pro-corporate, the media are not pro-business, the media are not pro-establishment, they *are* the establishment. They *are* the cutting-edge ideological arm of it. They *are* large corporations and they *are* very big business.”

The top one percent of wealthiest people in rich countries own these corporations almost exclusively. Are they likely to want reporting that questions

the society and economy and provides a structural critique of neoliberal capitalism, the system they have benefitted from?

Advertising

Advertising is crucial in shaping the content of news. Today, the vast majority of funding for private, for-profit newspapers come in the form of advertising and only a small minority through the purchases of copies. This jumps to one hundred percent for free newspapers and much television, radio and online content. This has serious consequences for the content of media, Bagdikian (1992: 121) lamented that advertising revenues have “insulated these media from the wishes of their audiences.” Large corporations insist that the content of the media does not share a contrary message to that of the advertisement. Thus, articles inviting the reader to think critically are discouraged and those that would promote an ideology other than neoliberalism are extremely rare. This is particularly insidious as media companies control a large range of outlets. For instance, *The New York Times* published a series of articles on medical incompetence with prescription drugs. Pharmaceutical companies, who did not advertise with *The Times*, were nevertheless able to stop further articles by cancelling \$500,000 of advertising in the magazine “Modern Medicine,” which *The Times* owned and which relied heavily on pharmaceutical advertising (Braithwaite, 2013: 221). A second example was the reaction of advertisers to *The Guardian* after it broke the Edward Snowden NSA spying revelations. Although the huge news event drew massive numbers to the newspaper, it also led to advertisers pulling out of the company, a key reason for the downfall of the newspaper’s American operation. As one former executive said, “While Snowden put us on the map, it makes corporate clients very nervous about wanting to get big into The Guardian” (Perlberg, 2017). Editors understand these pressures and internalize the pressures, ensuring not to upset their primary constituency: corporations. The interests of large corporations fundamentally dictate what appears in for-profit private media.

Sourcing

The third filter of the Propaganda Model is sourcing, specifically the reliance on official sources. Today, journalists are instructed to try not to take sides in arguments themselves, instead to leave opinions to others and simply stick to reporting facts. This leads to a situation where time-pressed journalists often turn to official sources such as the government or well-funded think tanks in order to get a quotable authority. Unfortunately, the outcome of this is frequently simply a parroting of official positions. This is a crucial flaw in reporting. Journalists tend to rely upon government officials and need to maintain their access to them and therefore do not report the news in a manner that would be too upsetting to those in government. The journalist must carefully cultivate contacts in the government and important think tanks. If the journalists reflect critically on what their sources are telling them or report the news in a manner that contradicts the official line, they risk angering the source and run the possibility that the source will refuse to speak to them again. It is therefore rare to encounter a story that seriously deconstructs a source's viewpoint. Furthermore, as we saw in chapter ten, newspapers are making deep cuts to their staff, particularly in costly investigative reporting, meaning their workers are increasingly less specialized and unable to question the official government line.

In 2012, at the Capitol Building, the *RT* journalist Abby Martin asked Senator Rand Paul why he endorsed Mitt Romney for President as Romney's aggressive foreign policy was at odds with Paul's non-interventionist standpoint. Martin claims Paul tried to have her fired and arrested for her question. She had to attend a disciplinary meeting at the Capitol Building where she was forced to explain herself, not just in front of Paul, but also in front of the Bureau Chief of *Al-Jazeera*, *CNN*, *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, who interrogated her on why she asked the question. More interesting was the response from her fellow journalists, who told her "we have worked extremely hard to get access to Congress and we can't have people like you set it back" (Media Roots, 2012). This is illustrative of how some of the media see access to official sources as more important than questioning power.

Flak

Flak is the negative response to their reporting journalists face. It can come from governments, organized groups or individuals. It can take many forms, including letter writing campaigns, lawsuits or smear campaigns. Flak on Venezuela is a particularly intimidating and pressing problem. Miguel Tinker-Salas, a progressive Venezuelan academic at Pomona College, California, was visited by the FBI who looked into his past, questioning his immigration status and his contact with the Venezuelan government. His students were also questioned about the political content of his lectures. Meanwhile, in 2017, after reporting on anti-government protests, Abby Martin and Michael Prysner were the subject of a viral “fake news” twitter campaign that claimed they were informants gathering information on the protests for the secret police. They were subject to dozens of death threats and there was a campaign in Venezuela to find and lynch them on the basis of these accusations (Gosztola, 2017).

Anti-Communism and Neoliberalism

Written in the late 1980's, when the Soviet Union still existed, the authors posited that the West's “official ideology” of anti-communism was the fifth filter that shaped news media production. Herman and Chomsky argued that to be seen as soft on socialism was akin to being unpatriotic or having sympathies with the enemies of the West.

Broadbent (1993: 155) argued that words such as “socialist” and “left-wing” are notoriously value-laden and content free when used in the media. Indeed, when one ex-*New York Times* journalist was asked what journalists understand by phrases such as “Marxist-Leninist” he responded “Nothing. None of them would be able to tell you what it means. It's simply used as a term of abuse’ (*Ibid.*).

Some have argued that the fifth filter, anti-communism, is in need of updating. The propaganda model's authors have postulated that the fifth filter is outdated and should be replaced with “anti-terrorism” (Mullen, 2009). However, Boyd-Barrett (2004) has argued that the fifth filter today should be expressed as the ideological convergence between the establishment and the media on the supposed overwhelmingly beneficial process of neoliberal globalization.

As the *chavistas* officially espouse an ideology of “21st century socialism” and are profoundly hostile to neoliberalism, the fifth filter is still highly applicable to the Venezuelan case.

Few of Herman and Chomsky’s insights, however, were unique. Curran and Seaton (1989) documented the rise of the free-market as a mechanism for the British elites to quash differing and unwelcome opinions. Numerous scholars (Doyle, 2002, Noam, 2009, McChesney, 2000) have also catalogued the increased concentration of media ownership. Today, a handful of massive transnational media corporations control increasing amounts of our media. Likewise, a worrying dependence on “official sources” has been highlighted as a serious deficiency by many (GUMG, 1985, Eldridge, 1993, Fisk, 2013, Lupien, 2013).

There have been numerous criticisms of the propaganda model published (GUMG, 1993, Klaehn, 2002, Boyd-Barrett, 2004, Sparks, 2007). In explaining the output of the media, others give greater weight to the class nature of journalism. They argue that journalism is increasingly an upper-middle class domain, leading to distortions in output (Davies, 2009, Parenti, 1986: 43). The Sutton Trust (2006) published a report that found that only twelve percent of leading British journalists were educated at comprehensive schools, which currently educate ninety percent of Britain. In fairness, Herman and Chomsky’s work specifically notes it is a model for understanding the US media. However, its generalizability has been accepted in academia (Sparks, 2007, Berry, 2012).

Herman and Chomsky and many other academics (Bhatt, 2013a, Young, 2008, 2009) have used case studies to illustrate and test the Propaganda Model’s applicability. Yet none so far have used the method of interviewing journalists to assess the relative strength of the five filters, as some have called for (Romano, 1989). Herman (1998: 196) rejected this criticism by stating that he did speak with journalists but they were hardly likely to “confess” everything about their internalized biases or why they follow their government’s line. Yet this study found that journalists were willing to talk about the flak they receive and the sources they used. The unique approach this study took to assessing the relevance of the propaganda model was not to use case studies, as others

(Bhatt, 2013a, Young, 2008, 2009) have, but to take the five filters and ask the journalists and academics how they relate to and shape the coverage of Venezuela. Thus, they were asked to comment on ownership, advertising, sourcing and flak, with revealing results.

As the fifth filter has been updated to be a pro-neoliberal one, it is vital to understand the process of neoliberal globalization, which provides the backdrop to the events that led to Hugo Chavez's election.

Neoliberal Globalization

Many have stressed that it is vital to understand Venezuela's recent history within the global framework of a reaction against neoliberal economic policies implemented in Latin America in the late 20th century (Lander, 2005, Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, Sader, 2011). It is therefore vital to understand the economic debate.

The historical argument centered on Keynes (1936) and Hayek (1944) on whether state intervention is a practical method of kick-starting an economy or the road to serfdom. Today, political scientists like Thomas Friedman (2000, 2005) and economists such as Milton Friedman (1962, 1980) champion neoliberal orthodoxy.

Neoliberalism can be defined as an economic, political and social theory that proposes that human wellbeing can be achieved most fully by liberating individual entrepreneurial skills within a framework that protects property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2005: 2). The cornerstones to viable economies are profit maximization and the free flow of goods with minimal regulation (McChesney, 1998: 2). The state must privatize its assets, implement austerity and trade liberalization, in accordance with the tenets of the "Washington Consensus" (Kirby, 2003: 256, Klein, 2008). The promotion of free markets leads to the creation of markets where there were none before, such as in water, healthcare or environmental pollution (Harvey, 2005: 2). Neoliberal theory is profoundly suspicious of state intervention. The role of the state is to

create a good business climate, optimizing conditions for profit making, no matter the consequences for employment or social wellbeing. This is in contrast to the social-democratic model, which is committed to full-employment and the well being of its citizens subject to adequate and stable rates of profit (Harvey, 2011: 25). The system privileges financial institutions, which, in turn, promote the system at a global level (Harvey, 2011: 26-27).

Neoliberalism is profoundly skeptical of collectivism and promotes the idea of individualism and personal responsibility and that we should be consumers in a free marketplace. In practice, this has meant privatizing large areas of the economy, reducing taxes on businesses and the wealthy and increasing the poor's share of tax payments and intervening on behalf of big business through policy changes and subsidies. Neoliberalism has achieved a hegemonic status among elites but also become accepted among the population to an extent, leading to a situation where collective solutions to problems such as climate change (Klein, 2014) and the financial crisis (Berry, 2012) have been marginalized so particular perspectives rarely receive consideration in the mass media.

The theory has been seen as an overwhelmingly positive process by many who see globalization is inevitable, beneficial to poor and rich alike, reduces the risk of war and supports democracy (Wolf, 2005, Friedman, 2000, 2006). But it has led to greatly increased inequality around the world. For this reason, others have argued that it should be understood as a political project designed to restore and further the elite's power vis-à-vis the rest of society in the wake of the 1960s, which brought increased political participation and economic equality (Harvey, 2005, 2011, Dumenil and Levy, 2004, 2011, Robinson, 2008). In 1975, The Trilateral Commission, formed of the liberal administrations of Europe, Japan and the United States, warned that the world was in crisis, suffering from "an excess of democracy" as previously marginalized groups like women, students, the working classes and racial minorities were entering the political arena. This was seen not as an expansion of democracy, but a threat to it, and to the power of the elites (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975: 173). The solution to this was neoliberalism.

Latin America was the testing ground for the new economic theory. Starting with Chile in 1973, nearly every country in the region moved towards acceptance of the “Washington Consensus.” The effects on Latin America have been much studied. Falling wages and rising poverty characterized the 1980s and 1990s (Buxton, 2009a, Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2009), as did rising inequality (Klein and Tokman, 2000, Lopez Maya, 2003: 89, Smilde, 2011: 5-10). For instance, the minimum wage in Latin America fell by 26 percent between 1980 and 1999 (Klein and Tokman, 2000:10). Children, having no economic power, were hit the hardest; by 1990, 96 percent of babies born in El Alto, Bolivia, were underweight, compared to 16 percent in Ethiopia (Green, 1998:143). As schools were privatized, poor children could not afford to go. In rural Brazil, the rate of children completing four years of school dropped to one in fifty (*Ibid*, 157). Instead, children worked, primarily in the informal sector. For example, in the relatively wealthy city of Curitiba, Brazil, (population 1,000,000) there were 30,000 children aged 11-15 working as prostitutes (Dimenstein, 1991:33). Venezuela shared a similar story. Between 1979 and 1990, real GDP per capita dropped over 20 percent (Buxton, 2001:64). Throughout the 1990s, the situation deteriorated. The poverty rate jumped from 23 to 49 percent between 1992 and 1999 (CEPALSTAT, 2016a) and inequality rose sharply (ECLAC, 2009).

Latin America’s problems were exacerbated by actions taken by the IMF and World Bank (Brandford and Kucinski, 1990, Honeywell, 1983). Furthermore, the neoliberal system that had been imposed restricted Latin American governments’ ability to act autonomously to mediate the social crisis (Pearce, 2013), while the social and economic fragmentation made it extraordinarily difficult for civil society organizations, particularly those representing the poor majority, to come together and represent their interests (Smilde, 2011: 14). Venezuela’s Human Development Index (HDI) actually decreased in the 1990s, as did those of the majority of South American states (UNDP: 2002).

The precipitous drop in living standards led to a profound disillusion with the political system (Buxton, 1999, 2001). The *Caracazo* protests of 1989 and the presidential elections of 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2000 represented popular mandates to do away with the neoliberal approach altogether, which Chavez’s predecessors ignored (Ellner, 2003:16). Chavez, however, did not.

Neoliberalism was taken up in the 1980s by that Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan administration in the US and quickly became the dominant ideology of the elite across the world. Global inequality has reached the point where the richest eight men own the same wealth as the bottom 3.6 billion people (Oxfam, 2017), with the richest one percent having more wealth than the bottom 99 percent (Hardoon *et. al.*, 2016). In the US and UK, inequality has grown since the 1970s (OECD, 2015) until today seven in ten Americans are effectively living paycheck to paycheck, with less than \$1000 in savings with over a third without any savings whatsoever (Huddleston, 2016). In Britain, more than 16 million people have no savings whatsoever (The Money Advice Service, 2014). This inequality manifests itself in a myriad of different ways. For instance, poorer people in their seventies have eight fewer teeth than rich people of the same age (Steele *et. al.* 2014). The effects of neoliberalism have generated great discontent and protest around the world, including the Occupy movement, which started in 2011.

Dumenil and Levy (2004, 2011) and Harvey (2005, 2011) have argued that neoliberalism is the ideology of the global elite. So hegemonic is neoliberal thinking today that its tenets have become “common sense” and competing theories have been marginalized. The term “hegemony” was popularized by Antonio Gramsci, who claimed that the tastes, morality, principles and outlook of the dominant groups become accepted by society as a whole, justifying the social, economic and political status quo. One vehicle that drives cultural hegemony is the mass media.

Studies have found neoliberalism to be deeply embedded within Western media culture, its acceptance being virtually a pre-arranged rule of the game, especially on financial matters (Fahy, O'Brien and Poti, 2010, Doyle, 2006). For instance, Berry's (2012) investigation into the Today Programme's coverage of the banking crisis showed that listeners were offered a prescribed range of debate. Likewise, Kay and Salter (2013) found that the BBC normalized the UK government's controversial austerity measures as inevitable rather than a political choice made by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

And yet, Yougov polls (Dahlgreen, 2013) show that the British public have not fully accepted neoliberalism and that large majorities support the public ownership of key industries, policies which the media have been very critical of Chavez for implementing.

The Western Media and Latin America

There have been numerous influential studies of the media's portrayal of other left-of-centre Latin American nations. The framing of Sandinista-controlled Nicaragua generated much interest from scholars (Parenti, 1993, Broadbent, 1993, Herman and Chomsky, 1988, Chomsky, 1989). Broadbent (1993: 155) and Parenti (1993: 156) both found that the US media downplayed or ignored the social achievements of the regime and cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the 1984 elections. In her study of the US and UK, Broadbent criticized the media for their overwhelmingly negative framing of the Nicaraguan situation and for constant use of value-laden adjectives, such as "Marxist" to describe the Sandinistas (Broadbent, 1993: 154-55). Parenti (1993: 172), Broadbent (1993: 159) and Herman and Chomsky (1988) agree that the US press systematically downplayed the US government's role in the violence of the region while widely reporting and exaggerating atrocities committed by anti-US groups.

Herman and Chomsky tested their own propaganda model in Central America by comparing the coverage of the elections in Nicaragua to those in El Salvador and Guatemala. They (1988) characterize the process in the latter two countries as undertaken under severe and ongoing state terror while contrasting it with the relatively free and fair Nicaraguan elections. Nevertheless, they found the US media were sympathetic to the Guatemalan and Salvadorean governments while adopting a combative line against the Sandinistas, as their model would predict.

Parenti, Herman and Chomsky have published widely on the US media and Latin America (Parenti, 1993, Herman, 1982, Chomsky, 1989, 1998). Parenti

(1993) has also undertaken qualitative studies of the US media portrayal of Allende's Chile, Goulart's Brazil and Castro's Cuba. He concludes that there are four rules that govern media coverage of left-wing countries,

1. An absence of any positive comments on democratic or economic reforms.
2. Sympathetic portrayal of the rich suffering oppression, unless it is possible to find oppressed poor.
3. A silence on the negative effects of US policy and violence in the region.
4. Build up an image of economic adversity due to mismanagement of the economy that is inherent to socialism (Parenti, 1993: 186).

It is to the media's coverage of modern Venezuela that we now turn.

Although the phenomenon is well known, even notorious to experts on Venezuela (Lemoine, 2002, Jones, 2008, Wilpert, 2003, 2007), academic analysis of the media's portrayal of Venezuela has only recently begun to emerge. Bhatt (2013a) and Young (2008, 2009) tested the propaganda model by comparing coverage of Venezuela with pro-US states, Honduras and Colombia respectively. Bhatt (2013a) concluded that *The New York Times* downplayed or did not report serious problems of judiciary, political and human rights in Honduras, but focused on Venezuelan transgressions, almost imperceptible in comparison. He accuses *The Times* of maintaining an unfailing double standard on Honduras and Venezuela, concluding that it is Honduras' status as an ally of the United States that crucially explains the discrepancy. Young (2013) compared coverage of press freedom and presidential term limits in Venezuela and Colombia, a key US ally (Stokes, 2005, Murillo, 2004). He found widespread and negative coverage of events in Venezuela contrasted with minimal, understated, and even non-existent coverage of attacks on press freedom in Colombia. Also absent were alternative, "fact-based" opinions on Venezuela. While revealing, these studies were limited in their range as they limited themselves to small-scale analyses of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Declacour (2005) studied the opinion pages of the top twenty-five highest circulating newspapers in the United States during the first six months of 2005. He found that ninety-five percent of the commentaries expressed open hostility to President Chavez, thus parroting the US government propaganda about “democracy promotion.” Young (2013) has recently argued that the press uncritically reproduce Castaneda's (2006) “two lefts” thesis, virtually the US government's official line.

Castaneda's two lefts thesis argues that since 1998, two distinct strains of left-of-centre governments have appeared in Latin America. The good left, the governments of Brazil and Uruguay, is “modern, open-minded, reformist, and internationalist,” and accept neoliberal economics. The bad left is “populist,” “nationalist, strident, and close minded.” Since the bad left rejects the modern scientific reality of neoliberalism, they are “committing macro-economic folly” by creating a “cult of the past,” thereby “driving their countries into the ground” (2006). Castaneda posits there is a considerable ideological divide between the two lefts. It is debatable whether this divide exists, as Lula, the influential ex-President of Brazil continually stressed his political and ideological closeness to Chavez (Da Silva, 2012). Young (2013) concludes that the two lefts thesis is an attempt from an imperialist government at divide and rule politics.

While insightful, these studies were again limited by their scope and time frame. Numerous media watchdog organizations (FAIR.org, MediaLens) regularly criticize the US media for their framing of Venezuela, indeed, one of the largest academic journals on Latin America (NACLA) has a section devoted to it. Rosnick and Weisbrot (2007) found politically-biased reporting creeping into IMF growth projections. Many (Bhatt: 2014, Grandin, 2013, Venezuelanalysis, 2008) have even accused human rights organizations of grossly flawed coverage. However, academic critique of the British press' framing of Venezuela is still limited at this time.

Salter and Weltman (2011) argue that the BBC reproduce the discredited liberal-nationalist “Venezuelan exceptionalism” thesis in their reports on

Venezuela. As such, Chavez is portrayed as a divisive figure stoking the fire of class resentment. Edwards and Cromwell (2009) and Ali (2006) agree. However, they argue that the corporate media are viscerally opposed to the political changes in Venezuela that are unleashing democratic hopes across the globe. Edwards and Cromwell (2009) and Ali (2006) argue that the radical attempts at raising living standards constitute a threat of a good example of an alternative to the current neoliberal order. Therefore, the neoliberal press must go on the offensive. Ali's study collates the British, American, French and German press. However, it is narrowly focused on the events of the 2002 coup. Many (Gott, 2011: 246, Salter and Weltman, 2011, Ali, 2006) have argued that part of the problem with media reporting of Venezuela is foreign journalists invariably live in the upper-class areas of Caracas and never venture into the dilapidated slums where the majority of people (and government supporters) live. Therefore, in the class-polarized world of Venezuelan politics, the media take sides by osmosis. As perceptive as these recent studies have been, virtually all are limited in their time-frames, and, as yet, no lengthy study has attempted to group together both British and American news and for a sustained time period. It is that what this study hopes to achieve.

The Changing Media Landscape

The 19th century shift towards advertising as the primary source of funding for news media had a profound effect on the news industry. Principal among these has been to marginalise the voices and opinions of radicals, the left-wing and the working class (Curran and Seaton, 1989, Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 3). This has been because those who hold these views tend to be of modest means, therefore being of lesser interest to advertisers, and because those views threaten the profits of advertisers. Thus, due to advertising revenue becoming a far more important source of revenue than the purchase price of the newspaper, titles with wide circulations aimed at these audiences failed financially while those with far smaller circulations but aimed at the middle or upper class prospered. For example, the left-wing *Daily Herald* was the west's largest circulation daily newspaper in 1933, with a readership of two million, but was making a loss due to poor advertising revenues (Curran, 2011: 157) and was

eventually closed and sold to the conservative Rupert Murdoch, who rebranded it *The Sun* and swiftly turned it into a right-wing publication. Likewise, the liberal News Chronicle closed in 1967, despite having a circulation of more than 1.1 million, roughly the same as the conservative Daily Telegraph, which was highly profitable due to advertising (Curran and Seaton, 2003, 87). One businessman succinctly summarized why he would never advertise in a left-leaning newspaper, “I’m not going to keep alive a newspaper which, the first time I get a strike, will back the strikers” (Curran, 2011: 160). Media often do not wish to attract working-class or left-wing audiences and one way to make sure of that is to provide conservative outlooks and editorial lines.

Thus, Herman and Chomsky (1988: 14-18) argue that in a free market with an advertising-based system does not yield a level playing field where the audience decides what media prosper and which die. Rather, it is the advertisers’ choice that primarily dictate who survives and who dies, which opinions are expressed and which are effectively suppressed. In a system that is sponsored by advertising, those with the most money have their voices amplified and those without money have little say. It is for this reason Robert L. Craig (cited in Jones and Salter, 2012: 19) that the media are “structurally dependent on advertising and therefore advertising acts as a form of “indirect social control on contexts, effectively censoring viewpoints they don’t like.”

As discussed in the literature review, a second change in the media is ownership. Bagdikian (1992, 2004) has chronicled the increasingly concentrated ownership of the US media. Today just six companies- CBS, Comcast, Disney, News Corporation (Murdoch), Time Warner and Viacom- control the vast majority of the American media while a similar situation exists in the United Kingdom, where three corporations- News UK (Murdoch), DMGT and Trinity Mirror- control nearly seventy percent of newspaper circulation while the BBC and ITV dominate television viewing (Media Reform Coalition, 2014). While the BBC is publicly-owned, Curran and Seaton (1989: 106-174) argue that it has always reproduced the ideology of the ruling class in Britain while Mills (2016) highlights the deep neoliberal culture at the broadcaster, meaning there is not

such a strong dichotomy between public and private television. These ideas will be explored with regard to the coverage of Venezuela in chapter eleven.

The arrival of the Internet has profoundly changed how many people view and use media. While many hoped the Internet age would challenge the dominance of media monopolies, the online situation is considerably worse, with large monopolies, such as Google, Facebook and Amazon, forming (Curran, 2011: 116-118, Curran, 2016: 5-6, Freedman, 2016: 104-111). Old media have successfully transitioned into new media and the most visited news websites in the US and UK are those of the dominant national news organizations (Curran and Witschge, 2011: 85). Furthermore, old media are placed highly on search engine results, boosting their popularity. Whereas an independent Internet site may take years of operating to attract and sustain an audience, a large news corporation can use their power and financial resources to immediately develop a large following (Jones and Salter, 2012: 24). Thus, the arrival of the Internet has meant media organizations are producing more content than ever.

And yet the arrival of the Internet has also meant a great loss in advertising revenue for media organizations as companies like Google AdSense challenge their profits with their ability to provide highly specific audiences to advertisers (thanks to the great amount of personal information we give them), weakening the bargaining power of old media. There has also been a decoupling of advertising from news content. Through Google, advertisers target individuals directly on whatever website they are on, including those, such as EBay, Facebook or Amazon, with no news content whatsoever. Thus, advertising money is moving away from traditional media towards the web. Curran (2011: 116) argues that this has not democratized the media or given power to consumers but led to a great increase in power for advertisers and search engines vis-à-vis media organizations.

The drop in media revenue has led to media organizations worldwide cutting staff (Noam, 2009, Nicholas and McChesney, 2013). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), American newsrooms cut a third of their workforce between 2006 and 2013. This leads to a situation where journalists are under great pressure to produce more content for both print and online publication,

effectively compensating for smaller newsrooms (Reinardy, 2011). There has also been a marked and intensifying imperative for media organizations to cutback on expensive investigative journalism, news or current affairs and concentrate on cheaper stories or programming (Jones and Salter, 2012: 21).

The pressures journalists are under have increased in the rise of the 24-hour news culture. Barnett (2011: 214-215) notes that journalists are under pressure to be the first to break a news story, thus privileging immediacy over accuracy, an inversion of traditional journalistic values. Under pressure to produce more in less time, the quality of journalistic output has decreased, leading to what Curran (2011: 116) calls “scissors-and-paste journalism,” with news organizations cannibalising stories from rivals’ websites or quickly piecing together a “story” from a tried and tested source.

On a similar vein, Davies (2009: 59) notes the rise of “churnalism,” where news organizations repeat, often verbatim, corporate press releases. As journalists’ numbers decline, they have been replaced with public relations officials who effectively write stories for journalists. Today, there are far more PR staff in staff in the UK and US than journalists (Davis, 2003: 28-32, US Department of Labour, 2015).

A second source of material for the media are wire services such as *Reuters*. In his authoritative history of the company, Read (1999) chronicled how *Reuters* grew as the official news service of the British Empire, but, as it waned and neoliberalism grew in the late 20th century, Reuters changed to serve the business community instead (1999: 472). Boyd-Barrett (1980) has similarly argued that news agencies are agencies of neoliberal globalization. Newspapers are highly dependent on news agencies, having outsourced much of their news to them. A study by researchers at Cardiff University found that sixty percent of British broadsheet news stories consisted wholly or partly of wire service stories or PR material, although only one percent acknowledged this. This will be discussed in chapter ten.

In part due to decreasing advertising revenue, there is a strong drive to produce content that attracts the greatest number of people to a news website. One method of achieving this is to produce clickbait, a pejorative term for sensational or provocative stories or headlines designed to pique the reader's interest or emotions. It is generally considered a cheap trick within the industry. However, the drive for more shares, links and clicks is so great that even respected news organizations such as the BBC have been told to “emulate *Buzzfeed*” by producing clickbait (Burrell, 2015). This was something the journalists brought up in chapter ten.

Media organizations employ increasingly sophisticated methods of chasing these audiences. Anderson (2011a, 2011b) notes that newsrooms are using algorithms to discover what audiences search for online and what topics will generate the most interest, and, therefore, the highest revenues and that stories are being commissioned and written on the basis of what the algorithms predict will be popular. This is occurring not only with tabloids, but also quality broadsheets, such as *The Guardian* (Perlberg, 2017), turning newsrooms into “content farms,” according to Bakker (2012).

For these reasons, journalists report a distinct drop in job autonomy, with a drop in journalists responding they had full autonomy at work from 60 percent in 1982 to 33.6 percent today with the majority of American journalists seeing their profession going the wrong way (Wilnat and Weaver, 2013).

The changes in the profession of journalism has been mirrored by changes in the socio-economic background of the profession. The Sutton Trust (2006) noted that over half of Great Britain's leading journalists were educated in private schools, which account for only seven percent of the population as a whole. The proportion of the top one hundred journalists coming from independent schools is rising, while only fourteen percent of the most influential journalists attended comprehensive schools. Nearly forty percent were Oxbridge graduates and seven out of ten went to one of the country's most prestigious universities. More journalists work in London and the South East than the rest of the UK combined (Spilsbury, 2013: 23).

The reasons for this are manifold. Unpaid internships are increasingly necessary way to gain access to a job in the media, meaning those without free accommodation in London are even less likely to succeed. Therefore, it is less likely that those from modest backgrounds will apply for positions at all. In addition the study posited that the informal recruitment process biases towards those with personal connections within the industry. Therefore, journalism is increasingly the preserve of those from privileged backgrounds in London and the Home Counties. The extremely high costs of living in London prohibit many from starting their careers. The high price of university tuition fees dissuades many from following that career path. Students from modest backgrounds saddled with high levels of debt are less likely still to move to an expensive city. Low pay and insecurity at junior levels also lead many to quit (Jones, 2014: 85-123).

The situation in the United States is similar. According to the Pew Research Center (2015) newsroom employment figures dropped by a third between 2006 and 2013. Men outnumber women nearly two to one in the newsroom. Like their British counterparts, American journalists today are far more likely to be a college graduate than previously- 92.1 percent obtained a degree as opposed to 82.1 percent in 1992 and 58.2 percent in 1971. In both countries women are underrepresented. The report also highlighted journalists' reliance on social media for information and communication. The context of the changing media landscape is crucial in understanding why the media portrays Venezuela in the way it does, a question answered in chapters 8-11.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Since the election of Hugo Chavez as President in 1998, there has been a great increase in interest in the country of Venezuela, both academic and public, and, therefore, a great increase in news and opinion articles. There has also been considerable discussion of how the media has portrayed the country (Bhatt, 2013a, Delacour, 2005, Young, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013). Some have studied one specific media outlet's content on the country over a period of time (Salter and Weltman, 2011, Chernomas and Hudson, 2012), while others have analysed how a specific event was covered by a range of media (Ali, 2006, Wilpert, 2003). However, no study exists that includes multiple media outlets over the whole Chavez period (1998-2013). This study, at its most basic, fundamental level, aims to answer these two questions:

1. How has the Western press covered Venezuela since 1998: what themes consistently arise, what positions do the media take on key issues and where do they fall on the spectrum of opinions on the country?
2. Why is it covered in this way: what factors influence the output of the Western media?

A mixed methods approach with the primary qualitative methodology being thematic analysis was decided to be the optimum approach to answering these questions. However, other methodologies were considered. Before laying out this study's methodology, a short discussion of other possible approaches follows, particularly of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis.

Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis and Hegemony

Discourse (DA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) were considered as methods to examine the content of the articles. The term "discourse" is notoriously ambiguous and misused in academic research (Van Dijk, 1997: 2-4). At its most basic form "discourse" can be considered linguistically as "texts"

which can be in the form of spoken or written communication (Fairclough, 2003: 2-4), virtually synonymous with “speech” or “writing.” But we can also refer to specific types or domains of language use or discourse, for example, “scientific discourse” or “media discourse.” We can also refer to “neoliberal discourse,” which is not limited simply to language but also refers to ideologies imbedded in its use (Van Dijk, 1997: 4). Analysing discourse can lead to insights into the worldviews of speakers and how they wish to present information, and underlying biases they hold. Tannen (2012) defines discourse analysis as “the analysis of language ‘beyond the sentence,’” whereas Potter (1997: 146) sees it as a method of “emphasizing the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse.” Both discourse and DA are used in many different ways and infer a great variety of concepts and practices. When this thesis uses these terms it is specifically referring to the ways they have been applied to newspapers by such theorists such as van Dijk and Fairclough.

Within certain discourses there are often unstated but very real power structures present, for instance in a father speaking to a daughter or a guard talking to a prisoner. Therefore, it is possible to note how the social world is reflected and reproduced through language. It is these power structures embedded in language use that CDA, a prominent methodological approach in social science, attempts to expose and indeed possibly undermine. Emerging from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, van Dijk (2001: 352) describes CDA as a type of discourse analytical research that,

“Primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.”

Therefore, CDA takes an activist position, standing in solidarity with subordinate groups, explicitly attempting to raise consciousness of how language contributes to the elite’s domination of subordinate classes “because

consciousness is the first step to emancipation” (Fairclough, 1989: 1). Thus, critical discourse analysis aligns itself with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (2005a).

Central to CDA is power, and methods with which dominant groups maintain it. CDA specifically studies how dominant groups maintain their power through discourse. A complimentary theory on how beliefs, values and morals that benefit those that the top become accepted as common sense by lower groups is that of hegemony. Gramsci defined hegemony as,

“An order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant; in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations” (cited in Williams, 1960).

In recent years a number of influential works (Dumenil and Levy, 2004, 2011, Harvey, 2005, 2011) have argued that neoliberalism- the ideology of the global elite- has become the dominant, indeed, only framework of understanding society, becoming not one of many ideologies, but a common sense understanding of the world. In chapter five, hegemony is tested as an explanatory concept for the largely consensus view among journalists on a highly contentious issue.

DA and CDA could certainly have been an appropriate to analyse and highlight ideologies embedded within the texts. Fairclough (2000) used CDA to critique New Labour’s embrace of neoliberalism, which he described as “profoundly dangerous” as it increases inequality, injustice and suffering and “threatens to make life on earth ecologically unsustainable” (2000: 15). It is not difficult to use CDA to uncover neoliberal ideology embedded within the sample articles. For instance, the newspapers constantly linked democracy and free markets as synonymous and going hand-in-hand. For example, *The Washington Post* described Hugo Chavez as,

“An elected head of state in Venezuela who has shown little commitment to democracy and free markets” (December 10th, 1998).

The newspaper also treated neoliberal tenets such as austerity as economic common sense and other measures as ones that would inherently harm the economy. On February 12th, 1999, an editorial asked whether Chavez would “fulfill his vaguely leftist campaign promises and destabilize the economy?” while somberly noting that austerity was an inescapable economic necessity, noting (emphasis added), “Austerity, including *essential cuts in public-sector jobs*, will touch first his supporters on the left and in the unions.”

This was despite the fact that neoliberal austerity had been implemented by the previous two administrations continuously for ten years, resulting in a fall in GDP per capita between 1990 and 1999 (World Bank, 2016), poverty to increase by a third and extreme poverty by nearly two thirds (CEPALSTAT, 2016b) and unemployment to increase from 10 percent to 15 percent over the same period (CEPALSTAT, 2016c).

Yet there are reasons why DA and CDA are not the most appropriate methodology for this study and why I did not use them as methodologies, only drawing upon some elements of them to inform my approach. While well-established methodologies, DA and CDA are limited as they do not look at the production process of the content; in other words *why* certain explanations and ideas are more prevalent than others. DA and CDA can highlight and expose ideologies and power structures entrenched in language use and how these ideas perpetuate in society, but they do not address the question of how the news is produced. Thematic analysis is more appropriate for this study as the second of the two fundamental questions it hopes to answer is why the content looks the way it does. Some form of discourse analysis may be appropriate for the first question of what the coverage of Venezuela looks like but has no explanation for the second question. Therefore, to explain both the “how” and “why” of the media and Venezuela necessarily required an approach that went beyond simply analyzing the content of the articles and examined the procedures and processes that underpin news production. That is what appears (primarily) in chapter five.

The production study enriched the thesis greatly. By analyzing the newspaper discourse alone, it is possible to see a very mechanistic, cynical form of journalism taking place. However, after interviewing academics and the journalists themselves a wide range of other factors beyond ideology was apparent and has been offered as an explanation to the second question.

Philo (2007) has criticized DA and CDA, arguing that a critique is given more force by noting what is excluded, of what we are not being told. Using thematic analysis allows us to scrutinize not only what is present but also what is *not present* in media accounts; what arguments and frames are commonly utilized by media in reporting and what arguments go unreported. Thus, as stated above, the Media Group found that the unions' arguments about poor management and underinvestment in manufacturing were ignored (1980), while Palestinian explanations of the Israel/Palestine conflict were disregarded (Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011). This is particularly important with regards to Venezuela, where this study found that the US government and the Venezuelan opposition's viewpoints were continually treated not as opinion, but as facts, and the Venezuelan government's position was rarely, if ever, stated at all. This is notable as, as explained in chapter four, the Venezuelan government's position was often backed by a wealth of evidence, large majorities of the population and by the international community. Furthermore, discussion of the Venezuelan government's social programs, the missions, which radically improved Venezuela's quality of life indicators and were the basis for the government's popularity, was virtually non-existent. The missions sparked a great deal of interest from academics around the world (Lievesley and Ludlum, 2009, Sitrin and Azzelini, 2014). Indeed, one team of Canadian doctors who went to the country lamented the lack of discussion of Venezuela's innovative health missions as they felt they were highly applicable to other countries (Muntater *et al.* 2008). Thus, thematic analysis shows what opinions the media are and *are not* exposing the public to. An informed population is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy and therefore it is crucial that the media present a wide range of opinions on key issues. To be able to gauge whether this occurs is therefore vital to the health of a society.

One of the strongest critics of CDA is Henry Widdowson, who charges that CDA is ideologically biased (which it explicitly is) and that this bias is further compounded by the fact that the analyst selects only those texts which will confirm to his or her beliefs (cited in Haig, 2004). Haig (*Ibid.*) states that he has found very few CDA studies that attempt to be representative of their samples. This is a critical point as the first question this study hopes to answer - how has the Western press covered Venezuela since 1998- necessarily requires a representative sample. This study specifically seeks to provide representative and generalizable data on that question; it includes all articles from a wide range of newspapers about particular Venezuelan issues during peak periods of interest between 1998 and the present and is therefore representative of the *chavista* era as a whole.

On a similar note, Philo (2007) criticized van Dijk's ideological square, a central component of his CDA method. Van Dijk argues that the media, politicians, etc. present in-groups ("us") positively and out-groups ("them") negatively by emphasizing "our" good things and de-emphasizing "our" bad things while doing the opposite for the out-groups (van Dijk, 2011: 396-403). Van Dijk's research is concerned with the reproduction of racism through discourse, for instance in British tabloids, which represented British-born people as "us" and foreign immigrants as "them," reproducing racist tropes and ideas. Yet Philo found contradictory stories in *The Sun* that presented racist British people discriminating against ethnic minorities as the out-group and *The Sun's* multicultural readers as the in-group, leading him to claim the method was highly flawed.

Thus, it was decided that DA and CDA were not the most appropriate methods to explore the two questions set out. Rather, a mixed methods methodology was developed.

Mixed Methods

In order to best answer the two key questions, a study using a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative analysis was devised. The quantitative aspect of the research consisted of analyzing 501 articles on

Venezuela from seven British and American newspapers and logging how many times they identified major political actors positively or negatively, mentioned a certain fact or presented an issue in a certain manor. The language in the articles was also analysed qualitatively. However, the major qualitative part came in the form of interviews with twenty-seven journalists or experts on Venezuela. These parts of the research are explained more fully below.

The research wished to uncover broad trends within the coverage of Venezuela, meaning some element of quantitative research, generally seen, though not by all (see Silverman, 1985), as the only method to do this, was necessary. But it also wished to understand the reasons for the complexion and peculiarities of the coverage and to explore fully the language used by journalists to describe the country, meaning that qualitative research was appropriate. Using purely qualitative research could not yield information on broad trends, while using only quantitative research it would prove extremely difficult answering the second question. In any case, some (Bryman, 2010: 47, Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) claim that the gulf between qualitative and quantitative is overstated and can be effectively bridged.

Furthermore, there is a long tradition of mixed methods studies working well together (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, Creswell, 2015). For example, Poortinga *et al.*'s (2004) study of the foot and mouth disease epidemic sent questionnaires to groups in the UK and was able to generate data on what people felt about the outbreak and the differences between the views of people in different regions. But their focus groups also provided crucial information about the reasons behind people's positions on the subject and how they understood the crisis.

The quantitative aspect of the study (content analysis) provided easy to understand and measure data pertaining to specific trends in the articles. With purely qualitative analysis, it is not difficult for a poor or dishonest researcher to find two or three specific instances of a theme or phrase and claim it constitutes a broad trend across the data, when, in fact, they may be outliers. Quantitative research, in general, allows for more generalizations to be made than qualitative. However, with quantitative analysis, the data generated is much

less rich than qualitative and can reveal only a limited amount. The quantitative analysis alone in this research did not gauge the *quality* of the references in the articles. It was therefore crucial to include qualitative analysis as well. Frequent reference to the differences between qualitative and quantitative data will be made throughout the study.

Quantitative research is generally deductive and begins from pre-existing theories (in this case, previous studies and information from the interviews) whereas qualitative work is inherently inductive and begins from participants' own subjective views of reality. This study possessed elements of both deductive and inductive research, the quantitative being primarily deductive, in that the categories of what to count in the newspaper articles were pre-arranged by the researcher's preliminary study of academic opinions on the matter. The qualitative side of the research, the interviews with journalists and experts were the primary driving force behind the explanatory theories of how and why the media portrays Venezuela in a particular manner offered towards the end of the study.

The qualitative data in this study serves to reinforce and deepen the trends identified by the quantitative data. However, if this study was purely qualitative, it would merely describe journalists and academics' own subjective understanding of the situation in Venezuela and its reporting in the media. The quantitative data adds an important sense of generalizability to it. In essence, both qualitative and quantitative research have their strong points, and this research aims to harness them both harmoniously.

There now follows a discussion of the methodology chosen, a modified version of thematic analysis.

Modified Thematic Analysis

The primary qualitative methodology used was a modified version of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis examines how opposing viewpoints are covered (or not covered) in news media. It was developed by the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) and posits that for any controversial issue there

will be a number of competing explanations and arguments. The first step is to identify the range of understandings and explanations being put forward in public debate to produce a “conceptual map” of the spectrum of beliefs on any issue. News media is then analysed to understand how often each side’s arguments and explanations are used, highlighted or referred to. The Group (1980) used it to investigate the coverage of UK’s economic troubles of the 1970’s. It found the media emphasized the government’s explanation that unions and industrial action were to blame for Britain’s low productivity and ignored the unions’ competing argument about low levels of investment in manufacturing. Thus, the explanation that strikes were to blame for the underperforming set the tone of the news and the range of debate. A versatile and influential methodology, it has since been used to analyse the coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict, where it was found that Israeli explanations of the conflict were repeated in the British media whereas competing Palestinian explanations were ignored (Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011). Furthermore, it has also been used to examine coverage of Latin American issues before (Broadbent, 1993).

However, while stating what the main arguments and explanations for contentious issues are, thematic analysis does not provide the reader with a section on the empirical data purporting to the arguments. After laying out the range of debate, this study provides the reader with the best empirical data available in order to further inform their understanding of the topic. For example, in chapter four, one central disagreement is whether the economy improved or worsened under Chavez, so data on GDP per capita, unemployment, poverty, inflation and more has been provided. Every effort was made to take empirical evidence from best sources available. Thus, sources such as the World Bank and United Nations are regularly used. Data provided by anti-*chavista* sources such as the Chilean polling organization *Latinobarometro* is also shown. Data from the Venezuelan government, which tends to show a more positive picture, is rarely used. Therefore, this study aims to address the weakness of this approach by using empirical data only from the most unimpeachable sources or from sources critical of the government. In other words, it has been designed to be overly critical of the government as to safeguard against claims of bias in the opposite direction.

One example that highlights the effectiveness of this improved method can be found in chapter four, where a key disagreement between political actors centered on the Venezuelan media. The opposition claimed the state-TV dominated the airwaves and their opinions were shut out while the *chavista* government claimed that state media was not dominant and that private, anti-government channels prevailed. Applying thematic analysis to the issue found the Western media overwhelmingly reproduced the opposition's position and ignored the *chavistas'*. However, this thesis also presented a study from the prestigious American Nielsen Corporation that showed that between 2000 and 2010 state TV channels accounted for between one and eight percent of viewership and that private channels account for around 90 percent. These findings were in line with other studies conducted by well-respected election monitoring organizations. Thus, to show that the media overwhelmingly preferred the opposition's argument and ignored the government's argument is one thing. But to show, as this modified thematic analysis does, they also contradicted the best empirical data on the subject produced by the most trusted source in calculating viewership worldwide is quite another.

Content Analysis

Another popular methodology of analyzing media is content analysis (CA), by which it is meant simply counting the instances of phenomena in texts. A malleable and useful methodology, CA can be used to highlight trends in coverage, as was done, for example, in presidential elections (Frank, 1973) and disputes such as the miners' strike (Cumberbatch *et al.*, 1986). Yet, to count simply the amount of coverage each presidential candidate receives and to draw conclusions from this is fraught with difficulty. There was extensive coverage, for instance, of Gerald Ford falling down a flight of steps. But to count this as more coverage and, therefore, revealing bias within the media would be problematic. The CA of Cumberbatch *et al's*, (1986) study revolved around the number of times certain themes, such as negotiations and picket line violence occurred. However, their study drew criticism (Philo, 1990: 162-169) for their vague, generic categories that did not take into account who was deemed responsible for the violence and not situating the references in the contexts in

which they appear. Thus, CA studies are limited to the quality and precision of the categories researchers identify. Attempts to force text into pre-made boxes can lose the subtlety of meaning conveyed.

This study used CA as a foundation. For example, this study employed CA to show that 26 percent of articles mentioning Hugo Chavez linked him to a coup d'état in 1992 but only two percent of articles mentioning Henrique Capriles Radonski, the leader of the opposition, mentioned his involvement in a 2002 coup d'état. This could possibly be taken as pertinent information about the biases of the media. However, this methodology is markedly limited, as it does not take into account the quality of these references. Chapter five details how all 209 of Chavez's references state as a matter of fact that he led a coup, whereas none of the mentions of Capriles' involvement in the 2002 coup were stated as a matter of fact. Rather, they were treated as accusations made by officials the media had spent years demonizing and were often immediately followed by noting all charges against Capriles had been dropped and countered by words from Capriles offering a total rebuttal. Without this important information, the picture on this issue is incomplete. Thus, CA is a "blunt instrument" (Stokes, 2012: 139), profoundly limited in what it can show and is an over simplistic methodology unsuitable for providing the fullest picture available for this study. Furthermore, it is always susceptible to idiosyncratic coding, with one person categorizing material differently to another. Therefore, it has been paired with other methodologies to complement it.

The Propaganda Model

Finally, in chapter eleven, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is assessed. As stated in the chapter one literature review, the authors argue (1988: 2) that news is systematically distorted to reflect the interests of state and corporate power as news passes through five "filters": (1) Concentrated elite ownership of media, (2) Advertising, primarily from corporations, as a means of funding, (3) Reliance on official sources, such as government or business officials for information and quotes, (4) Flak, particularly from organized groups, (5) Anti-Communism as an unofficial state religion.

The propaganda model is being tested with regards to Venezuela for two reasons. Firstly, because Chomsky and Herman's work has strongly influenced the research and was the first methodology of analyzing news content read, bringing the researcher to sociology. Secondly, there has been considerable debate (Mullen, 2009, Sparks, 2007) as to how well the propaganda model holds today in a new media age.

As discussed in the literature review, Herman (1998: 196) responded to criticism that he did not interview journalists by stating that he felt this method was unlikely to yield results. Yet chapters eight to eleven show this methodology was quite successful in highlighting certain pressures journalists felt they were working under.

Structure of the Research

The research was split into three parts, the literature review period, the interview period and the analysis of newspaper articles.

The first part was the period of reviewing the literature on Venezuela, Latin America and media theory. This part was crucial in establishing the range of debate on the numerous issues that are explored in detail. Identifying the range of arguments on a given topic is a vital first step in the thematic analysis method. It was also a necessary first step in identifying which academics and experts were appropriate to take part in the interview portion of the research.

The second part of the research was the interview period, where journalists were asked about their own practices, backgrounds and the pressures they face at work. Academics were also interviewed as expert witnesses in order to shed further light on the questions of how and why Venezuela is covered in the press.

When conducting interviews, social scientists should always be aware of asymmetric power relationships (Haworth, 2006, Kvale, 2006, Anyan, 2013). It is often the case that the interviewer is in a position of power, particularly when interviewing marginalized groups, such as refugees (for example, Philo, Briant

and Donald, 2013). However, in this study the researcher felt the interviewees had the power. On the information sheet given to the interviewees, it specifically stated they were being interviewed because they were uniquely qualified to talk on the subject. The interviewees were usually professors or journalists at prestigious news organizations giving their time to a younger student. The research was dependent on their goodwill so building rapport with the interviewee was crucial as the interviews could end instantly if they were upset. Therefore, the researcher did not feel able to challenge interviewees' statements but instead allowed them to speak freely. Previous studies of the media and Venezuela have been scorching in their critique (Ali, 2006, Bhatt, 2013b, Boykoff, 2009), and the researcher did not want interviewees to feel on guard and asked them primarily very simple questions about their work and backgrounds. However, the journalists were not wary but very open and approachable. It transpired that most of them were not aware their work was controversial at all and were unaware of critiques. On the contrary, many were pleasantly surprised to find anyone taking an interest.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between thirty minutes and two hours and thirty minutes. A set of standard questions was devised to best understand the interviewees' views on the media's representation of Venezuela and the possible reasons behind its particular framing of the country. The interviews deviated considerably due to their semi-structured nature; semi-structuring the interviews helped allow the academics and journalists to express themselves fully but allowed the interviewer the opportunity to steer the conversation back if it was getting off-course.

The third part of the research was the analysis of 501 articles dealing with Venezuela. The articles were coded into an Excel spreadsheet and into Quirkos, a specialist qualitative analysis software application. However, the latter's analysis tools proved inadequate for the project. There now follows a discussion of the sampling techniques used.

Sampling

As no studies of the Western media's coverage of Venezuela over a long period exist, the study was designed to have a longitudinal aspect to it. Sample dates were taken from across the period 1998-2014. Therefore, it can offer insight into how the media covered Venezuela over the entire Chavez period (1998-2013) and if coverage changed significantly over time. Furthermore, the first question of how the Western press has covered Venezuela since 1998 demands that the research also have a latitudinal aspect. Therefore seven of the most influential English-language newspapers from both sides of the Atlantic and of the political spectrum were used. They were *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Miami Herald*.⁶ Therefore, this study can offer insight into how much of Western media covered the country.

The interviews began in December 2014. It was decided early on in the research design stage of the study that interviews with experts and with those producing journalistic content on Venezuela would greatly enhance the project's scope and validity. The interviews were crucial in placing the coverage in context and shaping the process of sampling and data collection that came after it. It was also decided that these should take place *before* the fieldwork. There were many aspects of the coverage and many themes that the interviewees touched upon that greatly enhanced the criteria and the types of data that would be looked for in the subsequent phase of the project. They were also crucial in understanding and answering the second question *how* and *why* news about Venezuela is made as opposed to simply researching *what* is the output of the media. Without an understanding of the constraints journalists and media organizations are under, the process of examining their content and discussing its nature would be severely hamstrung. The results of the interviews are detailed in chapters eight to eleven.

Interviews with nine journalists and eighteen academics and experts in the field of media theory and Venezuelan studies were arranged. They took place between December 2014 and April 2016 and were conducted via Skype,

⁶ *The Miami Herald* was chosen as it is uniquely influential on the subject of Latin America, producing a great deal of content on Venezuela for its very large Latino audience. Miami is home to a great number of Venezuelan and other Latino ex-pats and is often referred to as the capital of Latin America.

telephone calls, and emails. They were subsequently analysed and transcribed. The researcher largely pre-identified the experts, though some snowballing took place as academics suggested other experts who could improve the research. The field of academics that have published on the topic of the media representation of Venezuela is relatively small and so therefore most could be contacted.

The journalists were accrued using the snowballing sampling technique. It transpired that most of the English-language journalists stationed in Caracas knew each other; that they were part of a small ex-pat community. Journalists were more willing to give their time to someone recommended by their colleague. Of course, the inherent danger with the snowball sampling technique is that researchers are introduced to people with like-minded views, meaning the sample will not be representative. However, as discussed in chapter five, the pool of people producing news content from Venezuela for the rest of the world is remarkably small, with financially-pressed news organizations all over the world downsizing and outsourcing their reporting to newswires such as *Reuters*, meaning the set of interviewees produce a substantial amount of what Western audiences read.

Furthermore, the range of opinions on the country that the media give is decidedly narrow, according to many of the academics interviewed⁷ and to studies published (Delacour, 2005). One interviewee, Sibylla Brodzhinsky, had written for both *The Guardian*, the newspaper furthest to the left of the spectrum of the seven in the study, and *The Miami Herald*, the furthest to the right, while another, Girish Gupta, had covered Latin America for five of the seven newspapers studied. Therefore, it could be argued that the interviewees are a fair representation of their profession as a whole. The journalists interviewed are also representative of the media more broadly in the sense that a majority of them reproduced what one could call orthodox reporting on Venezuela, while a minority, Bart Jones and Matt Kennard, went against that trend somewhat. In chapter five, they posited that this was due to their unusual backgrounds before becoming journalists. For example, Bart Jones originally came to Venezuela with a Catholic charity, and lived and worked in the slums.

⁷ See chapter eleven.

However, both Jones and Kennard both revealed that they felt compelled to toe a certain line and sometimes tempered what they wrote.

The Sutton Trust (2006) noted that journalism was increasingly open only to those from a privileged background. Half of Britain's leading journalists were educated at private schools and nearly forty percent were Oxbridge graduates. It is a similar picture in the United States where more than 92 percent of journalists graduated college- up from 58 percent in 1971 (Wilnat and Weaver, 2013). Men outnumber women almost two to one in the newsroom (Pew Research Center, 2015). The reasons for these trends are explored more fully in chapter eight, "Who are the Journalists?" Seven of the nine journalists were men. All questioned had attended university; most had been journalists their entire professional careers and all came from relatively privileged backgrounds. Therefore, the interviewees were reasonably representative of the profession as a whole.

However, the snowball sampling did mean that Latin American correspondents for newspapers and journalists for newswires such as *Reuters* are overrepresented in the research while those who did not cover Venezuela specifically, but only infrequently, were underrepresented. Those journalists proved hesitant or unwilling to participate in the research, citing their lack of experience and expertise in the country. However, just such individuals produce much of the coverage of Venezuela. This means that the journalists interviewed were more knowledgeable and familiar with the country than average. However, as discussed at length in chapter ten, newswire content is reproduced and published in large numbers of newspapers across the world. Virtually anything on Venezuela appearing on a newswire such as *Reuters* is likely to be picked up and reproduced, often *verbatim*, by many other news organizations. Therefore, newswire content is highly influential in setting the tone of coverage for other news organizations, meaning their overrepresentation is could be seen as appropriate.

The resulting cohort was a group of journalists that included,

Anatoly Kurmanaev, a journalist for *Bloomberg* in Caracas,

Brian Ellsworth, a journalist in Venezuela since 2002, currently working for *Reuters*,

Girish Gupta, a freelance journalist in Caracas who has written for *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and the *BBC* among others,

Jim Wyss, Andean correspondent for *The Miami Herald*,

Sibylla Brodzhinsky, a journalist in Bogota covering Venezuela for *The Guardian*,

Bart Jones, former *Los Angeles Times* journalist who spent eight years in Venezuela,

Matt Kennard, fellow of the Centre for Investigative Journalism who covered Venezuela for *The Financial Times*.

In addition, there were other journalists who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity. They were,

Journalist 1, a journalist in Caracas for an American newspaper.

Journalist 2, a former *El Nacional* and *El Universal* journalist working for a Western news organization.⁸

The academics and experts interviewed as expert witnesses included,

Steve Ellner, Professor of Economic History at the Universidad de Oriente, Venezuela,

Rick Rockwell, Associate Dean, School of Communications, Webster University and Executive Producer of radio program *Latin Pulse*,

⁸ Some personal information from quotes from these journalists has been removed in order to obscure their identity.

Francisco Toro, prominent Venezuelan opposition blogger and former journalist at the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *The Guardian*,

Dan Beeton, economist and International Communications Director and the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Washington, D.C.,

Kurt Weyland, Professor of Latin American Politics, University of Texas,

Michael Derham, Senior Lecturer in Spanish, Northumbria University,

Julia Buxton, Professor of Comparative Politics and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Programs at Central European University, Budapest,

George Ciccariello-Maher, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Drexel University, Philadelphia,

Ian Hudson, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Manitoba,

Jairo Lugo-Ocando, former Chief News Editor of Venezuelan newspaper *La Verdad* and Lecturer in Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield,

Joe Emersberger, blogger on the media and Venezuela at *Spinwatch* and writer for Venezuelan media channel, *TeleSur*,

Keane Bhatt, activist and writer for the *North American Congress on Latin America* and *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*,

Lee Salter, Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Sussex,

Dr. Michael Parenti, lecturer and author of "Inverting Reality: the Politics of News Media,"

Pascal Lupien, Research Enterprise and Scholarly Communication Librarian,
University of Guelph, Ontario,

Dr. Kevin Young, formerly of Stony Brook University and a specialist in
applied media theory in South America,

Justin Delacour, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Pace University, New York,

John Pilger, veteran journalist for *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* and
filmmaker.

While this study has categorized the interviewees as either journalists or
expert witnesses, many of the academics had journalistic experience and some
journalists had published books on Venezuela. For example, Jairo Lugo-Ocando
was a journalist in Venezuela for a long time before becoming an academic
while Bart Jones published an influential biography of Hugo Chavez after leaving
Venezuela.

The majority of journalists interviewed strongly supported the media as
publishing truthful, objective reporting on the country and were critical of the
government, in contrast to the majority of academics interviewed. Therefore, in
the interests of providing some balance, an effort was made to contact experts
critical of the government and journalists critical of the reporting. It was
beneficial to interview those were opposing views, as expert Francisco Toro
shared a valuable perspective into journalism and journalist Matt Kennard
provided insight into the ideological pressures felt by dissenters.

The interviews informed the third section of the research, the content
analysis of the newspapers. Samples of articles containing the word “Venezuela”
anywhere in the text were taken from seven of the most prestigious English-
language newspapers in Great Britain and the USA at four points of peak interest
in the country. These four points were the 1998/9 elections and inauguration of
President Chavez, the 2002 coup, the 2013 death of Chavez and the subsequent
presidential election and the 2014 demonstrations against the *chavista*
government. The seven newspapers were *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily*

Telegraph and *The Independent* from Great Britain and *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Miami Herald* from the USA. The study was therefore designed to have a longitudinal element, charting the media's coverage across the entire *chavista* period and also a latitudinal element, analyzing a wide ideological range of broadsheet newspapers from both the UK and USA. This was done as no such study combining both a range of newspapers and a long time period exists.

Three left-of centre broadsheet newspapers were studied, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The New York Times*, three right-of centre, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Washington Post* and *the Miami Herald*, and one centrist publication, *The Times*. This was done to ensure an even and balanced study where all views were represented. The number of articles from *The Miami Herald* was capped by sampling from a shorter time period, in order to prevent the newspaper, which publishes more articles than the others on Venezuela, from swamping the results. There were 232 articles from left-of-centre newspapers, 229 from right-of-centre and 40 from centrist newspapers in the survey. Samples were taken from periods of peak interest, where journalists could report on factual matters, rather than having to “sell” a news story in quieter periods to their editor by exaggerating or using inflammatory rhetoric, something some journalists said they felt they had to do (see chapter ten). Only articles over 400 words long were included.⁹

The result was a study of 501 articles gathered from the LexisNexis database at the University of Glasgow and the NewsBank database at the British Library. Tangential articles that featured the word “Venezuela” during the sample dates but were not about the events in the country were omitted. For example, many (though not all) of the 2013 stories mentioning the Venezuelan team competing at the World Baseball Classic were ignored. After further research, it was found that a small amount of content, particularly online content, that should have appeared on the LexisNexis database did not, leading to uncertainty over how many articles it omitted. However, all qualifying articles appearing on the databases were analysed.

⁹ Due to the paucity of articles, those shorter than 400 were also included in the 1998/9 sample.

Finally, a word on other possibilities not pursued. It was decided early in the research design stage that public understanding of Venezuela would not be studied. This was as the typical methods of understanding, focus groups, for example, were not of great utility. One trial group found that, even among a group of eight Glasgow doctors and other medical professionals, a subset of the population likely to read broadsheet newspapers and engage in world politics, knowledge of the subject was extremely limited. None of the group had heard of Hugo Chavez and one thought Venezuela was in Africa. Thus, the low level of public understanding and awareness of Venezuela makes it highly problematic to study reception.

A second possibility not taken by this research was to include Venezuelan newspapers in the sample. They were not available in the country and it would have proved prohibitively expensive to travel to Venezuela. Furthermore, the need to translate and transcribe the articles is beyond the scope of the research. A potentially serious limitation would be that translations by a non-native Spanish-speaking researcher would miss nuance and misunderstand words, leading to analysis of sub-optimal quality.

A Note on Data

Before starting the analysis, there follows a short explanation of data taken from Latinobarometro. Data from the respected Chilean polling organization Latinobarometro will be used throughout the thesis. Each year, the firm asks thousands of Latin Americans a set of questions on their views on democracy, the economy and the society of their respective countries. The data is used by organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and is generally considered among the most reputable data on Latin America.

However, Young (2014) states that the results of the data are highly likely to be biased against left-wing governments and in favour of right-wing governments. This is because people with stable, urban residences are overrepresented and those in rural areas or without a stable address underrepresented. This would prove problematic even in stable, prosperous societies, such as the US or UK, but is far more challenging in Latin America. More than half of the residents of Caracas live in what amount to shantytowns. The *chavista* government draws its support from these shantytowns and from the peasantry, meaning *pro-chavista* viewpoints would be seriously underestimated. Furthermore, the organization is funded by anti-Venezuelan government sources such as the US government and the Inter-American Development Bank. In addition to this, inside Venezuela, for years Latinobarometro outsourced its surveys to Datanalisis, a firm which even anti-government activists such as Nagel (2014a) categorize as an anti-*chavista* organization.

But this critique is mild compared to what it could be. The firm itself does nothing to hide its strong anti-socialist bias in the official reports of their findings. For example, in 2009, despite finding that Venezuelans are among the most likely people in Latin America to consider their country a democracy, the authors wrote about,

“The threat of authoritarianism,” where governments, “gradually proceed to increasing degrees of authoritarianism. They are still known as democracies, but have become a hybrid type of political regime. Such is the

case of Venezuela, where major elements of democracy are to some extent missing” (2009: 10).

In 2010, the agency found that support for democracy was highest in socialist Venezuela and low in neoliberal Chile. This created a “paradox” for the authors; that support for democracy was highest in such an “authoritarian” regime “where there is most criticism of the state of democracy. Venezuelans, however, do not share the opinion of analysts of democracy” (2010: 24). They solved this paradox by stating that Venezuelans “expect little” from democracy. This bias continues to the present day, with the most recent report noting that Venezuelans’ exceptionally high (87%) support for democracy was “difficult to understand” because “the institutional situation does not warrant applause” considering the facts that Venezuela has an “authoritarian government” with “a limited democracy or a semi-democracy” and that the state interferes with the media and has “domination” over the judiciary. The authors note the “great distance between what its citizens and the international community say about its democracy” (2013: 8). The idea that Venezuela may be a democracy is not considered. There is a similar bias against other left-wing controlled countries such as Ecuador (2013: 9). Young (2014) claims that the phrase “international community” refers only to a community of neoliberal intellectuals who serve the needs of corporate capital and empire. The Chilean organization is staffed with members of the internationalist elite, paid by business and the US government and places itself ideologically at the neoliberal end of a very wide spectrum about Venezuela. Considering these factors, it is all the more remarkable what the data show. All data presented are easily available, in English, on Latinobarometro’s website. It is therefore among the first sources journalists could turn to access reliable statistics for their reporting.

Journalists are indeed well aware of the survey, as they regularly quote it themselves. For instance, Juan Forero, who wrote 23 articles in the sample, used the survey in both *The New York Times* (2005) and *The Washington Post* (2011) but to present a radically different picture of Venezuela.

It is now time to turn our attention to how the Western media present the country.

Chapter Three, The Election of Hugo Chavez, 1998-99: A Threat to Democracy?

Competing Explanations

There now follows a summary of the competing explanations of the issues raised in the reporting of Chavez's election and inauguration. Chapters 3-7 are similarly structured, with a conceptual map of the range of explanations and arguments of certain phenomena and issues presented before the analysis of how the media presented the issues.

Venezuelan History 1958-1998

After the downfall in 1958 of the strongman Marcos Perez Jimenez, Venezuela was ruled for forty years by two parties: AD and COPEI. That year, the two parties signed a pact at the residence of Rafael Caldera in Punto Fijo, agreeing to a political alliance and to share power between themselves. The period has since become known as the *Punto Fijo* period.

There has been much debate about the nature of the system these parties installed. Here presented are three dominant strains.

Venezuelan Exceptionalism

In contrast with other Latin American countries, late twentieth century Venezuela was often seen as a beacon of democracy, stability and freedom. Unlike neighbours such as Colombia, Venezuela was not wrecked by widespread civil war, and in comparison to much of Latin America, which was ruled by neofascist military dictatorships, Venezuela had all the formal institutions of democracy. This, it is argued, made Venezuela an exception to the norm of Latin American regimes of the period and immune to the region's chronic social and political ills (Levine: 2002, 250).

Much of Venezuelan history of this period was written by politicians themselves. Former President Betancourt (1979) and his biographer (Alexander, 1982) tell of great individuals leading the country out of dictatorship into a new era. Anderson (1982) argued that Venezuela was a dynamic and relatively stable democracy that attracted hundreds of thousands of Europeans with the prospect of a better life. A functioning judiciary, civil and social services were set up and were said to be among the best in Latin America. Perhaps the most eloquent advocate of this theory was Daniel Levine, who argued that the 1970's saw the gradual improvement in income distribution and of poverty and welfare levels. While political parties in Venezuela were very strong and powerful, they were an advantage to Latin American democracy as they blocked the possibility of a slide into military dictatorship (Levine, 1977).

Karl (1987) argued its stable democratic structure, levels of growth and its oil-based economy made it the envy of its neighbours. The oil economy fostered a large middle class in the country, which reduced political tensions, increased satisfaction and aided stability. Martz (1984) claimed that high levels of popular participation demonstrated a unique political maturity.

Venezuelan exceptionalism was particularly popular among American political scientists and the Venezuelan elite. However, the narrative was interrupted in the 1980s and 1990s, with economic disaster, precipitous drops in living standards and the 1989 Caracazo, where President Carlos Andres Perez ordered the military to violently suppress demonstrations against unpopular new austerity measures he had himself campaigned against in the Presidential elections just weeks earlier. At least three hundred, but possibly up to three thousand civilians were killed (Lopez-Maya, 2003, Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 97). A recent study showed four million bullets were fired and ninety-seven percent of documented victims died in their own homes (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 97). Mass graves, filled with mutilated corpses of all ages were found. Some were tied up and received bullets in the back of the head (Jones, 2008: 124).

Many argue that the *Caracazo* marked the turning point in modern Venezuelan history, where the old system symbolically destroyed itself (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, Coronil, 1997), leaving the path clear for Hugo Chavez

to enter the political arena. The 1990's saw further political ruptures; greatly increased strike activity and two coups in 1992, and, finally, the election of the outsider Chavez in 1998.

The Venezuelan exceptionalism thesis has become largely obsolete in academia, with even some of its chief defenders, such as Levine (1994) rethinking their previous positions. Particularly after the 1989 *Caracazo*, alternative critiques of Venezuelan society became popular. It became common for political scientists to talk of “delegative democracies” (O'Donnell, 1994), “low-intensity democracies” (Gills and Rocamora, 1992), or even “undemocratic democracies” (Derham, 2002).

Revisionist Histories

Revisionist historians claim that the democracy Venezuela enjoyed was limited to a minimalist version, limited to electoral activity and individual rights (Garcia-Guadila, 2003: 182). Furthermore, the *Punto Fijo* pact was not only inclusionary, but also exclusionary, as it specifically excluded some widely supported parties from holding office (Hellinger, 2003: 29). Revisionists argue while Venezuela did enjoy a golden period in the 1970s, the fissures in the surface began to show in the 1980s and exploded in the succeeding decade. Indeed, many writers refused to classify it as a democracy any more, preferring terms such as “partyarchy” (Coppedge, 1994) or “polyarchy” (Hellinger, 2011b: 30) to define the system.

At the heart of the issue is the question of what defines a democracy. Schumpeter's (1994) great work argued for a minimalist, liberal democracy, based around regular elections and strong, apolitical institutions. Those in the academy therefore categorize the *Punto Fijo* period as reasonably democratic and the Chavez period as a hybrid regime that destroyed checks and balances on power (Corrales and Penfold, 2011: 8). Coppedge (2005: 291-292) claims that Chavez's “emphasis on executing the will of the current majority distracted attention from a more important and more conventional version of democracy-liberal democracy,” and that Chavez's version of democracy “tends to degenerate into the tyranny of the majority or worse.” There has been a noted

reluctance, particularly from American academics and NGO's to break with this analytical framework (Buxton, 2011: 10-11).

This critique has been challenged by some scholars (Lievesley and Ludlum, 2011: 17) and by Chavez himself, who argued for a more inclusive version of democracy: participatory democracy, where popular participation, the will of the majority and social inclusion were vital and outdated liberal institutions were challenged and replaced. Thus, those who subscribe to the Schumpeterian model of democracy are likely to see the *Punto Fijo* period as democratic and the Chavez period as anti-democratic and those who subscribe to the participatory model vice-versa.

Yet Buxton has argued that during the *Punto Fijo* period, Venezuelan institutions' neutrality was fundamentally undermined by the corrupt system of "partyarchy," where the two major political parties controlled virtually every appointment. She argues that the military, the judiciary, the state administration and electoral bodies were subject to intense politicization, with appointments dependent on party contacts, and that elections were hopelessly rigged (1999, 2001). Any civil society organization such as unions or NGOs could be brought into the partyarchy system by plying them with money. They were able to afford bribery on a vast scale by making sure to siphon off state funds into the parties. And no one would testify or rule against them as those at the top in decision making positions were all AD or COPEI loyalists. Thus, Buxton concluded that AD and COPEI "constantly conspired against the expression of the popular vote through gerrymandering, vote stealing and intimidation" and "political institutions had no credibility" with the population (1999: 180-181).

The Radical Critique

Buxton argued that Venezuela by 1998 had rotted to the core, but others have put forward an even harsher critique: that Venezuela was an entirely undemocratic police state. Derham (2010: 204) writes,

"Unfortunately for Venezuelan living in the slums and working in the informal economy, institutions mean absolutely nothing. I would suggest that the

supposedly ‘politically unsophisticated’ Venezuelans grasped, much more quickly than the ‘sophisticated intellectuals,’ that democracy was all just a sham.”

Ciccariello-Maher (2013: 10) categorizes the Punto Fijo period as,

“An attack on the people, as a subversion of the popular will that had ousted the dictator, and as an effort to prevent the incursion of the people into the halls of official power...at the very heart of Venezuela’s so-called democracy a veritable conspiracy against the pueblo.”

Concentration camps existed in the country (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 51) and Wilpert (2011) alleges that thousands of political opponents were tortured and disappeared, culminating in the crescendo of violence that was the *Caracazo* of 1989.

It is in this context, they argue, that we should understand the events of 1992, where Hugo Chavez led a coup against President Carlos Andres Perez. While all sides agree that the action had all the hallmarks of a coup, a group of military officers conspiring to overthrow a head of state, some choose to use the word “rebellion” instead (Jones, 2008: 158, Golinger, 2007: 24). It is also clear that the action had widespread support. The *Associated Press* reported that, “Chavez appears to be shaping up as a popular hero” (Jones, 2008: 164). Inside Venezuela, the event is often referred to as “the rebellion of the angels” (Levine, 2002).

The shock of a political outsider rudely interrupting the Venezuelan political establishment drew some level of reflection from the press on the nature of the Venezuelan system. As the economy melted down, so did the political system, in place since the 1950’s.

Empirical Evidence

Empirical data suggests that virtually every post in liberal institutions before 1998 was attained due to party loyalty rather than merit.

A 1992 report by the World Bank concluded that the judicial system was in crisis due to excessive politicization and bureaucratic incompetence. A United Nations survey stated that the Venezuelan judiciary was one of the “least credible in the world” (cited in Buxton, 2001: 32). The appointment of judges was done officially through a quota system, with AD and COPEI appointing officials from their own parties to the judiciary. This led to a situation where clientalism, incompetence and fraud reigned.

Latinobarometro data show that in 1996 fewer than 3% of Venezuelans had a lot of confidence in political parties (8% with some), with nearly two-thirds professing no confidence whatsoever in them.

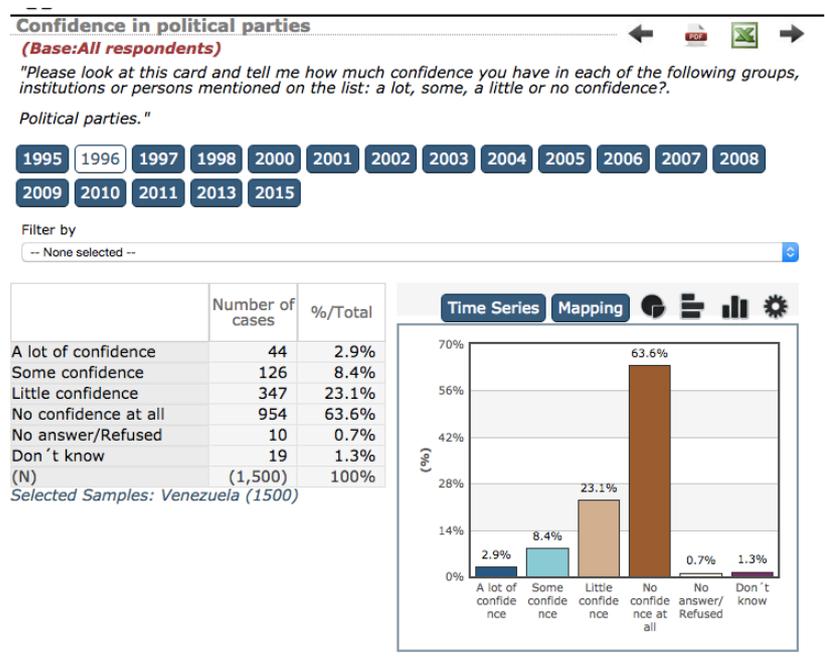


Figure 1 Venezuelan Confidence in Political Parties, 1996, Source: Latinobarometro

If we compare this to 2013, 16% of Venezuelans now have a lot of faith in political parties, 42% professing a lot or some confidence, with less than one-third having no trust whatsoever. This figure is among the highest in Latin America.

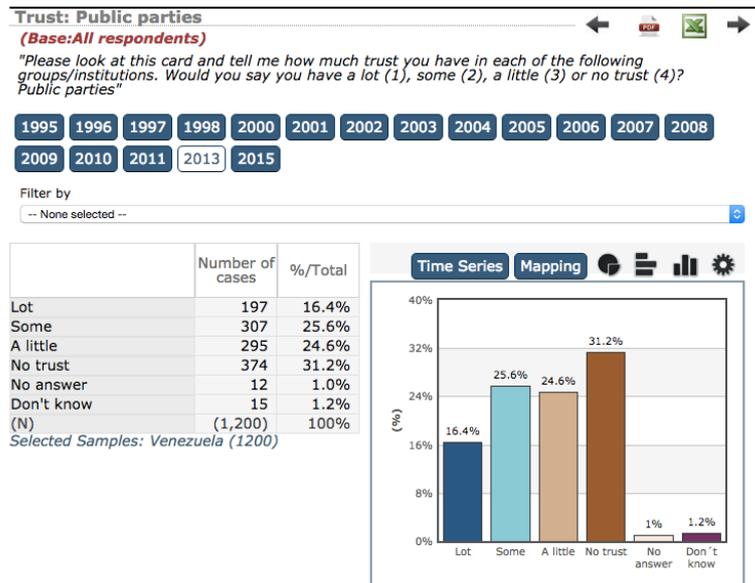


Figure 2 Venezuelan Confidence in Political Parties, 2013, Source: Latinobarometro

It is a similar story with trust in the public administration altogether, from 1996 to 2013 the amount of people responding that they had a lot of confidence in the public administration grew by over 300%. While the number professing a lot of confidence in the administration may appear low, it is, in fact, *the highest in Latin America*; double that of the second country (Nicaragua).

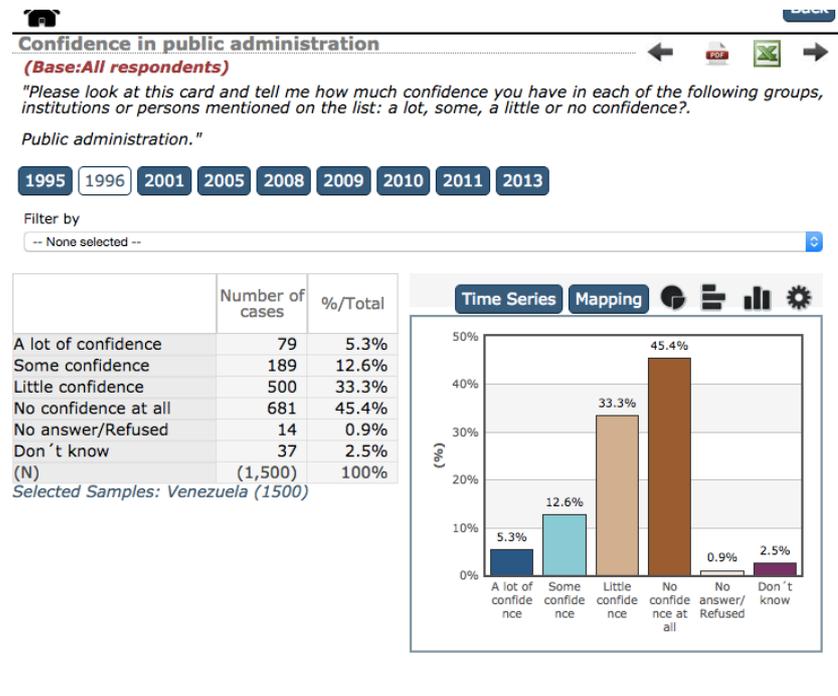


Figure 3 Venezuelan faith in Pubic Administration, 1996, Latinobarometro

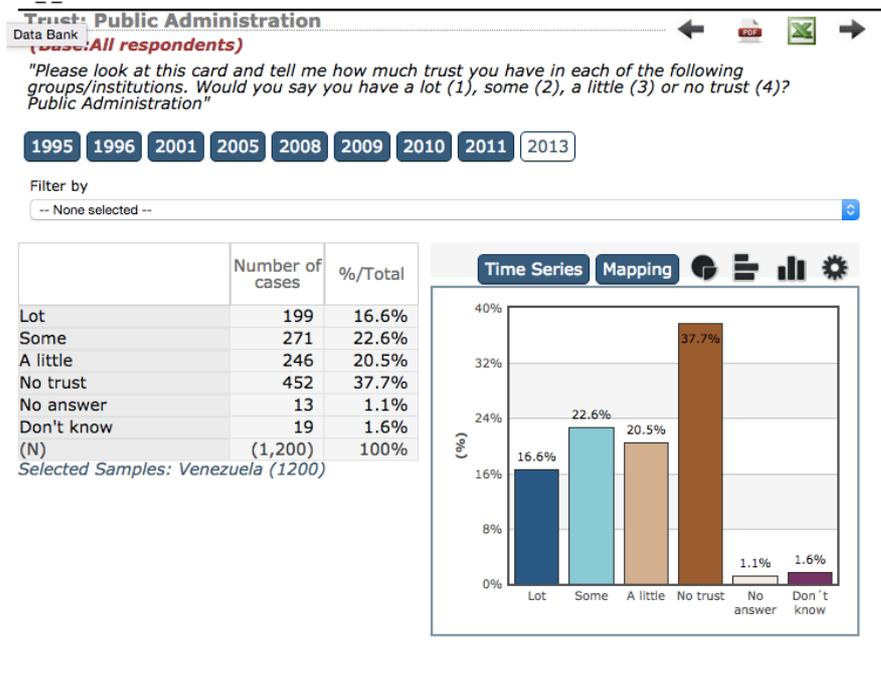


Figure 4 Venezuelan faith in the Public Administration, 2013, Latinobarometro

In August 1999, the Chavez government, elected on the promise of cleaning up corruption, moved against these institutions, declaring that any judge with more than seven outstanding formal complaints against them would be suspended. Around a third of all Venezuelan judges fell under this category. Many AD and COPEI appointees were removed from other state positions like the military and PDVSA. Chavez supporters argued that this was a necessary move in improving democracy. His critics claimed this was a sign of creeping authoritarianism. As this chapter will show, the media has largely sided with the critics.

In 1996, Venezuelans were asked about their confidence in the judiciary. Less than 10% said they had a lot of confidence in it, with more than 70% answering they had little or no confidence in it.

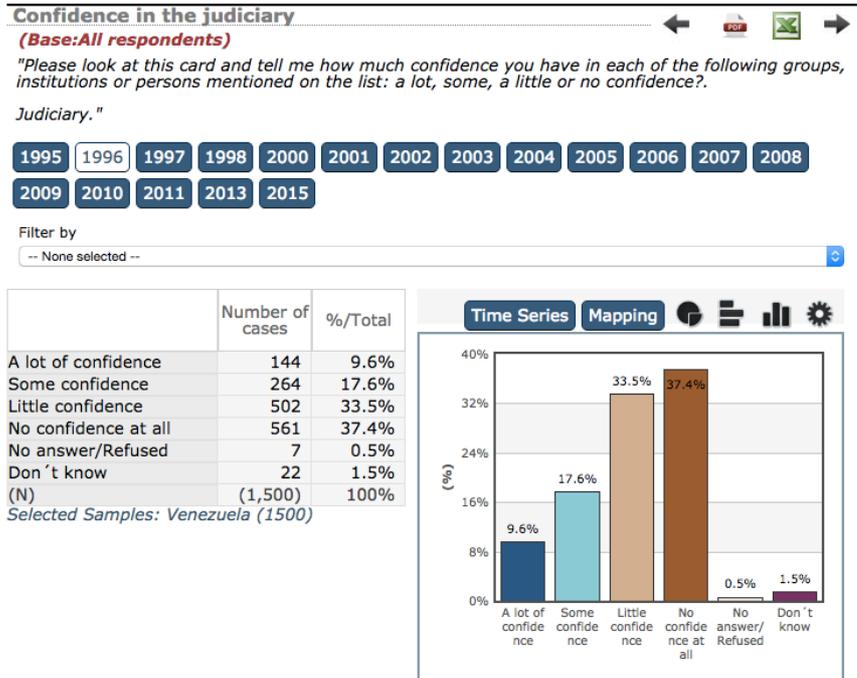


Figure 5 Venezuelans' Confidence in the Judiciary, 1996, Latinobarometro

If we compare that to 2013, the year Chavez died, the number of people with “a lot of confidence” in the judiciary doubled. While the number remains relatively low, indicating that Venezuelans believe that there are still major problems with the judiciary, it should be noted that Venezuela has the second highest confidence of any Latin American country, behind only Costa Rica.

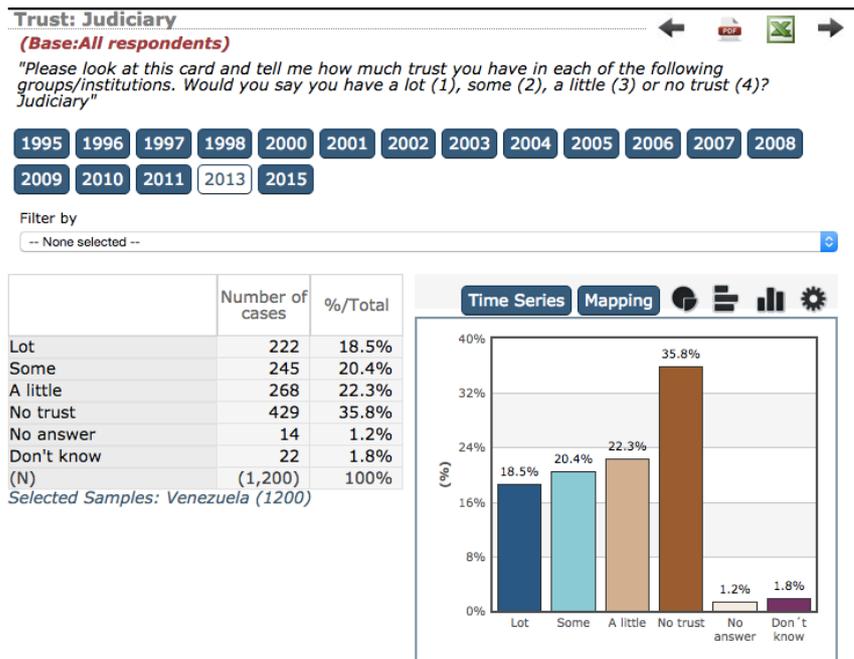


Figure 6 Venezuelans' Confidence in the Judiciary, 2013, Latinobarometro

A similar pattern emerged in state-owned businesses, the civil service, army and police. President Carlos Andres Perez himself admitted fraud in Venezuela was “like a bad African country,” which rendered democracy “an embarrassment” (Buxton, 2001: 92). The media was completely politicized and tied to the two major parties. Scholars have highlighted numerous examples of government ministers or advisors being awarded new media licenses (Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 196, Fox and Waisbord, 2002: 8-10). The close business and economic ties between the two led to a system of symbiotic dependence, where both needed the other to survive (Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 201). Despite this closeness, television stations were shut down and President Perez established state censors in every newsroom in the country (Jones, 2008: 163).

In 1996, slightly more than half of Venezuelans had no confidence whatsoever in the police, with only 4% having a lot of confidence. But by 2013, there had been considerable improvement- with 14% having a lot of confidence and less than one third having no confidence to the same institution. This figure shows the majority of Venezuelans clearly still do not trust the police. However, confidence in them is higher in Venezuela than in most other Latin American countries.

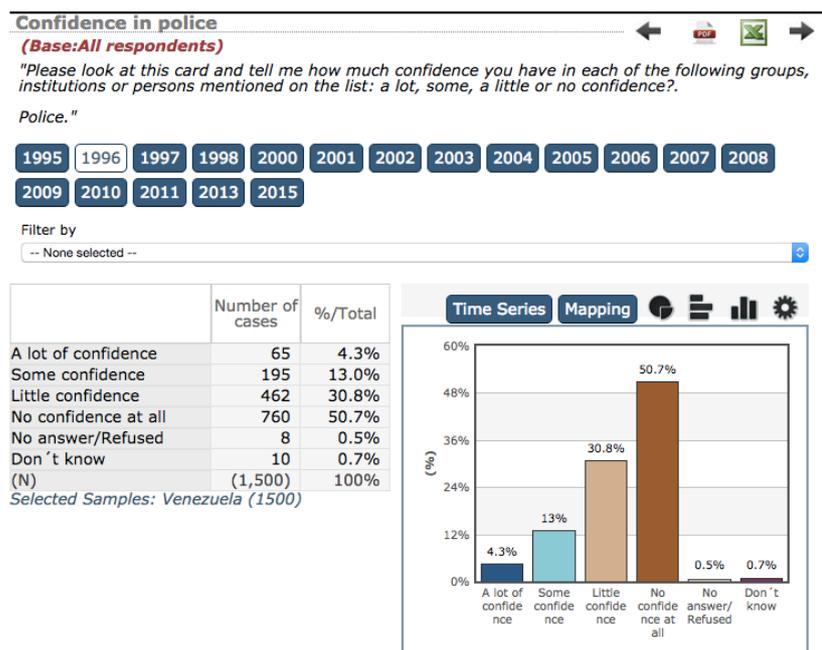


Figure 7 Venezuelans' Confidence in the Police, 1996, Latinobarometro

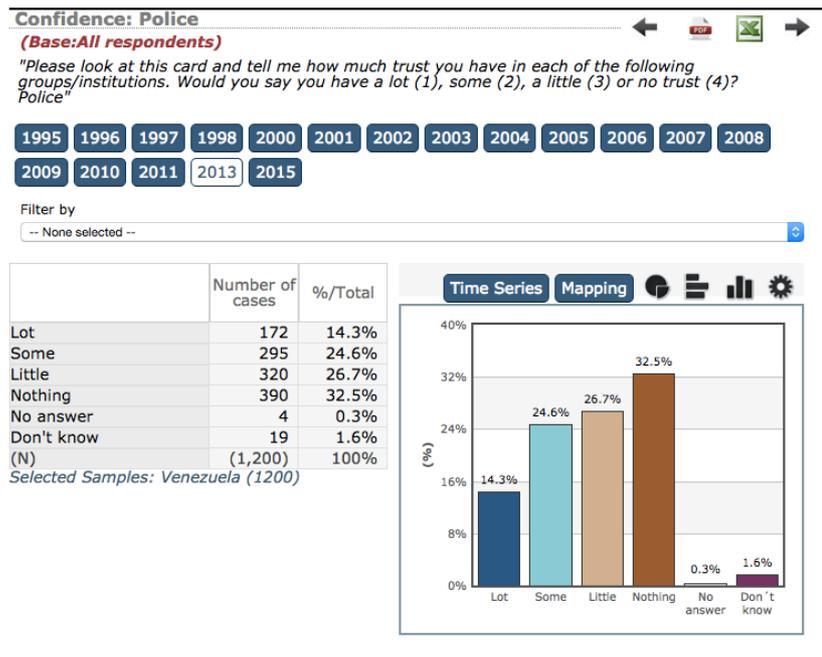


Figure 8 Venezuelans' Confidence in the Police, 2013, Latinobarometro

Elections themselves were rigged in favour of AD and COPEI. In 1993, it was found that many dead people had “voted” for AD and COPEI. Cathedral District, for example, had 4,000 inhabitants according to records but 16,000 people voted from there in 1993 (Buxton, 2001: 88). It was not difficult for AD and COPEI to register their supporters in tightly contested districts. The two parties could also pay their clientalistic supporters from state funds to watch the vote count whereas smaller parties could not, and needed to find a minimum of 23,000 volunteers to be at each of the voting tables. When all else failed, AD and COPEI colluded to steal votes for third parties and share them between themselves (*Ibid.* 94-99). A leaked instruction manual to AD supporters told them to “distract officials with violence” on election day and to “try and alter the ballot, particularly the vote of organizations with no witness” (*Ibid.* 93). After thousands of votes for him were found in boxes at a local dump, it is “widely believed” Andres Velasquez, the candidate who officially came fourth in the 1993 election, may have won the popular vote (McCaughan, 2004: 44, Raby, 2006: 143).

Abstention in elections grew from 6.6 percent in 1958 to 39.8 percent in 1999. Poorer states had the highest levels of abstention (Buxton, 2001: 59). Venezuela also suffered from rotten boroughs and a strongly unequal weight of

voting. For example, Maracaibo had over 1.5 million voters, whereas Alto Orinoco in Amazonas had only 60. Yet they both elected the same number of officials.

In 1997, Latinobarometro asked Venezuelans whether elections were “clean” or “rigged”. Only 11% responded they were clean, with 83% claiming they were fraudulent.

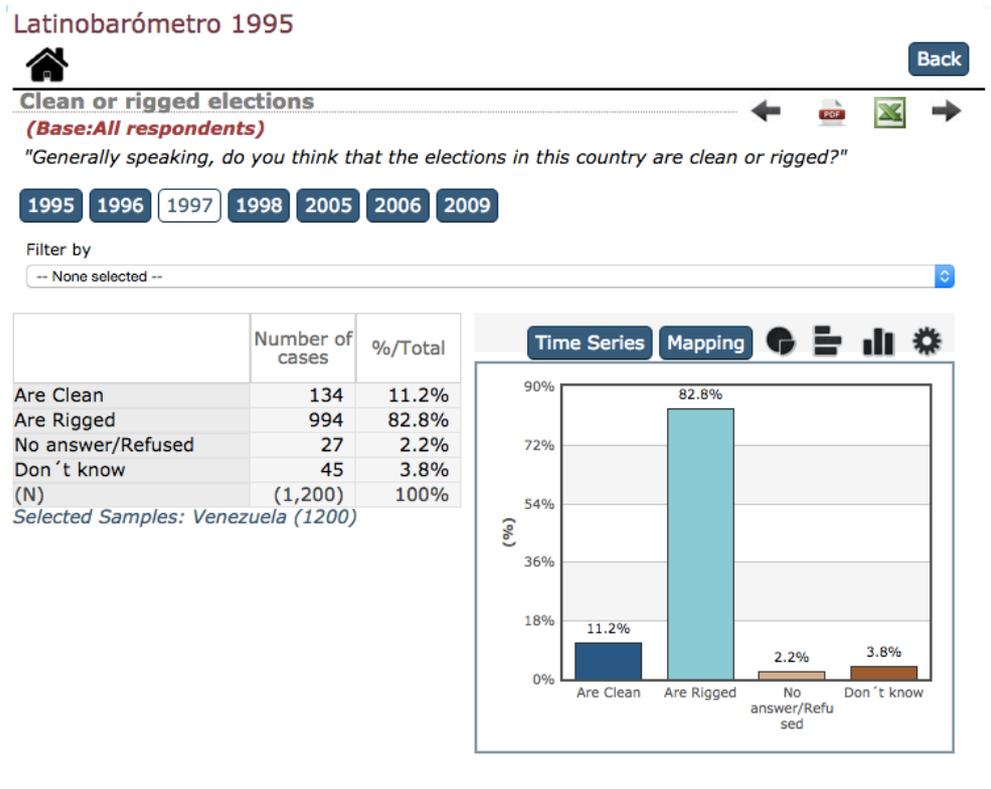


Figure 9 Clean or Rigged Elections? Venezuela, 1997, Latinobarometro.

Compare that to 2006, where the same question was asked, 56% said they were clean and only 30% claimed they were fraudulent. This, despite the fact the Venezuelan opposition and major local media claimed they were rigged in favour of the *chavistas*.

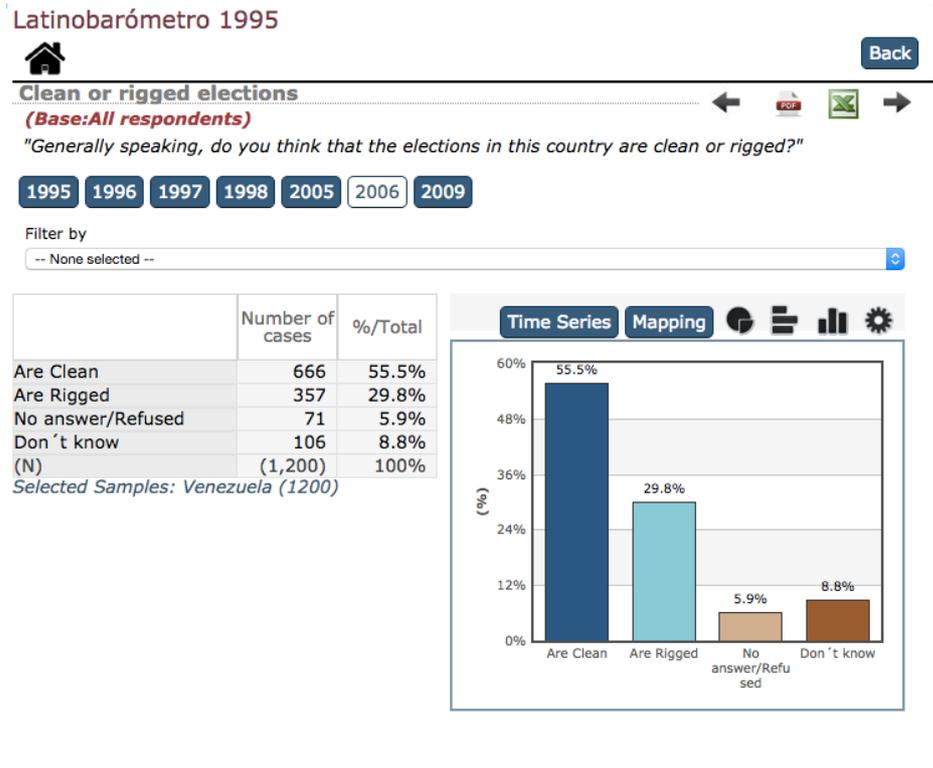


Figure 10 Clean or Rigged Elections, Venezuela, 2006, Latinobarometro

In 1989, Venezuelans elected Carlos Andres Perez of AD to the presidency on an expressly anti-neoliberal platform. However, Perez performed his infamous “great turnaround” and implemented neoliberal reforms he had, in secret, agreed with the IMF and World Bank. The effects on the population were devastating. Poverty rose from 22 percent of households in 1981 to 34 percent in 1990 to 42 percent in 1994 (United Nations, 1997: 26) Living standards dramatically dropped and employment became informal, meaning workers had no benefits nor legal protections (Klein and Tokman, 2000: 15). However, the richest stratum of Venezuelan society saw their power and share of national income increase (United Nations, 1997: 46, 53). One reform was a doubling of the price of petrol. Bus companies passed the increases onto their customers, meaning average Venezuelans were spending an inordinate amount of their wages on bus fares. This was the spark that led to a spontaneous protest that became angry demonstrations. This in turn sparked the *Caracazo* massacre, where government forces killed large numbers of Venezuelans protesting against neoliberalism. Despite the violence, the protests did not stop. Trade unions called for a general strike in 1991 and in 1992 a group of young military officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez tried to overthrow Perez. A second failed

coup took place later that year before Perez's own party impeached him in 1993.

In the following presidential election, the doyen of the *Punto Fijo* system, Rafael Caldera sensed the public mood and campaigned as an independent against Perez's neoliberal reforms and promised to grant Hugo Chavez, who was seen by many as a hero, amnesty. However, once in office, Caldera performed his own great turnaround and implemented more neoliberal reforms that made unemployment, poverty and inflation soar (United Nations, 1997: 26, 46, 53). He did release Chavez, however. The public rallied around Chavez as the last political voice that promised to fight neoliberalism.

Overall, Venezuelans clearly believe their country became substantially more democratic, if not greatly so. Indeed, Venezuelans were directly asked this question, and the results speak for themselves.

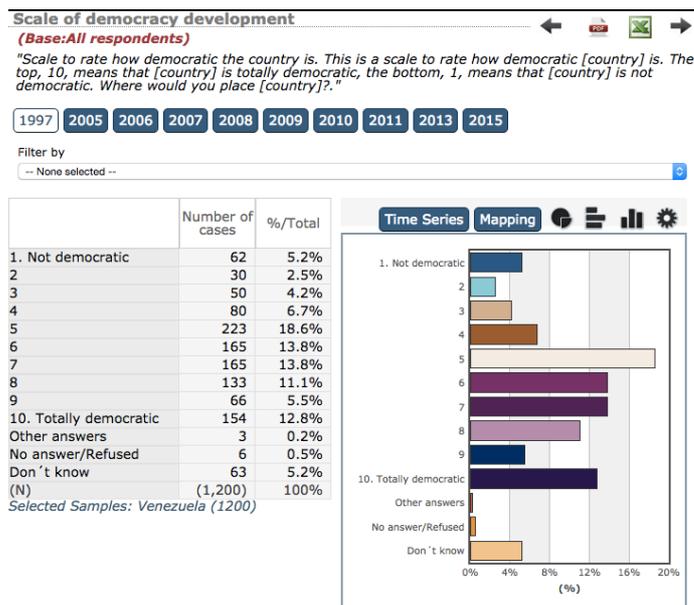


Figure 11 How Democratic is Venezuela? 1997, Latinobarometro

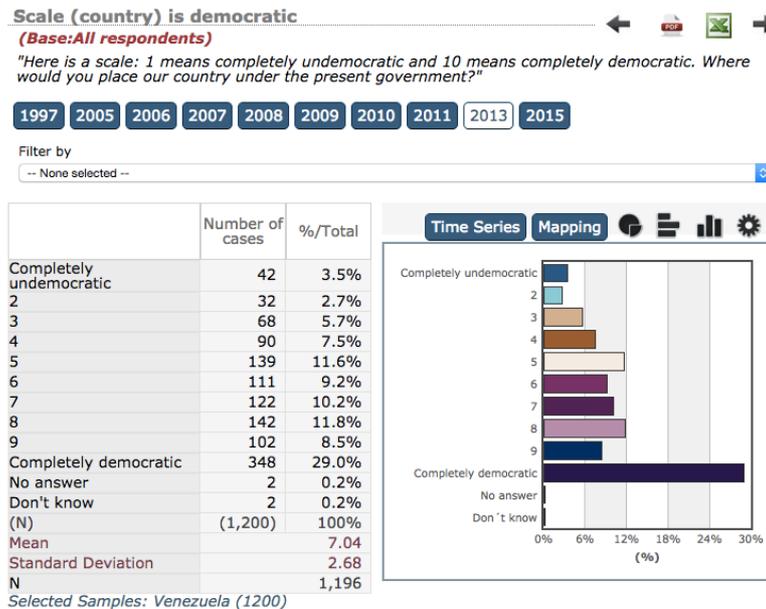


Figure 12 How Democratic is Venezuela? 2013, Latinobarometro

When asked on a scale of 1-10 how democratic their country was, Venezuelans in 1997 gave a mixed response, the most common answer being 5, and only 13% claiming their country was fully democratic. However, by 2013, by far the most common answer was that Venezuela was a perfect democracy (10), with 29% of the population agreeing, the highest in Latin America.

Overall, when allowed to speak for itself, the data shows Venezuelans think their country had serious flaws in its system. Its institutions were profoundly politicized and undependable. It also demonstrates that Venezuelans themselves think their institutions and the quality of their democracy have significantly improved since the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. However, as with all Latin American countries, there is certainly room for improvement in the quality and impartiality of institutions. But to present the *Punto Fijo* period as a democratic era and Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution as a democratic regression would be contrary to the empirical evidence.

Analysis

A sample was taken of all articles in seven influential Western newspapers with the word "Venezuela" in the text that were about the country. Some tangential articles, including stories about chocolate growing that mentioned

Venezuela in passing, were omitted. The seven newspapers used throughout the study were *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Miami Herald*. There were four sample periods, 1998-9, 2002, 2013 and 2014. However data from the 1998-9 sample discussed this question far more frequently than the other years. The sample dates for this period were between September 1st, 1998 and March 1st, 1999. This period covered the run up to Hugo Chavez's election victory to his inauguration. The exception was *The Miami Herald*, where the dates December 1st to December 8th were used. This was done in order to make sure the newspaper, which publishes far more Venezuelan stories, did not overwhelm the sample.

The newspapers presented the *Punto Fijo* period (1958-1998) quite differently, many framing the *Punto Fijo* period as a model democracy that was undermined with the election of Chavez, whose government set about destroying and politicizing once neutral and efficient democratic institutions. While there was a deal of critical reflection on the period, particularly from UK articles, there was little to no sense that the government had actually improved these institutions. Indeed the opposite was usually alleged.

It may have been expected there would be a good deal of critical reflection of the period, considering in 1998 the two-party system, thought by many to be exemplarily stable, was comprehensively ended with the landslide election of a jailed outsider who promised to destroy it and build a new republic. Overall, the *Punto Fijo* period was identified 38 times in 24 articles as a good democracy and 41 times in 28 articles as being undemocratic or seriously flawed. Examples of this identification include "the country's 40-year democratic tradition" (*The Washington Post*, 7th December, 1998) and, "Unlike most countries in the region, Venezuela has had four decades of uninterrupted democratic rule" (*The Times*, 8th December, 1998). Examples of the period as having problems included "Mr Caldera's government has hovered between inept and corrupt" (*The Independent*, 3rd December 1998), and "a quasi-democratic system that has helped very few people" (*The Miami Herald*, 1st December, 1998). But the British papers were far more likely to reflect on the period

negatively, framing it positively eight times in six articles while framing it negatively 15 times in 11 articles.

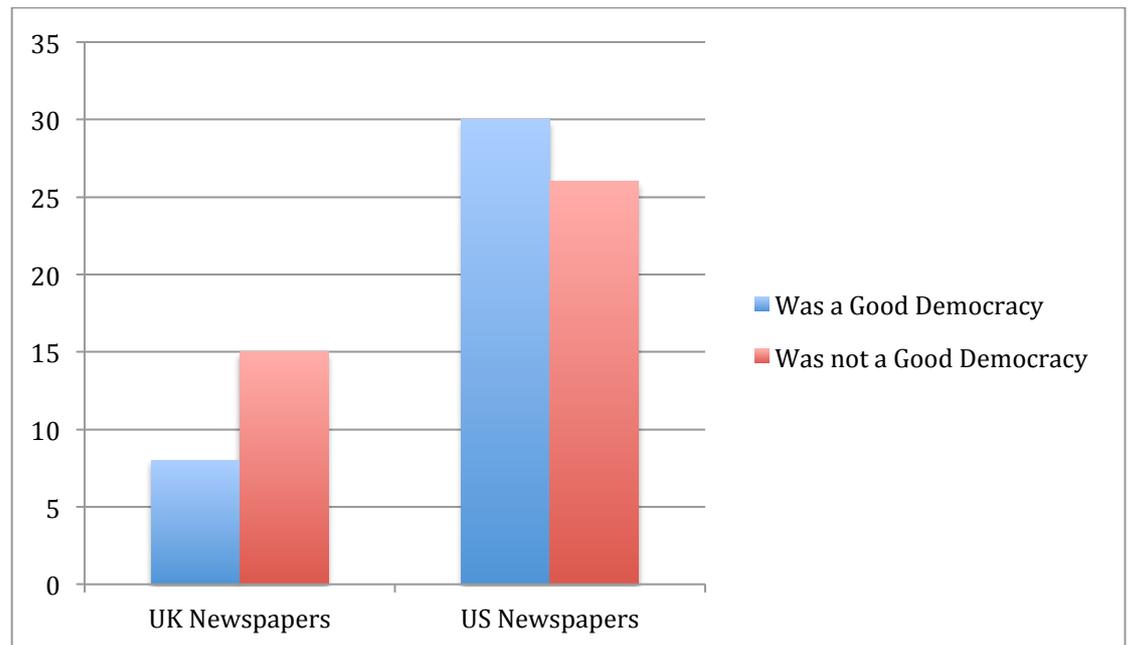


Figure 13 Newspapers' Framing of Punto Fijo Period or system

A typical description of the problems of the system was found in *The Independent*,

“Chavez’s support shows disillusionment with the fact that the free-market economics pushed forward by President Caldera have brought no improvement for the country’s poor...Added to that is the widespread feeling that Mr Caldera’s government has hovered between inept and corrupt.” (December 3rd, 1998).

In contrast, the American media was more likely to present the state of affairs as democratic. They were more accepting of the liberal democratic framework that paints any country with elections and liberal institutions as democratic,

“Venezuelan business leaders and foreign investors will be watching closely to see whether his moves mirror the campaign rhetoric that raised questions about his commitment to free markets -- and to the country’s 40-year democratic tradition.” *The Washington Post*, December 7th, 1998.”

Indeed, years after Venezuelan exceptionalism became considered obsolete in academia, newspapers continued presenting the period as a golden age of democracy. In an editorial in 2013, *The Miami Herald* wrote,

“For Venezuelans, the choice is clear: They can move forward, restoring the democracy that Venezuela once was, or they can watch their country continue to deteriorate under a Chávez apprentice like the official candidate, Nicolás Maduro, the hand-picked political heir and current vice president” (April 11th, 2013).

Political Institutions

As we have seen, the independent institutions of the state, such as the judiciary, police, media and military are seen as key tenets of liberal democracy.¹⁰ While some historians criticize the *chavistas* for undermining these institutions, others claim they are building bottom-up, more democratically run alternatives to these. Still others strongly challenge that these institutions were exemplary and independent of political parties at all before Chavez.

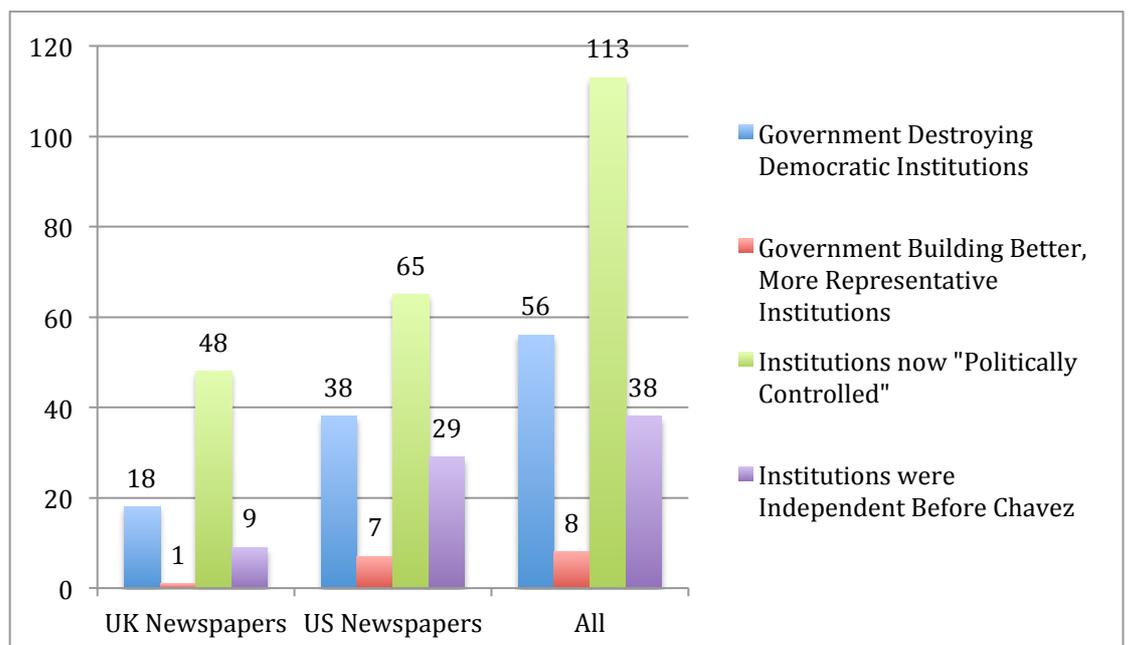


Figure 14 Newspaper Articles Mentioning Venezuelan Institutions

¹⁰ PDVSA, the state-owned oil company has also been included in the sample, as it is by far and away the largest and most important company/institution in Venezuela and the economic bedrock of the country.

In total, there were 73 reports of the *chavista* government destroying Venezuelan institutions in 56 articles whereas there were eight mentions in eight articles of the government building better, more representative institutions than before. However, this number makes the imbalance appear less pronounced than it is. All eight came from the 1998-1999 sample and most allusions to it were claims by Hugo Chavez, whom the newspapers already took a skeptical view of. A typical example of this would be,

“Chavez has vowed to call a referendum on dissolving Congress and creating a constituent assembly that he says would be more representative of the people and an effective weapon in the fight against corruption” (*The Washington Post*, December 9th).

From 1999 to 2014 there was no discussion of the radical experiment in participatory democracy in Venezuela, which had drawn great interest from academics (Lievesley and Ludlum, 2009, Muntater *et al.* 2008, Sitrin and Azzelini, 2014) and where the government claimed it was attempting to empower its own citizens to take control over decisions to do with their own lives. However, throughout the entire sample there was a good deal of condemnation of how the government was destroying democratic institutions of Venezuela. This was common in both UK and US newspapers.

The Independent (March 7th, 2002) claimed that Chavez,

“Did not live up to early constitutional promises on human rights and the rule of law. Vast powers were shifted to the presidency, state institutions were packed with supporters, and opponents were harassed and imprisoned.”

Meanwhile, *The Telegraph* (March 18th, 2013) stated,

“Carroll describes in great detail how Chávez hounded critics, purged the judiciary and kept a list of the three million people who signed a petition in 2003 urging his removal. Civil servants who put their names to that fateful

document were sacked, others were singled out for vilification. Carroll settles for describing Chávez as an ‘elected autocrat.’”

However, the tone in the American papers was more negative. *The Washington Post* (March 4th, 2013) summed up what newspapers had been accusing Chavez of for years,

“How are liberal institutions destroyed? These days, no military coup is necessary. Instead, cynical and determined rulers aim to corrupt rather than abolish independent courts, legislatures and media - and their defenders are too divided, too weak or too distracted to respond effectively... Behind the assault - no surprise - are the leftist populist rulers of Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua, who have spent the last few years gutting democratic institutions in their countries and now seek to punish the Inter-American Commission for calling attention to their offenses. At the head of this pack is Rafael Correa, the 49-year-old president of Ecuador and would-be successor to the dying Hugo Chavez as Latin America's chief caudillo and Yanqui-baiter.”

These particular explanations led to many articles (113) arguing that Venezuelan institutions were now politically controlled. The opposing viewpoint, that these institutions have always been politically controlled, only that now they are controlled by the *chavistas*, was virtually absent. The notion that institutions today are independent was completely absent. Indeed, many articles, nine in the UK and 29 in the US, insinuated that institutions were highly professional and completely politically independent before Chavez’s rise - something which contradicts the empirical evidence. Thus, the courts, which, in 1996 Latinobarometro showed less than ten percent of Venezuelans had a good deal of faith in, and which Buxton (1999, 2001) (Buxton and Phillips, 1999) showed were filled with judges appointed solely on the basis of what party they belonged to were presented as “bastions of judicial independence” now “packed” with *chavista* judges (*The Miami Herald*, April 16th, 2013).

Even before he gained office, *The Washington Post* (December 10th, 1998) was warning that Chavez might destroy institutions’ independence,

“Several administration officials said they feared Chavez would attempt to use his broad support for fighting corruption to assume near dictatorial powers, curtailing freedom of expression and the independence of the courts, as Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori did in a 1992 “self-coup.”

As we have seen, there is some degree of disagreement over the events of 1992, as to whether the word “coup” or “rebellion” is more appropriate. However, the media was virtually unanimous in framing the event as a coup, with 39 UK newspapers framing the event as a coup 62 times and 78 US newspapers mentioning it as a coup 146 times. Typical examples of this were “Mr. Chavez, a former army paratrooper who tried to take power in a coup in 1992” (*The New York Times*, 11th April, 2002), and “an ex-army paratrooper who once staged a bloody coup attempt,” (*The Independent*, 7th December, 1998). There is one mention of the word “rebellion”, in *The Washington Post*. However, that usage came sandwiched between multiple usages of the word “coup” in the same article. There was also very little context to the coup given in the press, with only 13 articles offering any whatsoever; the *Caracazo* massacre, its widespread support, or the consequence of corruption and growing inequality. Only eleven articles mentioned the *Caracazo* massacre whatsoever, the most important event in modern Venezuelan history, which marked the turning point in modern Venezuelan history, according to respected historian Fernando Coronil (1997). Indeed, only three *New York Times* articles since 1989 have mentioned the word “*Caracazo*” whatsoever. In contrast “Tiananmen Square,” where in 1989 a massacre of similar proportions took place has appeared in 3,548 articles over the same period.

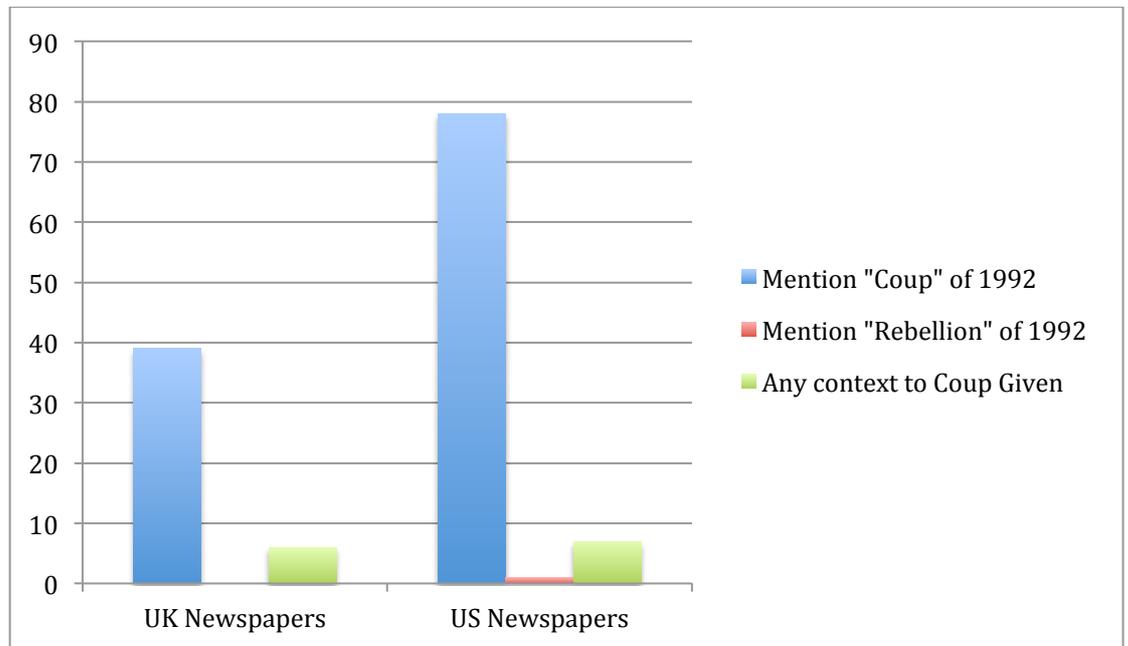


Figure 15 Newspaper Articles Mentioning the 1992 Coup, 1998-2014

Thus readers are largely left in an information vacuum as to why Hugo Chavez would have tried to overthrow the President in 1992. There was little offered about the neoliberal policies that hurt the country, nor about the large-scale repression of dissent in Venezuela.

The newspapers in the survey showed a tendency to present the pre-Chavez period as a democratic era while presenting Chavez as a threat to that democracy, somebody who was undermining the neutrality and independence of democratic institutions such as the courts and the police. They rarely discussed the alternative opinion that there was a radical experiment in a much deeper, meaningful and participatory democracy under way inside the country. This is particularly problematic as empirical data taken from organizations with an anti-*chavista* bias show that not only was there low or extremely low confidence in elections, democratic institutions and the government in the country pre-1998, but that during the Chavez period those confidence levels rose to become some of the highest, if not the highest, in Latin America. Thus, readers were given only one opinion on the matter and were not informed of the radical democratic experiment that had generated a huge increase in interest in the country among academics. Furthermore, the one opinion readers were exposed to is contradicted by empirical evidence.

Chapter Four, The 2002 Coup

Hugo Chavez was elected President of Venezuela in 1998 and re-elected in 2000. However, many Venezuelans were disillusioned with his rule. On April 11th 2002, large anti-government demonstrations engulfed Caracas. As those marches met pro-government counter-demonstrations near Llaguno Bridge, shots were fired and many were killed or wounded. Opposition leaders blamed the President for the deaths, and, with the help of military units, captured Chavez, replacing him with Pedro Carmona, the chief of FEDECAMARAS, the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce. Carmona was *de facto* head of state for 48 hours. Representatives from the Catholic Church, the military and trade unions were also present at Carmona's inauguration and signed the "Carmona Decree," legitimizing the events.

The Carmona Decree did several notable things. It abolished the recently ratified constitution, suspended the Supreme Court, liquidated Congress and gave Carmona the power to temporarily rule alone with a council of advisors. It also changed the name of the country. The Carmona Decree was signed by hundreds from the top of Venezuelan society, including Cardinal Ignacio Velasco, Manuel Rosales, governor of Zulia and future Presidential candidate, Miguel Angel Martínez González, President of the Venezuelan Chamber of Broadcasting, Leopoldo Lopez Gil, an influential journalist, and Maria Corina Machado, a famous human rights activist.

However, the Carmona government lasted less than 48 hours, as huge counter-demonstrations from Venezuela's dark-skinned working classes encouraged loyal troops to retake the Miraflores presidential palace and oust Carmona.

During the hectic events of April, there were two main explanations for the affair that journalists could draw upon. One framed the events as a patriotic uprising against a repressive regime. This was the position espoused by the US

and Spanish governments and the Venezuelan media. The second posited that this was a coup orchestrated by many sectors of the Venezuelan elite: business, the Catholic Church, the media and the trade union aristocracy. This viewpoint was expressed by the Venezuelan government and much of the Venezuelan populace. International organizations like the Organization of American States also identified the situation as a coup and condemned the actions as unconstitutional (Cañizález, 2002).

Competing Explanations

The Uprising Narrative

On April 12th, White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer spoke to the press to share the White House's official position. He stated that what had taken place was "a change in the government,"

"...The Chavez government suppressed peaceful demonstrations. Government supporters, on orders from the Chavez government, fired on unarmed, peaceful protestors, resulting in 10 killed and 100 wounded. The Venezuelan military and the police refused to fire on the peaceful demonstrators and refused to support the government's role in such human rights violations. The government also tried to prevent independent news media from reporting on these events. The results of these events are now that President Chavez has resigned the presidency...it was a very large protest that turned out. And the protest was met with violence" (Fleischer: 2002).

The White House did not use the word "coup" to describe the events, rather, framing them as "peaceful demonstrations" that Chavez, who had provoked the crisis, personally demanded suppressed, ordering his supporters to shoot the defenseless demonstrators. The White House presented the local media as bravely exposing the violence, despite the government's attempts at muzzling them. Chavez consequently resigned, but before resigning, sacked his Vice President and all the cabinet.

Responding to a follow-up question, Fleischer claimed that,

“The United States is at all times committed to democracy around the world, and particularly, of course, in our hemisphere... It's all times the position of the government to promote democracy and tranquility,”

Thereby presenting the US as always on the side of democracy and righteousness (*ibid.*). Fleischer and the American journalists at the press conference were evidently close, addressing each other on a first name basis.

On April 12th, some other governments with right-wing or far right-wing administrations welcomed the affair, such as Spain and Chile, while Colombian President Alvaro Uribe embraced Carmona as a friend of Colombia's, later granting him asylum.

The International Republican Institute (IRI), a semi-official government institution went further, welcoming the ouster of Chavez and hailing the leaders of the actions. On April 12th, its President, George Folsom, stated (emphasis added),

“Last night, led by *every sector of civil society*, the Venezuelan people *rose up to defend democracy* in their country. Venezuelans were *provoked* into action as a result of *systematic repression by the Government of Hugo Chavez*. Several hundred thousand people filled the streets of Caracas to demand the resignation of Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez. Chavez responded with sharpshooters and his paramilitary Bolivarian circles killing more than 12 civilians and wounding more than 100 others. In contrast, IRI commends the patriotism of the Venezuelan military for their refusal to fire on their countrymen.”

“IRI also applauds the bravery of civil society leaders ...who have put their very lives on the line in their struggle to restore *genuine democracy* to their country...We stand ready to continue our partnership with the courageous Venezuelan people” (emphasis added) (Folsom: 2002).

For the IRI it was clear: this was a laudable movement led by every sector of civil society, disillusioned with Chavez's oppression, to restore authentic democracy, which Venezuelans had not had under Chavez. Chavez himself was responsible for the killings.

However, the veracity of these statements was challenged over the course of the next few days, as the Carmona administration liquidated many democratic institutions, governed at will, and rounded up, detained or tortured hundreds of activists and political opponents (Dominguez, 2011: 120-121). Meanwhile, large numbers of Venezuelans took to the streets to demand Chavez's return. Much of the military rebelled and Chavez was back in the Miraflores Presidential Palace by the 14th. Furthermore, evidence of US involvement in the coup began to leak out (Cañizález, 2002).¹¹

In response to mounting global condemnation of the US' actions, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Lino Guitierrez issued a speech claiming that Chavez's "confrontational policies" and his attacks on the Church and the press and his attempts to cow any opposition were the reasons for the disruption and that when hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans wished to "seek redress of their grievances" Chavez's supporters gunned them down. Chavez prevented television stations from reporting the events.

Guitierrez claimed the US had always urged democratic dialogue and that it had put Carmona under "intense" pressure to maintain constitutional continuity. Guitierrez was categorical in his rejection of the idea of US involvement,

"Let me reiterate in the strongest possible terms that we oppose military coups in any democratic country. Let me be unambiguous: we oppose military coups, civilian coups, any other kind of coup. This has been a consistent US position that has transcended administrations...Let me now say, categorically: the United States did not participate in, inspire, encourage, foment, wink at,

¹¹ On April 16th, the White House admitted it had held a series of meetings with the leaders of the coup, with one State Department official claiming that they were sending "informal, subtle signals" that they did not like Chavez. One OAS diplomat reported that the US was trying to persuade them to accept that the affair was Chavez's fault (*The Guardian*, April 17th).

nod at, close its eyes to, or in any way leave the impression that it would support a coup of any kind in Venezuela. The record is crystal clear. Our public and private statements have repeated this ad nauseam” (Gutierrez: 2002).

Thus, the US maintained that Chavez had provoked peaceful demonstrations with his actions, and then subsequently ordered mass killings, which the media courageously reported, in spite of the government’s best attempts to stop them. However, the military overturned the will of the people. The United States was not involved in any coup, not that one had taken place. On the contrary, it put “intense pressure” on Carmona to behave democratically.

The Coup Thesis

The US and Colombian governments pressured the other Latin American nations at the Rio summit to recognize the Carmona government (*The Guardian*, April 17th). However, the Organization of American States immediately condemned the violence and expressed solidarity with the Venezuelan people (Office of the Inspector General, 2002: 78) The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights denounced what they saw as a violent *coup d’état* and a violation of constitutional order and demanded to know where Chavez was being held and that senior *chavista* politicians’ safety be addressed (OAS, 2002).

At around 3.30 am on the morning of the 12th, Environment Minister Ana Elisa Osorio announced to journalists that Chavez had refused to resign and that this was a *coup d’état* against the President and against the people. Other senior *chavista* politicians, such as William Lara did the same (Wilpert, 2007). Osorio urged the journalists to “let the world know” (Bartley and O’Brian, 2003, Jones, 2008: 39). They did not. Indeed, the *chavistas* claim that their point of view was consciously censored from virtually all Venezuelan media and they did not have any outlet for the truth, as the coup-plotters had shut down state media. However, international satellite media broadcast statements from Chavez’s family and the President of Cuba giving their explanations of the events.

General Jorge Garcia Carneiro stated that the media were not courageous, but an intimate part of the conspiracy, campaigning for a coup in an “openly fascist” campaign (Chavez and Guevara, 2006: 131).

Chavez himself claimed that the coup had been planned for months, including the shootings at Llaguno Bridge (Ali, 2006: 205) and that Carmona and Admiral Molina had agreed to assassinate him, as the only way of preventing the truth that he did not resign to come out. However, junior officers ignored the order of execution (Chavez and Harnecker, 2005: 179-180).

The *chavistas* claimed that the coup was reversed due to a dramatic uprising of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Venezuelans, who walked down from the hills to defend their president and their democracy. With no help from the media, the people used low-tech methods, messages passed by motorbike, word of mouth, and sometimes literally simply shouting in the streets. One protestor recalled, “It was like a human river going down the mountain (Jones, 2008: 361). The show of strength encouraged loyal military units to rebel and take back the Miraflores. This was accomplished despite the best efforts of opposition mayor Leopoldo Lopez, who Garcia Carneiro charges closed off traffic tunnels to stop the counter-coup (Chavez and Harnecker, 2005: 131). While initially uninformed about the US precipitation, emerging evidence led the *chavistas* to claim US involvement in the coup.

Therefore, these two frames of understanding are radically different. In contrast to the “uprising” frame, this frame posits that the events of April were a carefully planned coup attempt with US-backing. It posits that opposition leaders planned the massacre at Llaguno Bridge and that Chavez never resigned, but was kidnapped by members of a corrupt oligarchy, including Church, union, business and media leaders but was overturned by the will of the people rising up.

Academic Analysis of the Coup Since

The likelihood of supporting one frame or the other is correlated with the individual’s stance on the Chavez government. However, the “uprising” frame,

put forward by the US government and the opposition is not popular in academia (Wilpert, 2009), with most of the strongest critics of Chavez agreeing that there was a coup against the President (Corrales and Penfold, 2011: 22, Carroll, 2013: 2, Marcano and Barrera Tyszka, 2007: 167).

While the charge that the government was responsible for the shootings has been dropped, there is some disagreement as to who was responsible. Opposition defenders stress a lack of certainty over who is guilty (Marcano and Barrera Tyszka, 2007: 168-188, Corrales and Penfold, 2011: 22) whereas many, especially those sympathetic to the Chavez administration take it as a virtual fact that the opposition leaders had protestors shot (Raby, 2006) (Golinger, 2007). A large majority accepts US complicity in the coup, but some argue that there is little evidence of the US being actively involved in it (Carroll, 2013: 82).

Empirical Evidence

In 2004, a Venezuelan-American attorney, Eva Golinger, filed for documents regarding the United States and Venezuela under the Freedom of Information Act. The heavily redacted cables from the Embassy in Caracas to Washington confirmed many of the accusations of the Chavez administration.

The documents showed that many of the top coup leaders, such as Pedro Carmona and Leopoldo Lopez travelled many times to Washington to visit IRI headquarters and meet with officials in the Bush administration (Golinger, 2007: 44-49). The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and USAID had been funding and training a wide array of political and social groups in Venezuela all with one thing in common: antipathy towards the Chavez administration. In late 2001 the NED and USAID funding for opposition groups in Venezuela quadrupled.

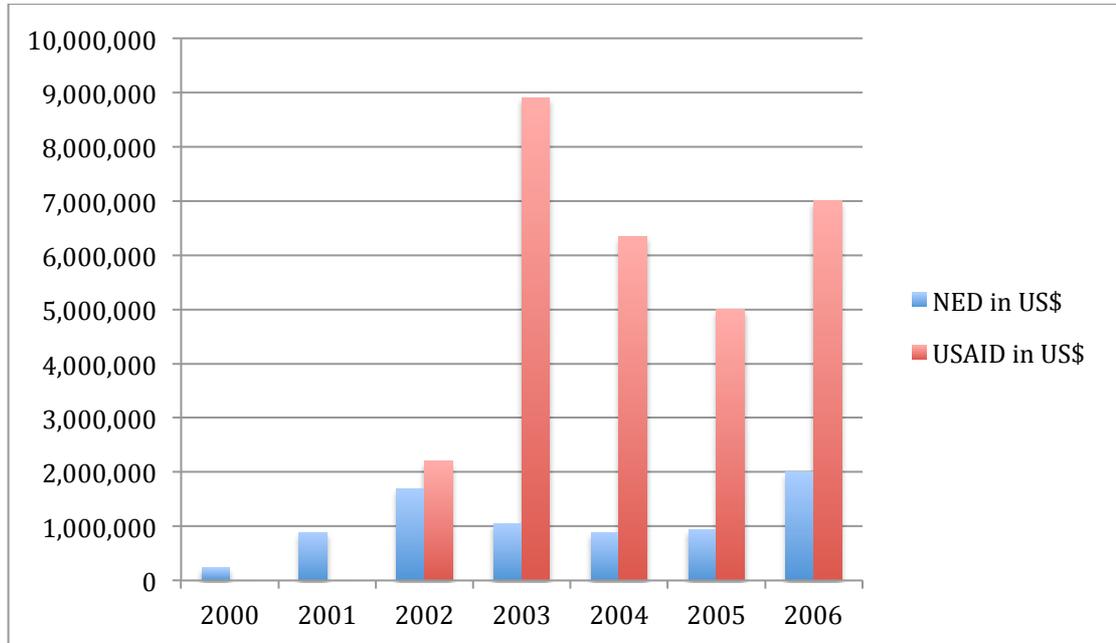


Figure 16 NED and USAID Grants to Venezuelan Organizations, 2000-2006, Source: Golinger, (2007: 56).

A March 5th document showed that the US embassy was certain that the opposition, who they were funding and meeting with, were planning to get rid of Chavez. The cable, sent to the State Department, the NSC, the CIA, the DIA and other government institutions, as well as six more embassies in the region, noted that a speech by Carlos Ortega to “the Venezuelan great and good” “dispelled any remaining doubts” as to whether he was planning a coup (*Ibid*: 61). The US Government did not attempt to warn the Venezuelan government, or to discourage the opposition groups from their attempts. On the contrary, the government increased its funding to the same groups, as funding quadrupled *again* in 2002, therefore having increased sixteen fold.

A “top secret” April 6th cable headlined “Conditions Ripening for Coup Attempt” said,

“Dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chavez, possibly as early as this month” (*Ibid*: 64).

It went on to note that opposition figures would provoke violence in order to arrest Chavez. It also commented on the level of detail of their plans, confirming that it had seen them.

Thus, by April 6th the US government incontrovertibly knew that a coup was planned for early April by opposition figures they had been funding and flying to Washington, D.C. for meetings for months and that the opposition would try to provoke and exploit violence from demonstrations against the government. It should be noted that the documents have been heavily redacted in order to prevent information the US government does not want others to know being public.

On the morning of April 11th, the American Ambassador, Charles Shapiro was at the mansion of media baron Gustavo Cisneros, the headquarters of the coup, along with business, media and political elites (Jones, 2008: 319), while top US officials like Otto Reich were in regular contact with Cisneros by telephone (Livingstone, 2011: 32-33). Neither party disputes this. Two US military officers were at the Fort Tiuna barracks, where Chavez was detained, while two US warships entered Venezuelan territory and made for the remote island of La Orchila, where Chavez was taken. The Washington-based IMF immediately welcomed the Carmona government, its Director of External Relations announcing on April 12th “we stand ready to assist the new administration in whatever manner they find suitable” (International Monetary Fund, 2002). While the US government was pressuring other Latin American governments to accept the change of government, Ambassador Shapiro met with Carmona on April 13th. Shapiro claims he was there to convince Carmona to call elections. However, Carmona flatly rejected this, countering that Shapiro did not bring the subject up at all (Jones, 2008: 355). During the opposition strike/lockout, the second great attempt to oust Chavez that year, Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to Colombia to talk with Carmona. After the coup, the US more than doubled funding for the individuals and organizations that carried out the actions. The United States continued to fly coup leaders to Washington. Maria Corina Machado, for example, signatory of the Carmona Decree, met with President Bush in the Oval Office in 2005. In short, there is considerable evidence linking the United States with the events of April.

According to the final report of the Venezuelan Human Rights Defender, nineteen people were killed and 69 wounded on April 11th. Seven of the dead

were *chavistas*, seven opposition demonstrators and five non-partisan bystanders. More than twice as many *chavistas* (38) were wounded than opposition demonstrators (17), with fourteen non-aligned also wounded (Wilpert, 2007).

The Role of the Media

As discussed above, the Venezuelan media is characterized by its concentration in a few hands. One of these is Gustavo Cisneros, Venezuela's richest man, who owns *Venevisión*, one of the country's six terrestrial TV channels, which is affiliated to the country's largest network of radio stations. In addition to this he owns over 70 media outlets in 39 countries as well as a myriad of businesses, such as the Pepsi and Pizza Hut distributors in the country. Described as "Venezuela's Murdoch" (Gott, 2006), Cisneros is a close friend of the Bush family, holidaying with George H. W. Bush (Kozloff, 2007: 68, McCaughan, 2004: 96). His mansion was the headquarters of the coup in April 2002 and his media came out in strong support of it (Jones, 2008: 319). The majority of private media did the same, stoking the flames of rebellion for weeks. *El Nacional*, owned and edited by Miguel Henrique Otero, the creator of anti-Chavez organization *Movimiento 2D*, announced in a headline, "Hugo Chavez admits to being the head of a criminal network" in late March. On April 10th, it told its readers to "take to the streets, not one step backwards!" which became a slogan of the movement. On the 11th it published a special edition, beseeching its readers forward, stating, "The final battle will be at the Miraflores," while on the 12th, a front-page editorial claimed "a grave has been reserved for you [Chavez] next to the Venezuelan presidents who are remembered for their atrocities." Another newspaper, *Asi es la Noticia*, proclaimed "The Assassin Has Fallen."



Figure 17, Left: *El Nacional* Extra front-page, April 11th. The headline reads "The Final Battle Will Be at the Miraflores" Right: *El Universal's* special edition celebrating the initial success of the April 11th coup.

On the 11th, *RCTV*, an influential private channel, allowed Carlos Ortega, one of the ringleaders of the insurrection, on television to call for an opposition march to the Miraflores. Another TV company aired the announcement "Venezuelans, take to the streets on Thursday 11 April at 10am. Bring your flags. For freedom and democracy. Venezuela will not surrender. No one will defeat us" (Lemoine, 2002). Makeshift adverts for the insurrection were run every ten minutes. A third TV station said, "Not one step back! Out! Leave now!" (Jones, 2008: 317)

During the coup attempt, television media broadcast doctored images of Chavez supporters under attack at the Llaguno Bridge to make it seem as if they were the aggressors responsible for the deaths and injuries. They subsequently broadcast clips of military generals and other public figures condemning Chavez for instigating the violence. The media's role was explored in the documentary "Llaguno Bridge: Keys to a Massacre".

The media greeted the coup with undisguised enthusiasm. On the 11th, Vice-Admiral Hector Ramírez was invited on Cisneros' *Venevisión*. He thanked the media for their cooperation, saying, "We had a deadly weapon: the media. And now that I have the opportunity, let me congratulate you" (Lemoine, 2002). The morning after Chavez was ousted, influential journalist Napoleon Bravo invited some of the ringleaders on his show, *24 Hours*. One stated that "we were short of communications facilities and I have to thank the media for their solidarity and cooperation," later thanking Bravo for allowing them to use his house to record calls to rebellion. A laughing Bravo responded that he was "just a journalist" (Jones, 2008: 343). Later on the same program Bravo hosted Rear Admiral Carlos Molina, Leopoldo Lopez and other ringleaders, who gave in-depth accounts of their plans, the events, and their reasons for acting. Admiral Molina stated that,

"The fall of President Chavez has been in the planning since a year ago and in some sectors even further back than that" (Wilpert, 2007).

Other ringleaders of the coup, like Colonel Julio Rodríguez, made similar statements confirming the actions were part of a long-planned strategy (*Ibid.*). *Venevisión* ran a ticker on its screen stating, "Venezuela recovered its liberty. Chavez resigned" (Jones, 2008: 343). It was a similar picture in print media, where *El Universal's* headline was "A Step Forward!"



Figure 18 *El Universal's* Front-page, April 13th. Headline: "A Step Forward!"

Opposition politician Antonio Ledezma appeared on television with a list of two hundred names of pro-government figures who were to be rounded up while a purge of over five hundred journalists considered politically dubious took place (Dominguez, 2011: 120-121). The private media joined in the witch-hunt (Jones, 2008: 349). In less than a day, over 100 were imprisoned (McCaughan, 2004: 93). Many media outlets assumed to be critical of Carmona were invaded and destroyed by the Metropolitan Police on April 12th, including tiny independent community media stations like *Catia TV*, *Radio Catia Libre*, and *TV Caricuaao*. *Radio Perola's* station director, Nicolas Rivero was detained and “brutally tortured,” in his own words (*Ibid.* 102-103). State television was forced off the air.

As the counter-coup grew, the media refused to give the demonstrators access, nor report on the demonstrations. Instead, they broadcast Julia Roberts movies and documentaries alongside repeats of Generals announcing Chavez’s resignation. As the counter-coup succeeded, all national newspapers except *Últimas Noticias* suspended printing.

Andres Izarra, a director at *RCTV*, claimed that at the height of the action, the staff were given explicit orders to show “zero chavismo on the screen” (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013: 174). Izarra claimed the idea of the media was to concertedly create a climate of transition. He resigned and was blacklisted from the industry, although he later took a high position in the government. *CNN* correspondent Otto Neustadt testified that on the 10th of April, the plotters,

“Called me on the telephone and said, Otto, tomorrow the 11th there will be a video of Chavez, the march will go toward the presidential palace, there will be deaths and then 20 military officials of high rank will appear and pronounce themselves against the government of Chavez, and will request his resignation” (Golinger, 2007: 69, Wilpert, 2007).

Neustadt subsequently recorded opposition leaders condemning the shootings *before any had taken place*. Therefore the coup-plotters knew there would be shootings before the event and prerecorded condemnations laying the

blame on the government, strongly indicating their own responsibility for the murders. It should be noted that many of the deaths were not from disorderly scuffles between rival protestors but as a result of carefully placed sharpshooters with high-powered guns placed atop strategically located tall buildings.

In short, the best evidence available suggests the events of April constituted a coup, pre-organized and supported by large sections of the media. US governmental support for the coup is also not in doubt. US involvement in the coup is still not ascertained beyond all doubt. However, considerable evidence supports this thesis. Likewise, while the identities of the shooters remain unconfirmed, the balance of evidence points to opposition culpability.

Analysis

A sample of all relevant articles using the word “Venezuela” was taken for the dates January 1st 2002 to June 1st 2002, excepting *The Miami Herald*, where due to the quantity of articles, the dates April 1st to May 1st were used. This produced a total of 133 articles.

In the wake of what appeared to be a successful coup attempt, all the newspapers in the sample published editorials on the nature of the Chavez administration; in effect, political obituaries. As shall be shown in chapter five, the 2002 editorials shared similarities with many of the 2013 obituaries of Hugo Chavez. With Chavez’s apparent departure from the political scene, this was an opportunity for the media to express exactly how they felt about him and to write the first draft of history.

The New York Times came out strongly in favour of the coup, insisting that no coup took place, stating that (emphasis added),

“With yesterday’s *resignation* of President Hugo Chavez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator. Mr. Chavez, a ruinous demagogue, *stepped down* after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader, Pedro Carmona” (April 13th).

Thus, it was explicitly made clear that Hugo Chavez was the threat to democracy, and Pedro Carmona was its savior. In Great Britain, *The Times* claimed he was a mass murderer,

“Few Venezuelans, even among the poor he claimed to champion but made poorer, mourn the abrupt end of the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ of Hugo Chavez. They do mourn his victims, demonstrators gunned down by his snipers yesterday before the presidential palace...[Chavez’s rule] was disastrous” (April 13th).

Even as this was published, hundreds of thousands of poor Venezuelans were not mourning, but organizing and demanding his return.

The Guardian, at the far left of this sample, published similarly negative articles. It published an opinion piece from the sitting UK government minister responsible for Latin America, Denis MacShane, titled “I saw the calm, rational Chavez turn into a ranting, populist demagogue” where the minister compared Chavez to Mussolini. The *Labour* Minister noted that the “calm, sensible Chavez” “sounded Thatcherite” wanting to privatize the national oil industry and allow multinational corporations into Venezuela but turned into a “ranting, populist demagogue” when he spoke of “a 20 percent increase in the minimum wage” (April 13th). MacShane made no apology for supporting the coup and faced no consequences for doing so.

The Washington Post wrote, “Mr. Chavez was a terrible leader. His senseless mix of populist and socialist decrees seriously damaged the economy and galvanized opposition” while noting his “friendship” with Fidel Castro, the FARC and Saddam Hussein made him a “pariah” (April 14th).

The Times did note that there was some disagreement in Venezuela over Chavez, but claimed it was limited over “whether Senor Chavez is bad, or merely mad; but they agree that he took Venezuela back to a discredited Latin American past of strong-arm tactics, cronyism and heavy and incompetent state

intervention...As his support fell away, his taste for dictatorial methods grew” (April 13th).

The Independent on Sunday noted that, “like a playground bully, he taunted the opposition, daring them to go on strike. Eventually the other kids gave him a bloody nose” (April 14th).

According to the editorials, all Venezuelans believed Chavez was either “bad” or “mad” and taking Venezuela into a very dark place. But since 1998 Chavez and his movement had won two presidential elections, two parliamentary elections, one regional election and three referenda, many by landslides. Yet the editorials were adamant that Chavez had alienated almost every sector of Venezuelan society, as shown in the following passages.

“Chavez has managed to alienate almost every sector of Venezuelan society” (*The Guardian*, April 15th).

“Chavez’s moves alienated all of the important sectors in Venezuelan society: business, landowners, the unions and the Catholic Church,” (*The Daily Telegraph*, April 13th).

“Chavez managed to alienate just about everybody in the country, including business, the media and the trade unions, with his weird mixture of fascism, populism and anti-globalisation,” (*The Daily Telegraph*, April 13th).

When these articles were written, Carmona had just liquidated the courts, the constitution, the parliament, declared himself autocrat and the opposition ordered the arrest of politicians, activists and journalists (Dominguez, 2011: 120-121). However, according to *The Telegraph*, Chavez, who won numerous clean elections, was the “fascist”. Evidently, Chavez had not alienated most of society, as his return, where large numbers of dark-skinned working-class Venezuelans rose up, attests. The language used bears a stark resemblance to the statement made by International Republican Institute (IRI) President George Folsom, the day before, who stated that,

“Last night, led by every sector of civil society, the Venezuelan people rose up to defend democracy in their country...Venezuelans were provoked into action as a result of systematic repression by the government of Hugo Chavez.”

The IRI is a quasi-government institution that acts as an intermediary organization between the CIA, US Government and groups that it funds. The idea is to create buffer organizations so the government can technically claim they do not fund specific organizations and to avoid the stigma for organizations of being funded by the CIA. However, the outcome is the same. Indeed, one of the drafters of the legislation, Allen Weinstein said that “a lot of what the we [the NED, USAID and the IRI] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA” (Blum, 2006: 239)

Nevertheless, the question remains as to what is meant by “Venezuelan society.” A *New York Times* article (March 26th) provides evidence. It stated that Mr. Chavez has “rankled nearly every sector- from the church to the press to the middle class.” All the groups mentioned are controlled by the dominant light-skinned upper class minority that controlled the country before Chavez.

Journalists who reside in Venezuela live in highly segregated, heavily guarded, wealthy white areas and rarely, if ever, venture outside their bubbles of privilege. There is a strong tendency among the Venezuelan elite to see the dark-skinned poor majority as subhuman. Pedro Carmona wrote an article in 1998 claiming that most Venezuelans do not understand how to vote properly but blindly follow candidates on emotion while Julio Borges, leader of US-funded opposition party *Primero Justicia*, claimed that those who vote for Chavez are not citizens of Venezuela, but simply “inhabitants,” implying they are unthinking savages (Cannon, 2008). In 2016, the opposition’s National Assembly head, Henry Ramos Allup had a picture of Venezuela’s founder, Simon Bolivar, removed from the National Assembly building because the painting portrayed him as too dark-skinned and not Caucasian enough (Mallett-Outtrim, 2016). These ideas are so strong they extend into much of academia and journalism, with many, such as Reid (2008:175) arguing that poor, black Venezuelans do not vote for Chavez logically, but follow him blindly due to a “quasi-religious bond” between themselves and the President.

Duno Gottberg (2004, 2009, 2011) has shown that the Venezuelan media dehumanizes the Venezuelan working-class and ridicules and attacks their efforts to organize. The international media displayed a marked tendency throughout the survey to follow the Venezuelan elite's line. There was a strong tendency to present anti-government organizations as respectable "civil society" groups whereas pro-Chavez civil society organizations like the Bolivarian Circles were referred to as violent hordes, "thugs" (The New York Times, April 15th), or "mobs" (The Washington Post, April 14th).

For example, *The New York Times* reported "Mr. Moscovitz joined a march last week calling for the president's resignation. He insisted it was a 'civilized, peaceful march,' in contrast to the extensive looting over the weekend by pro-Chavez demonstrators" while "an unemployed carpenter, Joise Perez, 31, compared the weekend of [opposition] protests and looting by the pro Chavez demonstrators," and compared the counter-coup to "the activities of the Ku Klux Klan" (April 18th) (emphasis added). The assertions that this- the forceful removal of a President- was a "civilized peaceful march" and the mass demonstrations against the act were simply "looting" by Ku Klux Klan-like thugs were not challenged.

A Coup or Not a Coup?

In total, there were 164 different identifications of the events of April 2002 as a coup and 166 categorizations of the events as not a coup, where words such as "resignation," "fall," or "affair" were used. Indeed, *The New York Times* had a series of articles in April entitled "Uprising in Venezuela," which connotes a very different set of circumstances and respectability to the word "coup." However, there was a marked difference between the likelihood of British and American newspapers to identify the affair as a coup.

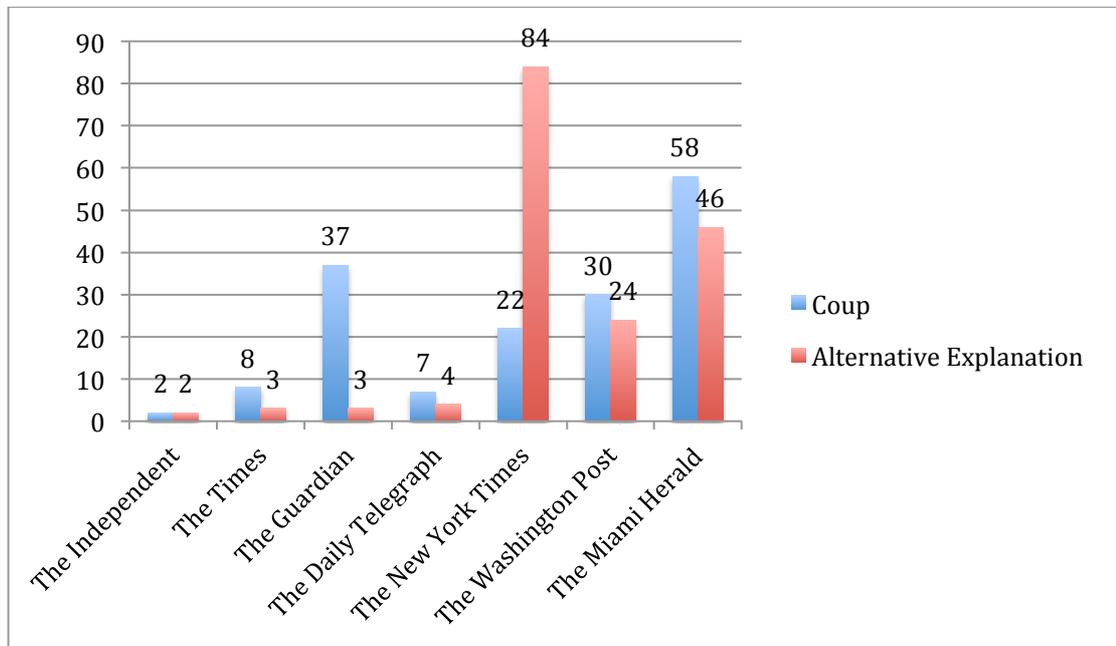


Figure 19 What Happened in Venezuela? 2002 Newspaper Identifications

Guardian journalists largely agreed what happened did constitute a coup. *The New York Times*, however, consistently preferred alternative explanations for the events. But all newspapers carried articles that stated that what occurred was not a coup.

On April 13th, Alex Bellos wrote in *The Guardian* that pro-Chavez snipers had killed at least 13 people, which triggered a reticent army to move in and force Chavez to “resign,” all of which is incorrect. He quotes Pedro Carmona uncritically, who said “everyone will feel that there exists plenty of freedom, pluralism and respect for the state of law, for values, and ethical and moral principles,” despite the fact that the opposition had liquidated the constitution and produced a list of activists, politicians and journalists to be rounded-up and “detained,” much of which Bellos knew, as he references it obliquely in the article. Yet the word “coup” is absent.

The Miami Herald wrote that “what began as a strike by oil workers early last week exploded into a full-fledged popular uprising” (April 18th) that ousted Chavez after “he assumed de facto dictatorial powers, cutting off television signals and allowing his followers to fire on protesters” (April 14th). Indeed, one *Miami Herald* article (April 12th), while giving space to one of the coup leaders

to directly deny any coup was taking place at all, reminded readers *on three separate occasions* that Hugo Chavez attempted a coup in 1992.

However, it was *The New York Times* that showed the greatest propensity to frame the events as a popular uprising, noting on April 13th that Chavez was “toppled by popular protests” that he “sought to contain with force that led to bloodshed” leading to his downfall and that the phenomenon has “been hailed as a refreshing manifestation of democracy.”

Thus, the narrative, particularly from *The New York Times*, was that spontaneous popular protests against an enraged Chavez led him to order his forces to shoot on the crowd, prompting the military to force him to resign. This was *exactly* the same position as the US government. This despite the fact that the newspapers knew a coup was imminent, as they had been reporting about it for months. For example, *The San Francisco Examiner* wrote an article entitled “The Scent of Another Coup” on December 29th, 2001, while *The Washington Post* reported a member of the House of Representatives was seeking assurance that the White House would not support any coup in Venezuela (February 23rd, 2002). *The New York Times* reported (March 26th, 2002) that the US government did indeed state that it would not support the imminent opposition coup. As *The Miami Herald* (April 20th, 2002) reported, “Rumors of a coup to oust Chavez were being whispered, if not shouted, for months before the revolt.”

Weiner wrote an article (*The New York Times*, April 14th), criticizing the US Government for failing to characterize the events as a coup. However, he did not question or failed to notice why his own newspaper was not doing so. On April 15th, White House spokesperson used the word “coup” for the first time. After that time there was a marked increase in the use of the word from *The Washington Post*. However, even weeks after the events, *The New York Times* preferred to use alternative explanations such as “unrest” (May 23rd), “popular uprising” (May 3rd), or “Hugo Chavez’s temporary downfall” (April 29th).

When the word “coup” was used, it was frequently mentioned as an accusation from an already discredited source. For instance, on April 18th, *The New York Times* reported that, “The television broadcasts angry statements by

pro-Chavez officials charging that he was forced out of power in a coup orchestrated by the elite.”

Consider the four following sentences about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs),

“There were no WMDs in Iraq.”

“The United Nations stated there were no WMDs in Iraq.”

“Saddam Hussein claimed there were no WMDs in Iraq.”

“Mass-murdering dictator Saddam Hussein angrily insisted that, despite many allegations to the contrary, there were no WMDs in Iraq.”

All four are factual statements. But each carries a very different level of believability. Newspapers in the sample often undermined contrary arguments by presenting facts as accusations; accusations made by officials the newspapers had spent years demonizing. Similarly, allegations against the government were either stated as fact or quoted from sources the newspapers gave the reader no reason to doubt, even when their reliability was highly questionable.

US Involvement in the Coup?

In total, 12 of 31 UK articles and 11 of 112 US articles entertained the possibility that the United States Government was in any way connected to the 2002 coup. Only *The Guardian* presented US involvement as a strong possibility.

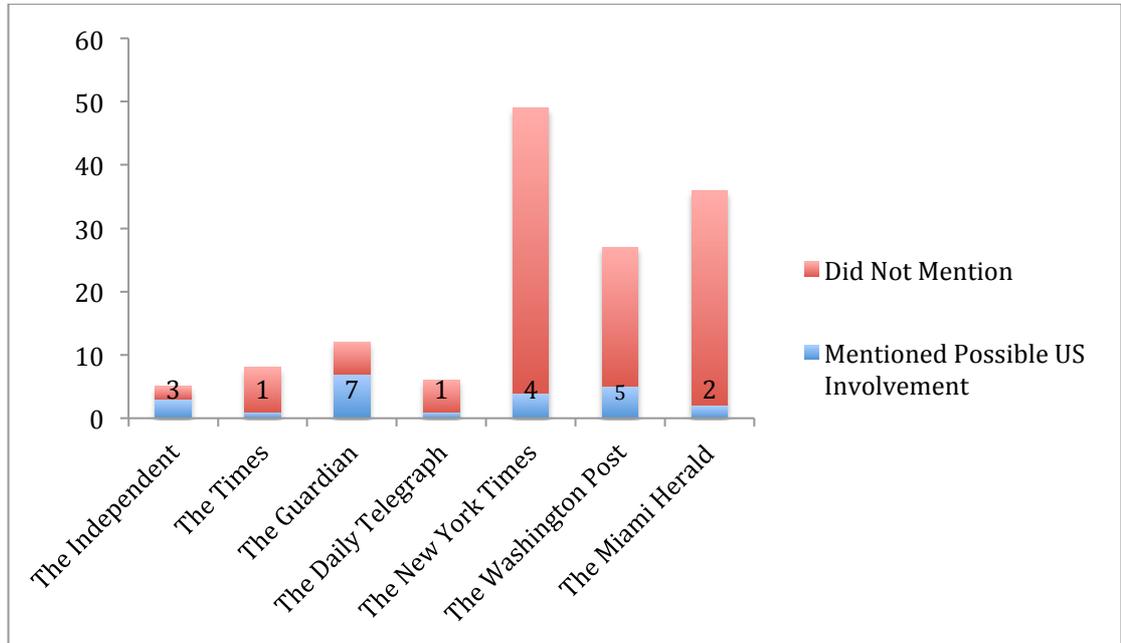


Figure 20: 2002 Articles Mentioning Possible US Involvement in the Coup.

In contrast, many articles specifically asserted that Washington was not involved, thus arguing against a virtually unstated opponent. *The Washington Post* claimed,

“Both the Clinton and Bush administrations chose to ignore most of Mr. Chavez’s frequent provocations; there’s been no suggestion that the United States had anything to do with this” (April 14th).

The New York Times wrote that (emphasis added), “The United States had adopted a policy of restraint, apparently content to let Mr. Chavez *collapse under his growing unpopularity*. There were no obvious American fingerprints on the plot,” (April 15th) and noted “Washington never publicly demonized Mr. Chavez, denying him the role of nationalist martyr. Rightly, his removal was a purely Venezuelan affair” (April 13th), thus, not only denying any American involvement in the coup, but also that any coup had taken place whatsoever.

The Miami Herald presented a similar picture. It wrote,

“The Bush administration sought to take a low-key role as events in the South American nation appeared to slip from the control of Chavez” (April 12th).

The Daily Telegraph went out of its way to argue against an unstated opposing view in its editorial on the subject (emphasis added),

“Washington did well to adopt a policy of masterly inaction, anticipating correctly that the Chavez government would *fall of its own accord*, like a rotten fruit. The last thing the Americans need is a new set of *myths* about Yanqui coup-mongering, after the fashion of their alleged role in the overthrow of Chile’s Salvador Allende in 1973” (April 13th).

Thus, on the question of US involvement, the media took exactly the same position as the US government. If there was no question of US involvement, the question remains unanswered why the media chose to specifically reject this, rather than, for instance, Swedish involvement. Many also categorically denied that any coup had taken place. This, despite a coup attempt being an open secret in Venezuela, one that journalists had been writing about for months. And, as previously noted, evidence of Washington’s series of meetings with the coup-organizers came out from almost the beginning.

When US involvement was considered, it was often immediately brushed off. *The Independent* noted (emphasis added),

“Some *cynics* even pointed to the hand of the CIA while world attention was on the Middle East conflict. The US reaction to the violence, though, has been muted (April 13th).

The Daily Telegraph (April 15th) noted that, “Iran, Iraq and Cuba were among the countries that welcomed Mr Chavez’s restoration yesterday, claiming that the coup was a US plot.”

It should be pointed out that these were counted as references to possible US involvement. The three countries mentioned were considered rogue dictatorships at the time in the US and UK. Thus, the newspaper simultaneously represented the Chavez government as a friend of dictatorships and the notion of US involvement as something believed only by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khamenei. The newspaper did not note that the countries of the

Organization of American States, such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, welcomed the return of the constitutional order.

The New York Times had still milder criticism of the US government. A week after the coup, when reports of US warships entering Venezuelan waters heading to the remote island where Chavez was flown, when Washington had warmly embraced the coup and pressured Latin American nations to do so (*The Guardian*, April 17th) and after reports of the Ambassador Charles Shapiro's activities had been published, *The New York Times* did note,

“Some critics have judged that the US was too quick to accept reports of the resignation of President Hugo Chavez and too slow to defend the democratic system that elected him” (April 18th).

Other critics judged that the US government had actively planned and carried out a coup d'état against an elected head of state that left nineteen dead, but those critiques were not published. Other American newspapers were uncritically reporting statements from US officials involved in the coup. For instance, *The Miami Herald* reported that White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer,

“Said US officials were aware of growing domestic opposition to Chavez but had no specific information that a group of civilians and military officers was about to try to oust the populist leader” (April 18th),

While *The New York Times* quoted Otto Reich stating that,

“The administration had had no involvement or knowledge- indeed had been operating under an ‘information blackout’ in the first hours of the revolt” (April 18th).

Both government officials were demonstrably lying, as proved by Gollinger's (2007) documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. The US Government had seen plans for the coup and remarked upon their detail. They knew who, when, where, why and how the coup would take place. Otto

Reich was in regular telephone contact with Pedro Carmona throughout the day of the 11th of April (Livingstone, 2011: 32-33).

Weeks after the coup, *The New York Times* conceded that, while not a coup and while not involved, the US Government “appeared to endorse” the new government (May 19th) while *The Washington Post* noted the Bush administration “appeared to send” a message of support for the coup (May 5th) although previously noting that “few Latin American officials appeared to believe the United States was involved,” (April 18th). The Bush administration “appeared to send” that message by strongly supporting the coup internationally and pressuring other countries into doing the same (*The Guardian*, April 17th).

However, *The Guardian* was interested in the idea of the United States’ involvement in the coup, with Duncan Campbell writing two articles on the subject. The newspaper catalogued how the US Government pressured Latin American diplomats at the OAS to accept the coup (April 17th) and Charles Shapiro’s actions on the day of the coup (April 29th). One headline stated that the US “gave the nod” to the coup (April 17th).

Media Involvement in the Coup?

As noted before, the Venezuelan media were a central component of the coup, with media bosses like Gustavo Cisneros organizing the affair and private media outlets beseeching their readers and viewers out into the streets, celebrating the coup’s success and subsequently engaging in an information blackout about the counter-demonstrations. The media’s involvement could hardly have been more conspicuous.

Of the 139 articles in the 2002 sample, seven mentioned possible media involvement.

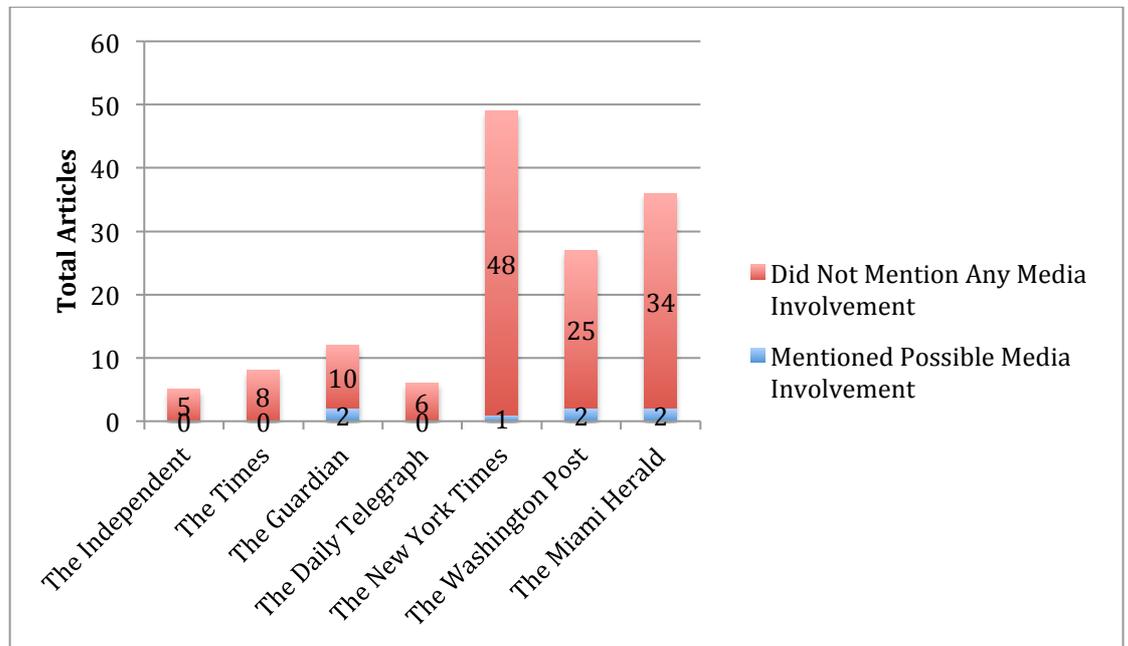


Figure 21 Number of 2002 Articles Mentioning Media Involvement in Coup

However, Duncan Campbell in *The Guardian* was the only journalist to base a story on the media’s involvement in the coup, noting that the media “certainly played a major part” (April 22nd) collaborating with the coup plotters, then imposing an information blackout once Chavez supporters rallied to take back the palace (April 29th).

In contrast, *The New York Times* addressed the reality of the media’s involvement once, mentioning it as an accusation made by Chavez, who the outlet had labeled “authoritarian,” a “ruinous demagogue,” a “would-be dictator” and “incompetent” in recent days, thereafter proceeding to present evidence against that charge. The article noted that the reason for the blackout was,

“For journalists, maligned by Mr. Chavez’s verbal attacks and attacked by the president’s supporters, the decision not to publish or broadcast was clear-cut: either go home or face possible death in streets teeming with armed men” (April 23rd).

The newspaper did not note that the journalists had been happy to not only publish the previous days, where nineteen people had been shot dead, but

to participate in and lead a coup and help the Carmona government attack, imprison and torture other journalists who did not share their ideology.

The same article noted that, “At the root of the problems, say journalists and press freedom groups outside Venezuela, is Mr. Chavez’s three years of harsh attacks on the news media” (April 23rd). *The Miami Herald* agreed, stating that Chavez launched “incendiary rhetorical attacks on business and labor sectors, the Catholic Church, the media and virtually anyone else who criticized him (April 15th). The evidence suggests the alternate notion: Chavez criticized the media, business sectors and the Church and they physically attacked him and killed his supporters.

How the media covered the question of who was responsible for the violence is the subject of the next section.

Who Committed the Murders of April 11th?

According to the final report of the Venezuelan Human Rights Defender, nineteen people were killed and 69 wounded on April 11th alone.¹² Of the dead, seven were *chavistas*, seven opposition supporters and five non-partisans. Of the 69 wounded, 38 were *chavistas*, 17 opposition and 14 unaffiliated (cited in Wilpert, 2007). There is no consensus on either who committed the murders.

However, the body of evidence, particularly the pre-recorded denunciations of the shootings from some of the chief coup-plotters the fact that the pre-made plans for the coup entailed blaming the government for shootings prove the opposition knew there would be killings before it happened. If the Human Rights Defender’s report is correct, twice as many *chavistas* were killed or wounded as opposition supporters, further suggesting opposition culpability.

¹² Other human rights groups have different figures. For example, Human Rights Watch (2002) claims eighteen died and that the majority were opposition supporters. However, the report’s fact-finding mission lasted only five days and consisted entirely of foreigners who admitted the level of uncertainty surrounding the events. Opposition newspapers such as *El Universal* (April 14th, 2012) agree that nineteen people were killed.

In the turbulent events of April 11-14th, it is understandable that there would be confusion and lack of clarity as to who was responsible and what exactly transpired. The task of the journalist would be difficult, and thus, a hesitancy to make bold statements and judgments would be expected.

However, the media regularly published articles stating as fact that Hugo Chavez himself had ordered the shootings. *The Independent* reported,

“Pro-Chavez gunmen kill 13 protesters” (April 15th) and that, “More than 110 people were wounded when government snipers in uniform and Chavez supporters sprayed bullets into the crowd” (April 13th).

The Times lamented that Venezuelans “mourn Chavez’s victims, demonstrators gunned down by his snipers...the blood Chavez shed at the end tragically justified their every criticism” (April 13th) and continued to report in the same manner. These were evidently unconfirmed accusations of the highest seriousness reported as facts by major outlets.

One journalist who did report in a balanced manner on this issue was Duncan Campbell in *The Guardian*, who stated that “Chavez’s opponents claim pro-Chavez gunmen shot protesters while his supporters say the shots were fired by agents provocateurs” (April 29th). Therefore, it was evidently possible to report in a balanced fashion about the issue. Yet the media placed itself largely at one extreme of the spectrum, meaning that balanced reporting from Campbell may appear as extremist to a reader. The final section of the chapter deals with the media’s depiction of Pedro Carmona.

Pedro Carmona

Businessman Pedro Carmona was the figurehead of the insurrection and the head of state of Venezuela for less than 48 hours. However, in that time he did several notable things. He abolished the recently ratified Constitution, he suspended the Supreme Court, liquidated Congress, sacked the National Electoral Council (CNE), changed the name of the country and gave himself powers to rule alone in his controversial “Carmona Decree.”

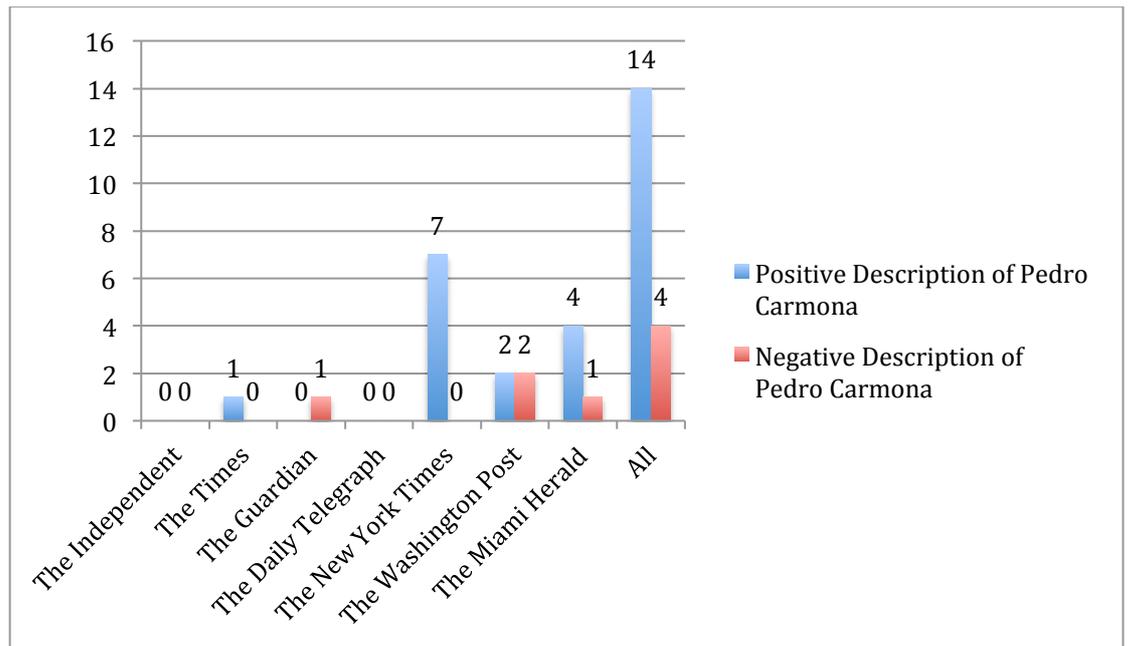


Figure 22 Identifications of Pedro Carmona in 2002 Articles

When his character was discussed at all, there was a pronounced tendency to portray him positively. *The New York Times* called him a “mild-mannered businessman (April 14th) and in an editorial presented him as the saviour of Venezuelan democracy in the same sentence as writing off Chavez as a threat to it,

“With yesterday’s resignation of President Hugo Chavez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator. Mr. Chavez, a ruinous demagogue, stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader, Pedro Carmona” (April 13th).

Also on the 13th of April, *The New York Times* published a biographical portrait of Carmona. Written at the same time as Carmona had voided Congress and his movement ordered the “detention” of hundreds of political opponents and activists (Dominguez, 2011: 120-121, McCaughan, 2004: 93), *The New York Times* presented him as “level-headed” and “meek” “conciliator” (April 13th). It also noted how Carmona and Chavez could not be more different as Chavez was power-hungry, even staging a coup in 1992, whereas, Carmona had never sought power. A week after leading the coup, the media continued to present him as “a

bookish economist” (*The Washington Post*, April 18th) and a “soft-spoken civic leader” (*The Miami Herald*, April 20th).

Some articles did portray Carmona negatively. *The Miami Herald* quoted one individual calling Carmona the “head of the rancid oligarchy” (April 15th) and *The Guardian* quoted an observer labeling him a “dictator” (April 29th). While there was some discussion that Carmona had revoked the Constitution and abolished Congress and the Supreme Court, no article mentioned the arrests of journalists and the suppression of pro-government or independent media.

To conclude, the editorials in the wake of Chavez’s apparent demise made clear that the editorial boards of the newspapers in the survey approved of the overthrow of an elected head of state and his replacement with Carmona as a step forward for democracy and Chavez to be an authoritarian “would-be dictator.” Chavez’s return proved heavily problematic in the reporting of subsequent events in Venezuela. How could the media go back to providing “objective” news about a man they had disparaged as a “ruinous demagogue”? In situations where news media make serious errors in reporting, it is customary to issue apologies. It is a similar practice in diplomacy. However, no apologies were forthcoming and no action was taken against journalists who had seriously misrepresented the facts on the ground. To this day, the inaccuracies stand uncorrected. Instead, both the US government and the newspapers issued statements hoping that Hugo Chavez would henceforth rule in a less autocratic manner. Indeed, the majority of the media mirrored the positions of the US government on all the key issues. The lack of apologies afterward, recognizing their errors in the fog of war is hard to reconcile with the idea that the media attempted to report the coup accurately and honestly.

Chapter Five, Hugo Chavez's Death and Funeral

Competing Opinions on Chavez's Legacy

President Chavez died on March 5th, 2013. A common theme throughout this study is the extreme divergence of opinion on matters relating to Venezuela. Above all, this is the case when discussing his legacy. Did Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution" leave Venezuela and its society better or worse off?

Critical Opinions

Weyland (2013b) claimed that his legacy was that he and his populist movement "slowly but surely smothered democracy." He noted that,

"With its electoral façade and progressive rhetoric about helping the excluded the soft authoritarianism that is taking hold in parts of Latin America has an attractive face" and "Chavez and his friends used populism to entrench their predominance and install competitive authoritarian regimes" that "inherently stands in tension with democracy and the value it places upon pluralism, open debate, and fair competition...Once these populists of the left established predominance, they used their unfettered control over all branches of government to limit debate, strike at their opponents, and drastically tilt the electoral playing field."

Toro (2013) took a still more critical line, claiming, "Chavez wasn't just a zany buffoon, he was an oppressive autocrat," asserting that Chavez destroyed freedom of speech and Venezuela was now a place where "an off-the-cuff remark could land you in jail." He claimed that, "instead of a police state, Chavez built a propaganda state" where the population was brainwashed with government propaganda.

Carroll labeled Chavez's model "toxic" (2013: 267) but noted, "For all the Cuban echoes and Orwellian touches, Venezuela never seriously attempted totalitarian brainwashing" (2013: 232). However, he compared Chavez

unfavourably with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Il (2013: 232-233) and claimed he employed “virtual slaves” in his social programs (2013: 220).

In terms of the *chavistas*' economic legacy, Carroll portrayed it as a “decay” where Venezuela “peeled, chipped and flaked into moneyed dysfunction” led by a “disastrous manager” (2013: 215-216) and suffered crippling food shortages (2013: 206-213).

Anderson (2013) characterized Chavez's economic legacy as one “defined by confiscation, expropriation, governmental incapacity, and the use of violence” and labeled Chavez a “slumlord” who presided over the immiseration of ordinary Venezuelans forced to live in shantytowns.

Plummer (2013) noted that Chavez left behind a legacy of “economic muddle,” “unsustainable public spending” and “underperforming industry.” He did note, “Every Venezuelan now has a more equal slice of the cake.” However, “the trouble is, that cake has not been getting much bigger,” and that high inflation was tearing apart the economy.

In short, critical voices characterize Chavez's social legacy as one of decreased democracy, polarization, a virtual dictatorship and little progress. Economically, they claim it Chavez left behind an economic mess marked by atrophy, lost opportunities, high unemployment, food shortages and inflation.

Supportive Voices

On March 6th, Unite, Britain's largest union, released a statement that read,

“Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution have been a massive inspiration for all those engaged in the fight for social justice and who believe that another world is possible. He embodied and represented a people who refused to accept that grinding poverty and social exclusion could be tolerated while massive wealth was stockpiled in the hands of a few.”

It went on to say, “under Chavez’s leadership Venezuela has been transformed beyond recognition for the better” (Unite, 2013). Writer Benjamin Dangl (2013) claimed Chavez’s social programs in health, housing, education and food had drastically improved the lives of most Venezuelans and that the *chavistas* had created “some of the most sophisticated and successful experiments in direct democracy.” Andreassi (2013) also noted the social programs, but emphasised that “the meaning of the revolution goes beyond these numbers” claiming the *chavistas* empowered ordinary Venezuelans with a sense of agency. Rosen (2013) claimed that institutions were changed to be more inclusionary. Ciccariello-Maher (2013) also emphasises the agency of ordinary Venezuelans and improvements to their lives, but insisted that it was the ordinary people leading the revolution, not Chavez himself.

A number of academics (Pearce, 2013, Anderson, 2014, McCarthy-Jones, 2014) stress the inclusion of other countries in the process, with Chavez taking the lead in building a unified Latin America and a sense of solidarity across the continent. Duno-Gottberg (2013) claimed that the most telling characteristic of the revolution was that it was so popular that the opposition felt compelled to mimic Chavez and pretend to be centre-leftists.

In direct opposition to the critical narrative, Sirota (2013) described Chavez as residing over an “economic miracle.” Buxton (2013) claimed Chavez led Venezuela “from bust to boom” claiming that Venezuela enjoyed high growth rates and low unemployment in a “vibrant” economy. She also blamed the opposition’s actions, such as the 2002 coup and the 2002/3 strike/lockout as damaging the economy. Although questioning the sustainability of economic growth, she noted that there was no golden economic period before Chavez.

There is a great divergence of opinion on what the “Bolivarian Revolution” achieved. Economically, the opinions range from it precipitating economic disarray to bringing in a virtual golden age. Likewise, politically, the Chavez experiment has brought about a dictatorship or an inspirational success in direct democracy, depending on one’s political persuasion. Abalo (2014) claimed that the reason for this divergence was not simply political, but because academics are using different measurements of success. He claims if judged by

the standards of participatory or radical democracy, the Chavez government has done “quite well,” noting the poverty decline and public participation. However, if judged by the standards of a liberal democracy, which, he claims, the opposition in Venezuela more closely resembles, “there are clear shortcomings,” noting the politically partisan CNE and Attorney General.

Considering the lack of agreement on any issue, the aid of empirical data on the most contentious of all subjects would be greatly helpful.

Empirical Data

The empirical data is drawn from the most unimpeachable sources available, such as the United Nations and the World Bank. All of the data presented is also fully and easily available in English to anyone with a computer. Thus, it can reasonably be expected that journalists and academics could find it. The data covering the legacy of the Bolivarian Revolution has been split up into two sections: social and economic. As Hugo Chavez was incapacitated in late 2012 and died in early 2013, the statistics used will take into account years up to and including 2012. The indicators presented below were chosen because they are among the most common indicators used to judge a country’s progress and because they were the issues most frequently brought up in the newspapers themselves.

Social Indicators

The Human Development Index (HDI) is the UN’s flagship statistic in measuring the well being of a society. It combines economic data (gross national income (GNI) per capita) with other factors, such as medical and education levels to produce a number reflecting the development of a society. All countries have a number between zero (completely undeveloped) and one (completely developed). With a score of .942 in 2012, Norway was the world’s most developed country (UNDP, 2015). With a score of 0.348, Niger is one of the world’s least developed countries.

In the 20 years between 1980 and 2000, Venezuela increased its HDI value from 0.628 to 0.673, an increase of 0.045. However, in the ten years of *chavista* rule between 2000 and 2010, its score rose to 0.757, an increase of 0.084, almost twice the increase in development in half the time. This was achieved in spite of the opposition's 2002/3 lockout/strike, which took a severe blow on the economy, shrinking it by one third in a few months, sharply decreasing the HDI score.¹³ Under the Chavez government, Venezuela improved from “medium human development” to “high human development” (UNDP, 2013).

A fine barometer of education is the percentage of children enrolled in school. ECLAC statistics show the number of children enrolled in secondary school increased from under one half in 1999 to over three-quarters in 2012 (CEPALSTAT, 2016a), a graph illustrating both primary and secondary school enrollment can be found in the appendix. The government also pioneered a number of programs centering on adult education. The country now has one of the world's largest student populations, despite being home to only 30 million people. It was programs such as these which academics supportive of the administration claim led to a sense of empowerment and awakening in the Venezuelan population. In 2005, UNESCO, an agency of the UN declared Venezuela illiteracy free.

Both poverty (49.4%) and extreme poverty (17.9%) peaked in Venezuela in 1999, after ten years of neoliberalism and the year Chavez took office. In 2012, poverty (25.4%) had been reduced by half and extreme poverty (7.1%) by three-quarters (CEPALSTAT, 2016b). However, some observers sympathetic to Chavez have noted that the poverty reductions include only monetary poverty, and do not take into account the gains in health, education, and other social progress (Wesibrot and Sandoval, 2007).

¹³ A graph of Venezuela's HDI can be found in the appendix, in the 2013 section. The effect of the strike/lockout can be seen in many of the following graphs.

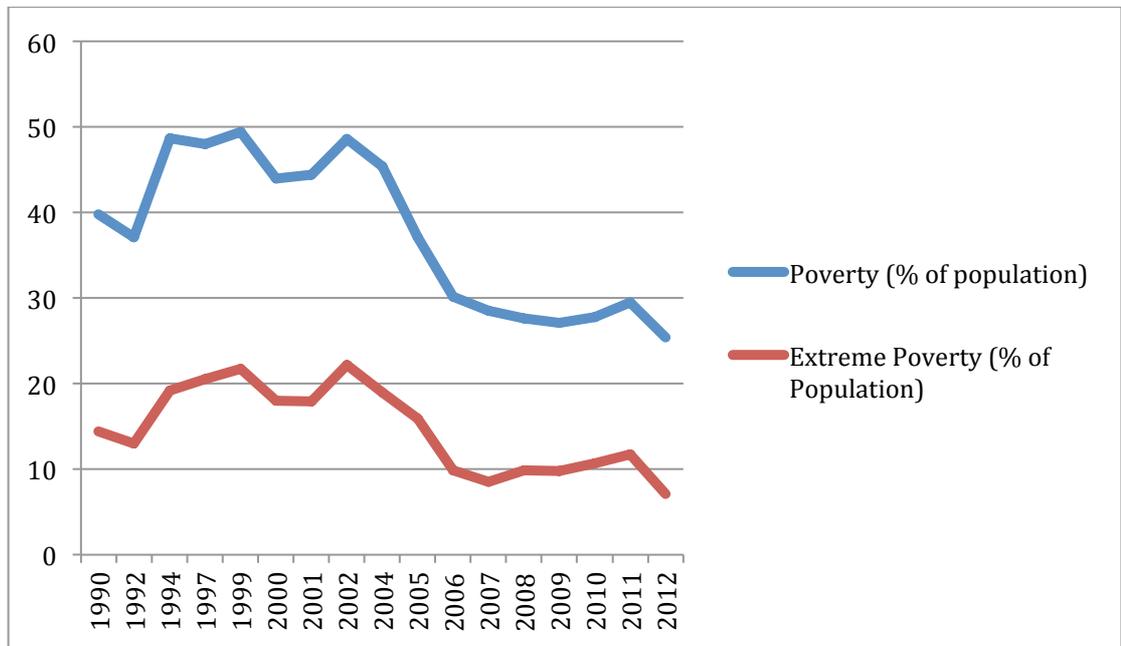


Figure 23 Venezuela: Poverty and Extreme Poverty, 1990-2012, Source: ECLAC/CEPAL

There was a good deal of discussion, particularly in recent years about food shortages in Venezuela and the hunger it causes.

In 2010, the Venezuelan National Institute of Statistics released a report detailing their progress on the United Nations' millennium development goals. The data showed a steep increase in the amount of calories available per person in Venezuela (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2010). In the late 1990's, the average Venezuelan often did not have enough food to meet the minimum necessary intake.¹⁴ But the amount of food per person increased every year from 2003 to a record high in 2009. The drawbacks to the data include that it was released by a Venezuelan government body, which could be seen as biased, and that the data goes up to 2009 only. However, the report was published by the UNDP and the trends shown were corroborated by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which in 2013 gave Venezuela a special commendation for its work reducing malnourishment (FAO, 2013).

The chart below shows Venezuela's neoliberal 1990's suffered from growing malnutrition. It should be noted that the FAO does not track malnutrition rates below five percent, so the percentage figure is not known.

¹⁴ A chart visualizing the data can be found in the appendix. It should be remembered that Venezuela was a sharply unequal country and therefore the scale of the undernourishment problem for the poor is obscured by the conspicuous lifestyles of the rich.

What is known is that since 2007, the country has managed to keep the percentage below five. The FAO also noted that the number of undernourished Venezuelans was 2.8 million between 1990 and 1992, rose to 3.8 million between 2000 and 2002 and fell to a “not statistically significant” number by 2010 to 2012, where it has remained. In 2013 the FAO (2013) calculated that there were 3,020 calories available per person per day in Venezuela, a figure much larger than the 1,800 per person per day it recommends as a minimum and far larger than the figure of under 1,800 available in 1999 when Chavez became President. Indeed, the FAO (2013) warned that Venezuela’s most pressing food problem might now be obesity, which affected 38 percent of the population. According to the FAO (2013), Venezuela did this by instituting a food supply network- Mission Mercal- of 22,000 subsidized stores nationwide, in which 61 percent of Venezuelans shop.

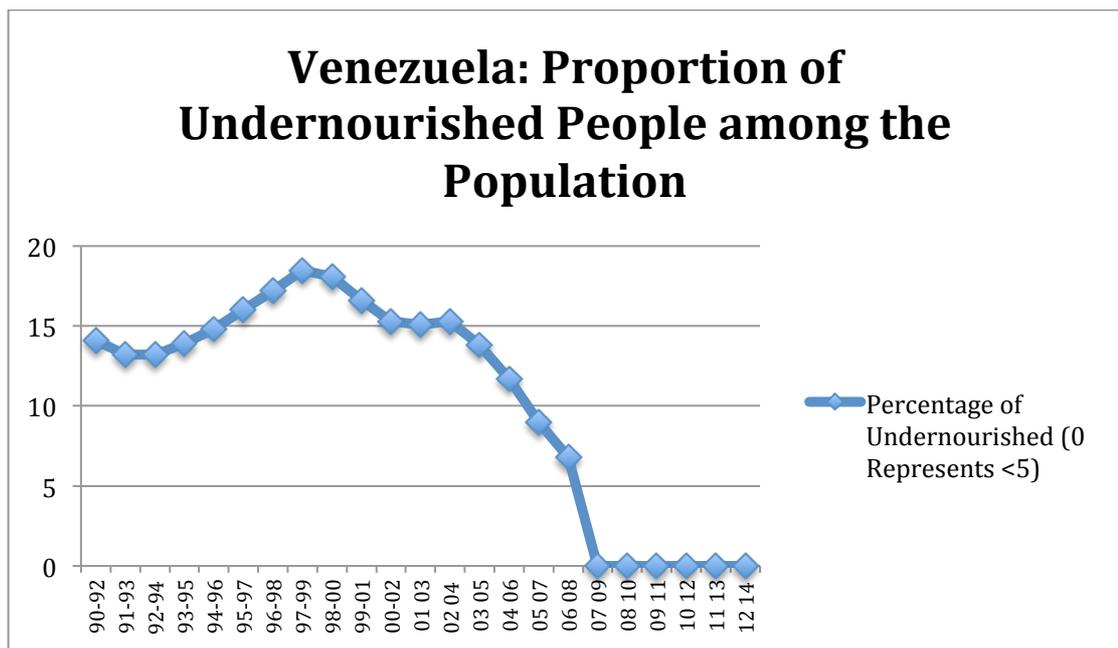


Figure 24 Venezuela: Proportion of Undernourished People, 1990-2013, FAO.

On the subject of crime, the murder rate is typically used as the most dependable statistic in developing countries. The intentional homicide rate rose from 25.0 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1999 to 53.6 in 2012 (World Bank, 2016), making Venezuela among the most dangerous countries in the most dangerous

region in the world for homicides.¹⁵ The UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted that the murder rate in Caracas was three times higher than the rest of the country (UNODC, 2013: 150). Furthermore, the violence is largely localized to the *barrios*, the shantytowns in the hills of the city while less than one percent of the homicides occur in the wealthy Chacao district (Humphrey and Valverde, 2014: 157). Therefore, Venezuelans' experiences of violent crime differ greatly along class and geographic lines. In chapter nine journalists interviewed expressed fear for their safety because of high crime rates.

Violent crime is a Latin America-wide phenomenon, with 41 of the top 50 most violent cities worldwide in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Ibid*: 148) and Venezuelans are no exception to the trend of rising concerns about violence, as an ECLAC (2013: 151) survey showed.

Thus, the majority of the social indicators show considerable progress, particularly in the reduction of undernourishment, poverty and extreme poverty and improvements to education. However, social cohesion is harmed by high and rising violent crime rates, which concern the population. It is to the economic indicators we now turn.

Economic Indicators

GDP per capita is the benchmark statistic for measuring the health of the economy. Data from the World Bank (2016) show that Venezuelan GDP per capita rose from \$5150 dollars in 1999 to \$6434 in 2012. This was in spite of the 2002 coup and the 2002-3 strike/lockout that severely damaged the economy¹⁶. Since the government gained control over the oil industry in 2003, the economy fared well. The figures show that economic growth under Chavez was markedly superior to growth under the two previous, neoliberal presidents, Caldera and Perez. According to the UN's ECLAC, unemployment in Venezuela fell from 15.0 percent in 1999 to 8.1 percent, despite the strike/lockout, which caused

¹⁵ For a graph of the homicide rate in Venezuela and of continent-wide concern about violent crime, consult the appendix.

¹⁶ A graph detailing the changes in GDP per capita can be found in the appendix. The effect of the 2002 coup and the 2002/3 lockout/strike is easily seen.

countless businesses to permanently close and unemployment to soar (CEPALSTAT, 2016c).¹⁷

Figures for inflation are difficult to find. However, CEPR published a study of inflation before and during Chavez's presidency. It showed that during the previous two presidencies, inflation was higher than under Chavez (Johnston and Kozameh, 2013).¹⁸ *Indeed, the highest inflation under Chavez was around equal to the lowest rate of inflation under the previous two (neoliberal) presidents.* However, after Chavez's death, inflation increased and the economy worsened.

One of the standard methods in measuring inequality is the GINI index. It measures the income inequality of a country and assigns it a value between 0 (complete equality) and 1 (complete inequality). One of the most equal countries is Norway, with a GINI of 0.258. One of the most unequal countries is South Africa, with a GINI of 0.631.

Data compiled from ECLAC (2013: 91) and the World Bank (2016) show that Venezuela's GINI score fell from 0.498 in 1999 to 0.405 in 2012. Inequality rose during the 1990's, peaked in the year 2002, and dropped until 2012. By 2012, Venezuela was the second most equal country in Latin America, behind only Uruguay.¹⁹

ECLAC's 2013 report noted that the ratio in wealth between the upper and lower quintile rose from 13.4 in 1990 to 18.1 in 2002, then dropped to 9.4 in 2012, meaning the poor were twice as wealthy in comparison to the rich by 2012.

Statistics from ECLAC's (2013: 89) report showed the effect that a decade of neoliberalism had on Venezuela. In 1990, the average Venezuelan income was 8.9 times the poverty line, whereas in 1999 it was 7.2. Despite the coup strike/lockout in 2002 and 2003, the Chavez administration increased the average national back to 1990 levels. However, to speak of "average" incomes in an unequal country can be misleading.

¹⁷ For a graph of unemployment, see the appendix.

¹⁸ A visualization of inflation during the 1990's and 2000's can be found in the appendix.

¹⁹ A chart of Venezuela's performance on the GINI index is in the appendix.

The data shows that the poor, particularly the poorest 40 percent of the country were hit the hardest by neoliberalism, whereas the rich increased their share of the national income. Under Chavez, the poorest 40 percent of Venezuelans saw their share of national income rise from 14.3 percent in 1999 to 19.8 percent in 2012, a rise of over a third. The bottom 70 percent increased their share of the national income. This was done without financially hurting the middle classes as we have seen that GDP rose substantially under the Chavez administration. Their share of national income dropped marginally, from 29 to 28 percent under Chavez. However, the growing economy meant their total income was much higher in 2012 than in 1999. It was only the richest 10 percent of Venezuelan society who were financially worse off under Chavez (ECLAC, 2013: 89).

The numbers are available in the appendix but are visualized in the graph below. As can be seen, there was no great revolution in income inequality. Rather, a slow but significant transfer of income from the richest 10 percent to the lower 70 percent.

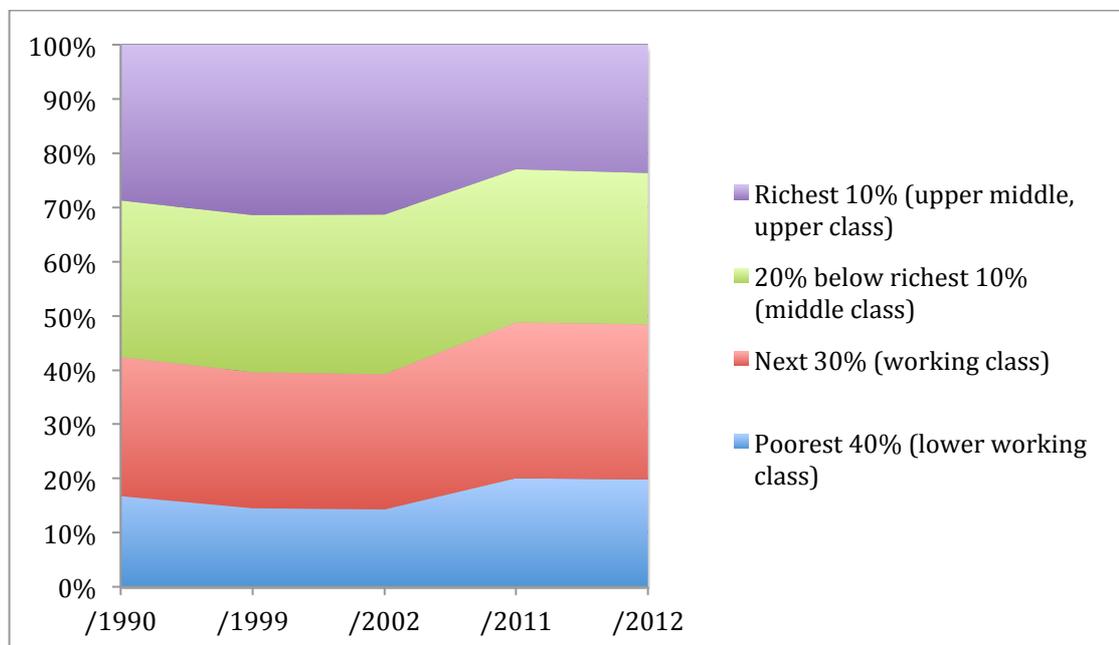


Figure 25 Venezuela: Share of Income by class, 1990-2012, Source: ECLAC (2013:89)

Empirical economic data show that the Chavez administration achieved considerable progress in reducing inequality and unemployment while growing

the economy, particularly after the devastating strike/lockout of 2002-2003, the aftermath of which led to government control over the crucial oil sector. However, despite the rhetoric of some *chavistas*, there was no economic revolution. Nor was Venezuela transformed into a model economy. Unemployment and inflation fell considerably, but remained high. Furthermore, the country was still highly dependent on its oil sector for income and employment.

Overall, the empirical data suggest that much of the critical commentary on the legacy of the Chavez administration is flawed. As seen in chapter three, Venezuelans believed their country to be considerably more democratic after Chavez than before him, while economic indicators suggest a recovery from a decade of neoliberal policies that stunted economic growth, deepened poverty and exacerbated inequality and inflation. However, the Chavez administration made many mistakes. One notable area in which Venezuela regressed was in violent crime levels. The social and economic issues highlighted in this section will arise in the analysis.

Analysis

A sample was taken of all relevant articles in the seven newspapers with the word “Venezuela” in the text. Some tangential articles, like stories about the Venezuelan baseball team at the World Baseball Classic, were omitted. The sample dates were between March 1st and May 1st, 2013. The exception was *The Miami Herald*, where, in order to stop the newspaper overwhelming the sample, the weeks March 1st-8th and April 11th-18th were chosen. These dates still covered Hugo Chavez’s death and funeral and the following presidential elections, and were therefore the peak period of interest. The two 2013 periods were analysed together but split up for the sake of convenience of reading.

In Western countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, there is a strong cultural practice of not speaking ill of the dead. This norm is particularly strong with reference to the recently deceased. Thus, obituaries of public figures tend to be markedly positive, celebrating people for their qualities and downplaying or ignoring their faults. So strong is this custom that

even extremely negative traits of characters are referred to with euphemistic compliments. It is custom to describe boring people as “tireless raconteurs” and drunkards as “vivacious.” Meanwhile, the phrase that someone “gave colourful accounts of their exploits” really means they were a liar and “he tended to become over-attached to certain ideas and theories” is used as a euphemism for “fascist” (Ferguson, 2002).

This custom is illustrated with the obituaries of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who died in January 2015. Saudi Arabia under Abdullah was one of the world’s last remaining absolute monarchies, and human rights groups noted Abdullah’s human rights record was among the worst in modern history. Human Rights Watch’s 2013 World Report noted that many of the country’s nine million migrant workers suffer in “slavery-like conditions,” working 15 to 20 hours per day, seven days a week, in particular women, who are forced to endure “food deprivation and severe psychological, physical, and sexual abuse” (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The king did not tolerate public worship of any other religion but his own, while women are banned from travelling, studying or working without permission from their male guardians. The report also noted that children are tortured by the state (*Ibid.*). A recent example of this was Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, who Abdullah sentenced to death by crucifixion for sending online messages supporting the Arab Spring when he was seventeen years old.

In response to the death of King Abdullah, the United Kingdom ordered flags to fly at half-mast, with former Prime Minister Tony Blair stating that he was “very sad indeed” and that he “admired Abdullah greatly.” He went on to say that he was a “patient and skillful modernizer of his country...a staunch advocate of inter faith relations” and that “he was loved by his people and will be deeply missed” (Blair, 2015). Prime Minister Cameron said he was “deeply saddened” by his death, noting that he would be remembered “for his commitment to peace and for strengthening understanding between faiths,” (Cameron, 2015). The head of the IMF, Christine Lagarde, hailed Abdullah as “a strong advocate of women” (Amnesty International UK, 2013). In the United States, similar commemorations were forthcoming. Secretary of State John Kerry tweeted that King Abdullah was “a man of wisdom and vision” and that the “world has lost a revered leader” while President Obama noted his warm

friendship with Abdullah and characterized him as a peacemaker and an educator (The White House: 2015).

While hardly overwhelmingly positive, the media followed the lead of state and business power in its obituaries. *The Independent's* (January 23rd) headline described Abdullah as, "A shrewd ruler who was popular with his subjects" and went on to say that he,

"Gained a reputation as a reformer...combining an avuncular style with a reputation for honesty...and espoused interfaith tolerance, cracked down on extremism, reached out to women and offered a plan for Arab peace with Israel."

The Daily Telegraph (January 22nd) noted that he "became known as something of an advocate for women" and was "a man of principle." *The Guardian's* editorial (January 23rd), after listing his achievements claimed, "Abdullah was, in others words, not a bad man." Amnesty's Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director described Abdullah's penchant for executions as "utterly gruesome" (Amnesty International, 2015).

The American newspapers also gave moderated praise. *The Washington Post* printed the same obituary as *The Independent*. *The New York Times* noted that his greatest legacy would be a "scholarship program that sent tens of thousands of young Saudi men and women abroad to study at Western universities and colleges" (Martin and Hubbard, 2015). Amnesty suggested his legacy was the scores of prisoners of conscience in his prisons (Amnesty International, 2015).

Thus, even in extreme circumstances, such as the death of the head of a regime labeled as among the most repressive administrations in history, the custom of not speaking ill of the dead holds. Given that Hugo Chavez is not accused of anything approaching the crimes of Abdullah, we may expect effusive praise in his obituaries.

Obama's full statement on Chavez's passing is reprinted below,

“At this challenging time of President Hugo Chavez’s passing, the United States reaffirms its support for the Venezuelan people and its interest in developing a constructive relationship with the Venezuelan government. As Venezuela begins a new chapter in its history, the United States remains committed to policies that promote democratic principles, the rule of law, and respect for human rights” (Obama, 2013).

In contrast to his statement on Abdullah, there was no praise whatsoever for Chavez in Obama’s statement. His short statement was strongly criticized by *The Washington Post* who deemed it “embarrassing” that Obama offered no condemnation of a “dictator” and “one of the most noxious figures in the hemisphere,” who “supported terrorists” and “persecuted Jews, denied basic civil liberties and acted as a banker for the Iranian regime” (Rubin, 2013). The writer pointed to two other US officials’ responses that she deemed more appropriate. Tom Cotton, a congressman from Arkansas said,

“After the welcome news of Hugo Chavez’s death, I hope that the oppressed people of Venezuela will be able to live in freedom, not under miserable tyranny” (*Ibid.*).

Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee expressed a similar opinion. He said,

“Hugo Chavez was a tyrant who forced the people of Venezuela to live in fear. His death dents the alliance of anti-US leftist leaders in South America. Good riddance to this dictator” (*Ibid.*).

The reaction from Latin American governments was not the same. The President of Bolivia broke down and cried on television as he said that his country was “destroyed” by Chavez’s death but noted that “Chavez is alive more than ever” and he “will remain an inspiration to the peoples struggling for liberation” against the United States (*El Universal (Colombia)*, March 5th). Bolivia declared a week of national mourning for his death. The President of Ecuador called Chavez,

“A great Latin American, a great human being” who “the whole world will recognize for greatness and courage...those who die for life cannot be said to be dead. Hugo Chavez died for the life of his beloved Venezuela, for the life of a unified Latin America. He will be more alive than ever” (Kozameh, 2013).

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff called Chavez “a great leader, an irreparable loss and above all a friend of Brazil” before declaring three days of national mourning (*TeleSur*, 2015). Former President Lula, whom the press had been claiming for years (Young, 2013) had a deep ideological divide with Chavez, stated,

“I am proud to have lived and worked with Chavez for the integration of Latin America and for a more just world...His love for his country and dedication to the cause of the poor will continue illuminating the future of Venezuela” (Kozameh, 2013).

The governments of Peru, Haiti, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and the Dominican Republic all independently took the step of declaring three days national mourning. Nicaragua declared a week, Cuba two days, and Surinam one day. More countries declared national mourning after Chavez’s death than after Nelson Mandela’s.

In South Africa, President Zuma of South Africa claimed Chavez was a “visionary” and “respected revolutionary leader of...the entire progressive family of nations” (*Times Live*, March 6th). Meanwhile President Abbas of Palestine claimed his people would “be forever grateful to Chavez” for his “courageous support” (*TeleSur*, 2015).

There was no official national mourning in the UK or US. The extremely wide range of reactions to Chavez’s death is testament to the reverence he inspired in some officials and the contempt in others.

Given the fact that the governments of both Britain and the United States did not issue condolences praising Chavez’s successes and characters, and that

many in the political and business establishment welcomed his death, it is therefore possible to gauge whether the media will side with business and state power or continue the strong cultural practice of not speaking ill of the dead.

In total, the seven newspapers published eleven obituaries of Hugo Chavez. In contrast to those of King Abdullah, all eleven displayed an overwhelming aversion to or contempt for the Venezuelan President. *The Guardian*, at the far left of the spectrum of Anglophone newspapers, published two obituaries, written by Rory Carroll and Phil Gunson.

Carroll's obituary (March 6th) painted Chavez as "a dynamic, divisive leader," a man with a split personality; "there was Chavez the hero who empowered the poor, deepened democracy and stood up to the US" and "there was Chavez the dictator who jailed opponents, sponsored terrorists and left his people hungry." Carroll concluded, "Chavez was a hybrid, a democrat and autocrat, a progressive and a bully." He gave no insight into who Chavez had locked up nor which terrorist groups Chavez allegedly sponsored. Furthermore, the accusation "leaving his people hungry," as demonstrated above, conflicts with data from the United Nations.

Gunson wrote that Chavez was "seen as a hero by the poor and a socialist dictator by opponents" (March 7th). However, Gunson went on to make clear his opinion,

"The debate continued as to whether Chavez could fairly be described as a dictator, but a democrat he most certainly was not. A hero to many, especially among the poor, for his populist social programmes, he assiduously fomented class hatred and used his control of the judiciary to persecute and jail his political opponents."

Among academics there is indeed a debate whether Chavez could be called a "dictator." However, it lies between the extreme right and those only strongly opposed to the government, with those on the positive end of the spectrum claiming he was a near-model democrat and even those closer to the middle, such as Buxton (2011) stating that associational life, political

participation and political institutions have “undoubtedly been strengthened” under Chavez. Thus, at the far left of the media spectrum of obituaries situated themselves at the far right of the academic spectrum. Chavez’s obituaries were less favourable than Abdullah’s.

The Times presented Chavez to its readers as a dogmatic, violent narcissist who had a “fascination with the sound of his own voice” and “went out of his way to attack...business leaders, bankers, newspaper owners, trade union bosses...even the Catholic Church” (March 6th). In a separate article that day, *The Times* presented Chavez as a buffoon, full of “idiotic bombast” and suffering from a “Christ complex” (March 6th).

Diagnosing Chavez from afar with mental disorders was something the newspapers regularly did throughout the time period. *The Independent* quoted a psychiatrist who diagnosed Chavez as a “narcissist,” “impulsive,” “temperamental” and “hypersensitive to criticism” and quoted a writer who said he would go down in history as a “despot” (March 7th).²⁰

The Daily Telegraph noted Chavez was a “shrewd demagogue” who “combined brash but intoxicatingly rhetorical gifts with a free spending of oil revenues” which “failed to create and upsurge in employment” and as a man who “went out of his way to pick fights with both the United States and the Venezuelan political and economic establishment” (March 6th). As seen previously, United Nations figures show unemployment halved under Chavez, from 15 percent in 1999 to 8 percent in 2012. It also portrayed Chavez as uncouth, claiming he was “no intellectual,” despite the fact that Chavez was a university lecturer before becoming president, this position often being considered the definition of an intellectual.

The New York Times published three strongly critical obituaries. A web obituary’s headline read, “In the end, an awful manager” (March 6th) while the print-based edition, *the more balanced of the two*, talked of,

²⁰ This quotation was particularly misleading as it belonged to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who met Chavez in the late 1990s and believed Chavez had the ability to become either the savior of Venezuela or “just another despot.” In the succeeding years and until his death, Marquez publicly and conspicuously supported Chavez and his project. Thus, it used a quote from the 1990s from Marquez, who supported *chavismo*, to make it seem he was completely against it.

“Chavez’s dramatic sense of his own significance helped him to power as the reincarnation of the liberator Simon Bolivar- he even renamed the country.”

Chavez’s socialist legacy was, “the decay, dysfunction and blight that afflict the economy and every state institution” that the “bungling” Chavez had staffed with crooks and incompetents who “tried to impose pseudo-Marxism principles” (March 6th).

In reality, the Venezuelan people voted in 1999, by a factor of nearly three-to-one, to change the name of the country. And, as seen previously, the macro-economic indicators indicate an alternative interpretation, with GDP rising and unemployment and inflation falling.

The Washington Post published a similarly negative article entitled “Anti-US leader who had Promised Revolution” (March 6th) in which they uncritically quoted one academic stating,

“‘I think Chavez proved to be a despot in the end,’ he said. ‘He wasn’t a dictator. There was a fig leaf of democracy. But I think he was a despot who really wanted to control everything. He was intent on concentrating power in his own hands and was unwilling to create a system that distributed power and constrained his powers.’”

This statement runs in contrast to the opinion of the Venezuelan people, who, as shown above with surveys conducted by anti-Chavez organizations, believe their country became greatly more democratic (see chapter three). It also is in sharp contrast with a wide range of election monitoring organizations’ reports (see chapter six).

But it was *The Miami Herald* who published the most negative obituary of all. Entitled “Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and his legacy of plunder,” *The Herald* described Chavez’s,

“Skilful rhetoric, which filled supporters with utopian dreams, was used to justify the methodical destruction of Venezuela’s democratic institutions and the free market. Shortly after coming to office, he rewrote the constitution to his liking and aggressively set out to rig elections and stifle adversaries in the legislative branch and the courts.... As a result of all this, Venezuela today is a polarized society divided between the intolerant supporters of Mr. Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution and a democratic opposition that, against all odds, has waged a courageous fight for a democratic alternative” (March 5th).

The obituaries in the Western press differed little from opposition propaganda, *excepting that they were more critical*. When compared to the obituaries in Venezuelan opposition newspapers such as *El Universal*, the coverage in the UK and US was *more negative*. *El Universal* (March 6th), which led a coup to overthrow the government in 2002 (see chapter four), did note his “polarizing, sectarian and aggressive style with his adversaries” and the “openly Anti-American” current in the government, but did not question his sanity or call him a “dictator,” “demagogue” or “despot” as the Western press did.

Furthermore, in the wake of Chavez’s death, numerous newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* also published articles about the street parties of the opposition celebrating Chavez’s death which gave the journalists opportunities to uncritically publish numerous accusations and condemnations of the deceased president from anti-Chavez activists.

Other Analysis of Hugo Chavez

A testament to Hugo Chavez’s impact on world politics was the level of interest around the world upon his passing. *El Universal* (March 6th) reported that there were more than 800,000 tweets about Chavez in less than a day after his death, the large majority from outside Venezuela. The newspapers responded with a great number of news and commentary articles about his passing, his funeral and his legacy, the four British newspapers in the study publishing 69 separate articles in March alone. The more liberal newspapers in the study published some positive portrayals of the Venezuelan President. *The*

Guardian published articles from the historian Tariq Ali and the feminist Selma James, who noted that Chavez was “the president of the poor who was loved by millions, especially by women, the poorest” (March 8th). In *The Independent*, Owen Jones identified Chavez as a “democrat” who had greatly improved the lives of the poor (March 7th). However, there were no positive articles in *The Times* or *The Telegraph*.

The New York Times invited ex-President of Brazil, Lula, to write an op-ed. Lula portrayed Chavez positively as “a strong, dynamic and unforgettable figure” whose was characterized by a commitment to “ameliorating the misery of his people” (March 7th). It is possible *The New York Times* expected him to write a critical article, as the newspaper had been informing its readers for years that there was a deep ideological divide between the “good left” of Brazil and the “bad left” of Venezuela (Young, 2013).

In the wake of Chavez’s death, the massive funeral processions attended by millions of Venezuelans, and the subsequent presidential election, the newspapers interviewed ordinary people in the street, as the following two quotes demonstrate.

“‘Chavez opened our eyes,’ said Carlos Pérez, 58, a cookie salesman who drove into town with his wife and took part in the caravan. ‘We used to be stepped on. We felt humiliated’” (*The New York Times*, March 7th).

“‘Chávez changed our lives completely,’ said Carmen Tovar, 62, a housewife in Antimano. ‘It used to be you couldn’t go into a shop without street kids begging for food. Now, only shameless people beg. It’s wonderful.’” (*The Times*, April 15th).

These views of ordinary Venezuelans who voted for the government were a perspective often missing in the reporting. They give insight into the disillusionment with society, detailed in chapter three, that many people in Venezuela felt in the 1990s and contextualise Lula’s quote about the “misery” that Latin Americans face. The reasons for the lack of these voices will be explained in chapters nine and eleven. However, further praise of Chavez was

often immediately undermined by the writer, as in this example (emphasis added),

“‘He was like my father. He had a soul that was very big, and we are very sad,’ said Nancy de Nogal, 58, a worker in the state oil company, *which Chavez purged of opponents*,” (*The Washington Post*, March 6th).

Thus, the positive presentation of Chavez as a friend of the people was immediately diluted by informing readers Chavez fired his enemies from their jobs.²¹ Sometimes praise of Chavez was put into the mouths of already demonized figures, as in the following quote,

“‘I have no doubt he will come again along with all the righteous people and the Prophet Jesus and the only successor of the righteous generation, the perfect human,’ [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad said,” (*The New York Times*, March 7th).

President Ahmadinejad presided over a state labelled an “outpost of tyranny” by the US government (Rice, 2005). Therefore, this praise from a demonized figure serves only to frame Chavez as a friend of tyrants, a theme that will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

A large number of the positive descriptions of Chavez came only by way of denigrating his successor, Nicolas Maduro. Chavez’s charisma or popularity was invoked only to note that Maduro had little in comparison to Chavez, as in the following two examples,

“Even Maduro’s most ardent supporters would concede that the former bus driver and union leader lacks Mr Chavez’s panache and common touch,” (*The Independent*, March 7th).

²¹ The context of the firings, between 2002 and 2003, the oil company managers had pursued a strike/lockout of the company designed to oust Chavez from office by destroying the economy, resulting in a massive economic crash. According to World Bank figures, the Venezuelan economy shrank by 32 percent between 2001 and 2003. To put that in context, the Greek economy also shrank by a third in the seven years after 2008. The strike/lockout occurred over only three months, however.

“Analysts say Maduro has to resort to such tactics to channel Chavez’s popularity and influence because he does not have the same visibility or charm,” (*The Guardian*, April 12th).

In contrast, there was a great deal of negative portrayals of Chavez and his legacy in early 2013. *The Guardian* likened European Chavez supporters to Maoist cult groups that threatened death on anyone who criticized the Chairman (March 6th). Also on the 6th, less than 24 hours after his passing, *The Daily Telegraph* published one article entitled “Hugo Chavez and the politics of resentment: why some on the left love a good dictator” and another entitled “Hugo Chavez a Venezuelan Spartacus? A Latin American Kim Jong-Il, more like.” On March 7th *The Times* published a leading article entitled “The Perils of Populism” that began by stating,

“Chávez’s death ends a destructive chapter in Venezuela’s history. His rule harmed liberty, hampered development and was a terrible model for Latin America.”

It went on to say that “literacy rates have changed little, income inequality has worsened and the poverty rate remains above 30 percent,” all of which contradict the data from the United Nations. As shown previously, UNESCO declared Venezuela illiteracy free in 2005, Venezuela’s poorest 40 percent saw their share of national income rise 37 percent under Chavez, making it one of the most equal countries in Latin America. Poverty dropped to 25 percent in 2012, from 49 percent in 1999. It had been below 30 percent since 2006. Indeed, the United Nations’ report show that poverty fell more sharply in Venezuela in 2012 than in any other Latin American or Caribbean country (ECLAC, 2013: 15).

On March 9th, one *Times* author attempted to give a fair view of the Chavez government, noting that,

“To be fair, Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela is not a one-party state. It has no gulag. Chavismo (sic) is a pale shadow of real Marxist-Leninism...But Chavez was

no [Jeremy] Bentham. He had a different attitude to votes: he liked them only if he won.”

The Washington Post described Chavez as, “A Marxist with a dash of Oprah” and stated, “he continues to have a near-mythical hold on the Venezuelan people. Even as the country crumbled around him, even as he leaves a legacy of ruin” and “produced a clone of Cuba’s faltering communist state” (March 10th).

The Miami Herald said Chavez,

“Was able to turn once democratic Venezuela into an autocratic country, and, to his credit, without unleashing terror. But opponents of Chavez do not like living in this intellectual apartheid” (April 13th).

Thus, Hugo Chavez, a man who had won multiple clean elections, dramatically reduced inequality, poverty and extreme poverty, decreased unemployment and inflation, increased literacy rates, increased GNP per capita in Venezuela, a country where polls show its citizens believe the country became substantially more democratic and where there was freedom of speech,²² was presented in a less favourable light than King Abdullah, an absolute monarch boasting one of the worst human rights records in history. The key difference in this instance was that Abdullah was an ally of the British and American states and of neoliberal globalization pushed for by big business, whereas Chavez was its foe. The media ignored the reactions of the majority of the world leaders and the people of Venezuela, and continued to contradict the best empirical data available to side with their governments and business elites in condemning Chavez. Evidently the dedication to state and business power is stronger than the custom of not speaking ill of the dead.

The Funeral of Hugo Chavez

²² See appendix graph [10]

The heads of state of thirty-three countries attended the state funeral of Hugo Chavez. This was in addition to delegations from more than fifty countries and international organizations. Of those thirty-three, the CIA expresses no reservations about the quality of the democratic system of thirty of them, raising concerns only in the case of Cuba, Iran and Belarus (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016).

In 2002, President Bush described Iran as belonging to an “axis of evil.” In 2005, incoming Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice added an addendum to the Axis of Evil, adding Cuba, Belarus, Myanmar and Zimbabwe to the expanded list, which she dubbed “outposts of tyranny,” officially regarded by Washington as the most repressive rogue states in the world (Rice, 2005).

The frequency with which countries with a head of state attending was counted. Given their special status in the US as rogue repressive states, Iran, Cuba and Belarus were counted separately. It is understandable that some small, geopolitically unimportant states such as St. Lucia may not be mentioned very often. Therefore, a control group was added; Mexico, a large important state without a negative reputation was also counted. As noted in scholarship, the media have categorized the wave of the left-of-centre governments in Latin America as belonging to either a “good left” of responsible governments who accept the free market (Brazil, Chile, Uruguay) or a “bad left” of irresponsible repressive governments (Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela) (Castaneda 2006, Lupien, 2013, Young, 2013). Argentina also belonged to the second group. However, it was counted separately as at the time there was a renewed British hostility with Argentina over its claims to the Malvinas Islands with its President, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner being a figure of hatred or contempt in the press. For example, on March 19th, The Daily Mirror called her “shameless,” “two-faced” and “cynical” (Rossington, 2013).²³

In total, of the three “outposts of tyranny” Iran was mentioned seventeen times as attending Chavez’s funeral, Cuba seven times, Belarus six times. Mexico, the control group with little to no negative image in the UK and US was

²³ Fernandez de Kirchner did not actually attend the funeral itself, as she was taken ill on the day. However, she travelled to Caracas and was widely reported as attending. President Dilma Rouseff and Lula of Brazil attended funeral proceedings on the March 7th but not the 8th.

not mentioned at all. The “good left” countries of Chile, Brazil and Uruguay were mentioned five times, while the “bad left” countries of Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador were mentioned fourteen times. However, if Cuba and Argentina, traditionally portrayed as “bad left” were added to that total, then “bad left” countries outnumbered “good left” 29 to 5, as Argentina was mentioned eight times. All the other 22 attending countries put together were mentioned three times.

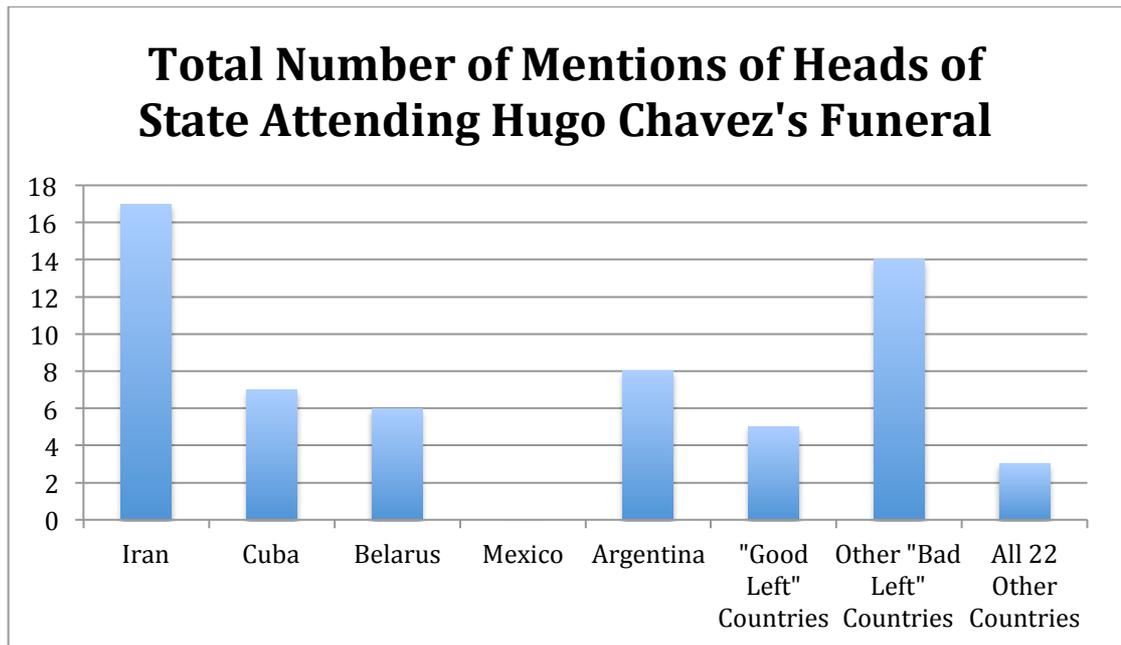


Figure 26 Total Number of 2013 Mentions of Heads of State Attending Hugo Chavez's Funeral

Therefore, the three states designated as “outposts of tyranny” were mentioned as many times as all other thirty democracies combined. Of those other countries, half of those mentioned were “bad left” countries, who the media had also portrayed as repressive authoritarian regimes (Lupien, 2013, Young, 2013). Thus, the impression given was that Venezuela was a friend primarily of dictatorships and tyrannies. Indeed, this point was underscored in many of the articles. For example one *Washington Post* article stated (emphasis added),

“For several leaders who will be here for the funeral, Chavez was a special leader, one who helped countries struggling with diplomatic and political isolation. “A great friend has died, a loyal friend, our brother,” said Alexander

Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, *a country the United States has called Europe's last dictatorship*. Another *friend* planning to attend is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad” (March 8th).

The Telegraph did the same, noting that,

“A state funeral service attended by 33 heads of state, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, and Alexander Lukashenko, the dictatorial president of Belarus, is still expected to go ahead today” (March 7th).

It was evidently insufficient simply to note that Castro, Ahmadinejad and Lukashenko attended; the newspapers underscored the assertion that they were dictators as well. The connection between Chavez and unsavoury characters did not end with heads of state. *The Independent* informed its readers that a Russian gangster attended,

“Russia has sent the head of the state oil company Rosneft, Igor Sechin, an ally of Vladimir Putin who allegedly engineered the arrest of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and is described in the Moscow media as ‘the scariest man on earth.’” (March 8th).

Meanwhile, *The Times* alleged that Chavez had been training Hezbollah terrorists (March 7th). It is perhaps understandable that the heads of state of smaller, less influential nations such as Trinidad and Tobago were not mentioned. Readers would not be expected to know these leaders. However, the large, influential nation of Mexico was not mentioned at all and Brazil, one of the largest and most important nations on the planet, was mentioned only once. This was despite it sending both its President, Dilma Rousseff, and its ex-President, Lula, one of the world’s most respected and well-known politicians.

Why *The Independent* mentioned the presence of Igor Sechin is unclear. Given the disparity with which various nations were mentioned, with the three nations dubbed “outposts of tyranny,” in particular Iran, one strong hypothesis that could be drawn was that newspapers were attempting to portray Venezuela in a negative light by linking it with regimes associated with terror and

repression. The alternative hypothesis that they were mentioned in great numbers because these were heads of state that readers would most be aware of fails, as states such as Brazil and Mexico, the control group were barely or never mentioned. Furthermore, as in the examples above, the newspapers often gave a short, negative biography to its readers of who President Lukashenko was.

Only weeks after Chavez's funeral, Venezuela was consumed by the presidential election between Chavez's successor Nicolas Maduro and Henrique Capriles Radonski. The following section deals with the election.

Chapter Six, The 2013 Elections

Following the death of Hugo Chavez the previous month, Venezuelans voted in new presidential elections on April 14th, which pitted Chavez's Vice-President, Nicolas Maduro, against opposition leader Henrique Capriles Radonski. Maduro won fifteen of Venezuela's twenty-three states, plus the influential capital district and the popular vote by 51% to 49%; a margin much smaller than Chavez had the previous October. After the results were announced, Capriles refused to recognize them, claiming he had won. He demanded a full audit and subsequently a recount. He called for his supporters to "unleash their fury" on the streets, which resulted in **at least eleven people**, mostly *chavistas*, being killed (Ciccariello-Maher, 2016: 50).

Competing Narratives on the Elections

The Opposition Frame

The Venezuelan opposition generally accepted that the electoral process in Venezuela is clean. Vicente Díaz, senior opposition member of the Venezuelan Electoral Council (CNE) said he had "no doubts" about the veracity of the 2013 election results (*The Miami Herald*, April 16th, 2013). However, it charged that the government used state resources to tip the balance of power in its favour. Vicente Bello, the opposition's representative to the CNE and its expert in elections stated that,

"We say the vote is secret and secure... The problem is with the CNE administration and leadership. For example, with the use of state resources and the completely unbalanced official propaganda, there are abuses in the open use of state resources for the electoral campaign. These are five television channels, around 130 radio stations, a variety of national and regional newspapers, all dedicated to the campaign as if they are part of the propaganda team of the [*chavista*] PSUV party" (*The Real News*, 2012).

Alejandro Vivas, coordinator of Capriles' electoral campaign claimed that hundreds of thousands of government employees are pressured into voting for the *chavistas* (*The Miami Herald*, April 13th, 2013). Thus, the opposition charged that the government had a grossly unfair advantage in elections due to their media empire tilting the balance in favour of itself. The opposition accused the CNE of turning a blind eye to the abuses of state funds used by the *chavistas* during election campaigning which further disadvantage the opposition, who received no state funding.

This opinion is put forward by those at the critical end of the academic spectrum, such as Naim (2014), who claims that the government uses an array of “dirty tricks” such as buying votes and shutting down critical television channels, and Corrales and Penfold (2011: 1), who state that “die-hard loyalists of the government are placed at top-level positions in state offices, such as the courts, thereby undermining the system of checks and balances.”

The *Chavista* Frame

In contrast, the Venezuelan government highlights the technical achievements of the electoral system and its transparency and sophistication. It rejects the notion of the CNE as a biased body, instead characterizing it as an independent branch of government responsible for the consistency and efficiency of elections. The government categorize the elections as free and fair and “a model for the region” to follow (Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the US, 2012). It emphasizes the high voter turnout as a sign of voter empowerment and inclusion. It notes that Venezuelan elections are among the most carefully monitored in the world by election monitoring bodies and outside observers, who attest to the robustness of the system, its openness and its transparency (*Ibid.*). In total contrast to the opposition narrative, the *chavistas* claim the opposition has a great advantage in the election process, as the vast majority of media networks are in private hands and are highly critical of the government. Therefore, the media are active participants in protecting the country from further democratization (Kitzberger, 2012). They also claim that media owners, bosses and workers played a key role in numerous attempts to illegally oust the government, such as in the 2002 coup and the 2002-3

strike/lockout. Furthermore, the *chavistas* argue that Washington funds a wide range of opposition parties and groups, giving them a great advantage.

Academics sympathetic to the government highlight the great number of elections in Venezuela that Chavez won. Bhatt (2013a) notes Chavez won some 14 in 13 years, which he characterizes as “free and fair.” Carasik (2015) argues that the election system is unfairly maligned, characterizing it as “one of the most efficient, secure and transparent electoral systems” in the world.

These two interpretations of Venezuelan elections starkly contrast. There was a similarly wide reaction to the results of the elections and Capriles’ protestations.

International Reactions to the Elections

UNASUR, representing all the nations of South America, came out strongly in favour of Maduro and the elections. On April 19th it congratulated the Venezuelan people and recognized Maduro as the rightful President. Furthermore, it urged Capriles to respect the results and the CNE and demanded that the violent protests desist (UNASUR, 2013). Other Latin American governments, such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Haiti quickly recognized Maduro, thereby shunning Capriles. Prominent countries such as Russia and Canada also quickly accepted the results.

In contrast, the United States did not recognize Maduro’s victory, with White House spokesperson Jay Carney (2013) standing with Capriles in his calls for a 100 percent audit, declaring it a prudent and necessary step. The government of Spain originally took the same position as Washington. Thus, the two countries allegedly involved in the 2002 coup against Chavez prominently refused to acknowledge his successor.

However, seeing that much of the rest of the world had backed Maduro and the legitimacy of the elections, and after the lethal protests/riots flared up, Spain reversed its position, siding with UNASUR. It issued a statement calling on Capriles to respect the CNE’s results and formally recognizing Maduro as the

legitimate President-Elect (Gobierno de España, 2013)²⁴. So complete was the backtracking, that the Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo insisted that “there was nothing to rectify” as his government had not held the previous position, rather it had been “a misunderstanding” (*El Universal*, April 17th). Thus, by April 17th, the US was isolated in its support of Capriles and its questioning of the results.

Although Capriles himself is a major actor in Venezuelan politics, there is no agreement on what or whom he represents. Capriles presents himself as a reformer, a moderate, and an admirer of the former Brazilian President Lula, a socialist from the Workers’ Party. *NBC* presented Capriles as a youthful, “center-left progressive” whose “inclusive approach” has proved very popular with ordinary Venezuelans (*NBC*, 2012).

In contrast, the noted Venezuelan playwright and intellectual Luis Britto García characterizes Capriles as a “fascist creep” and an “ultra-super-reactionary” who rose to prominence after cutting his teeth in a “fanatical fascist group, somewhere between a religious and a political organization” (Lovato, 2014). The organization, “Tradition, Family and Property,” was banned in 1984 after it tried to assassinate the Pope (Ciccariello-Maher, 2016: 59). It is a widespread opinion among many sympathetic to the government that Capriles is a fascist, one foreign Ambassador in Caracas describing him as “the face of fascism” as Capriles’ mob attacked his embassy in 2002 during the coup (Sanchez, 2007: 141-160). In between these two extremes, one can find a full range of viewpoints on Capriles considering him as moderate, conservative or far right. Carroll (2013: 278), for instance, presents Capriles as a glamorous, charismatic and capable moderate while Tinker-Salas (2015: 204) characterizes him as a conservative. Evidence of his character and motivations beyond other people’s opinions is presented later.

Empirical Evidence

²⁴ The statement calls for “all political actors” to act responsibly and to respect the constitution. However, as there was only one major actor refusing to do so, therefore it is clear that the statement was aimed at Capriles.

The Venezuelan voting system has drawn praise from all over the world (The Carter Center: 2013, European Parliament, 2005, European Union Election Observation Mission, 2006). In order to vote, Venezuelans must arrive at their polling place with their national identity card. They type their personal identity number on the card onto a touchscreen computer. If the number is successful, they must place their thumb on the screen, where a computer matches the number to the fingerprint. If successful, they then vote electronically. The machine prints a paper ballot, which they must check and place in a sealed voting box. The electronic vote is counted automatically but a random audit of 53% of the votes is counted manually, far more than in most countries. There must be a 100% match between paper and electronic, if not, an alarm is raised. Thus, in order to vote, Venezuelans must have both their ID card and a matching fingerprint. There are two votes, paper and electronic, which must come to exactly the same result in all boxes in all polling stations in all states. This process is watched over all day by representatives of all parties and by international observers in what are some of the most monitored elections in the world. The overly secure system was brought in in 1998 and significantly improved later in reaction to the very low public confidence in the veracity of elections. During the October 2012 elections, the audit of the machines found 22 total cases of discrepancy between electronic and paper tally, with no machine across the country having more than one discrepancy between the two. This was because 22 Venezuelans failed to put their paper ballot in the box after voting electronically (The Carter Center, 2013: 20).

There have been a great number of reports from international organizations monitoring the Venezuelan elections. The Carter Center, a Washington-based election monitoring organization funded primarily by multinational corporations and by the US Government, headed by former US President Jimmy Carter and anti-Chavez academic Jennifer McCoy, observed the 1998 Presidential elections where they “found no significant problems,” concluding that “the elections clearly expressed the will of the Venezuelan people in one of the most transparent elections in the country’s history” (Trinkunas and McCoy, 1998: 14).

The European Union's reports on the 2005 and 2006 elections lauded the electoral system. In 2005 it noted,

“The security and transparency measures introduced in the automated voting process are in line with the most advanced international practice” (European Parliament, 2005: 15), while in 2006 it claimed,

“The electronic voting system established in Venezuela is efficient, secure and auditable, and the competence of the technical experts is in line with its advanced technological level” (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2006: 4).

It also commented upon the media, noting that there was a “great diversity of political opinions” offered. However, it noted that no coverage was fair and balanced, with state TV giving negative and disparaging coverage to the opposition while most of the private media was strongly critical of Chavez “disregarding basic journalistic principles” offering more space for political forces critical of the government, thus inflaming tensions (European Parliament, 2005: 15).

Positive reports from election observers have continued since then. Indeed, President Carter (2012) stated in 2012 that “I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world...they have a very wonderful voting system.” The Canadian democracy watchdog, The Foundation for Democratic Advancement (FDA) monitored the 2012 elections and gave Venezuela of 78.8% (very satisfactory). It monitors a wide range of election-based topics, including media coverage, electoral finance and election transparency. In comparison, the 2012 US Presidential election received a score of 54.5% (unsatisfactory) and in 2013 it gave the Canadian federal electoral system a score of 64.3 (mediocre).

Voter turnout has greatly increased in Venezuela since the 1990s, thanks, in part to a massive voter registration program and increased numbers of polling stations.²⁵

²⁵ A chart displaying Venezuelan voter turnout for presidential elections can be found in the appendix.

However, there is more to democracy than simply voting. As shown in chapter three, in 1997, 83% of Venezuelans believed elections to be fraudulent and 11% to be clean. However, by 2006, only 30% believed them to be fraudulent, with 56% believing them to be clean. The survey data also showed that Venezuelans have a very high opinion of their democracy. Indeed, when compared with the other countries of Latin America, Venezuela fares extremely well. Of note is the fact that the citizens of countries branded the “bad left” (Castaneda, 2006) by much of academia and the media (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua) as authoritarian semi-dictatorships actually believe their countries to be considerably more democratic than most citizens of “good left” countries (Brazil, Uruguay) or US allies such as Colombia.

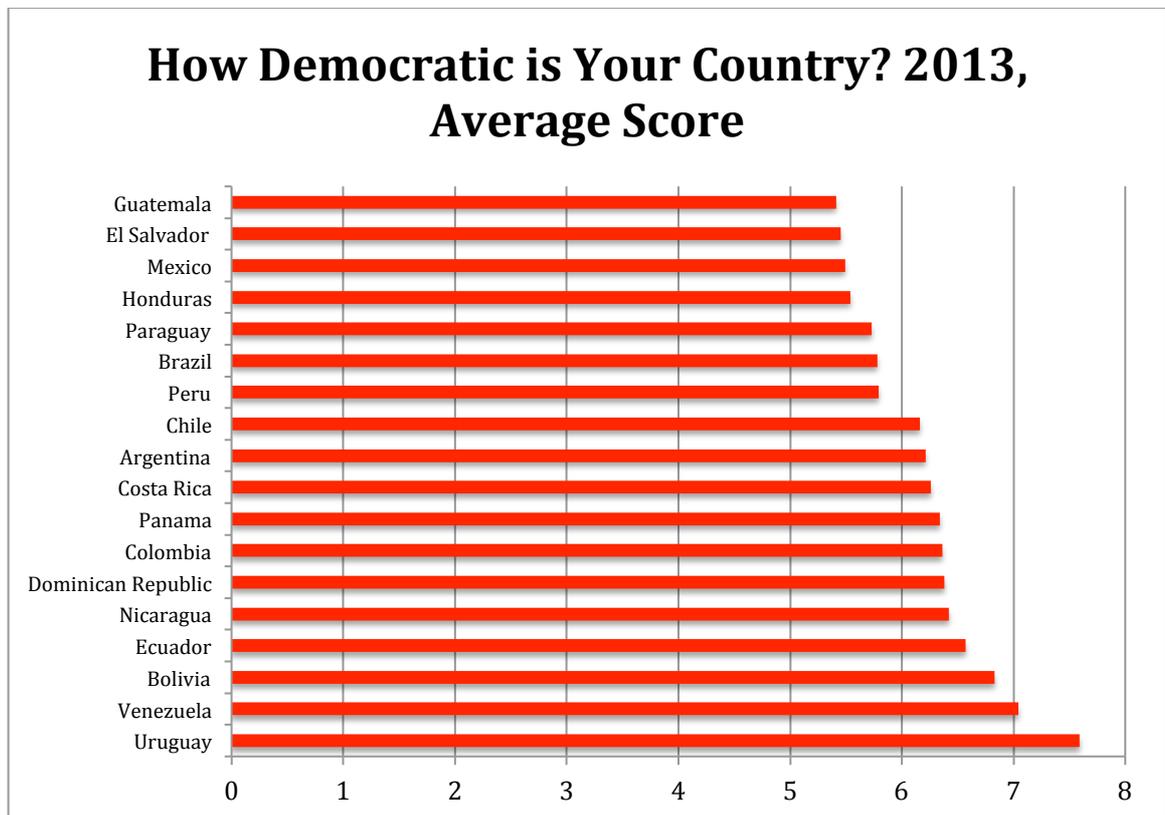


Figure 27 How Democratic is your country, Latin America, 2013, Latinobarometro

The CNE declared Nicolas Maduro to be the winner of the elections, by a count of 51% to 49%. A random sample of 53% of the ballots was manually checked against the electronic vote, finding no discrepancies. The Carter Center (2013: 67) noted that both Maduro and Capriles’ parties provided witnesses for around 91% of polling stations.

Capriles, going against what his own party's elections expert stated, refused to accept the result, claiming fraud, and demanded an audit of 100% of the ballots cast. He called his supporters onto the streets to demonstrate. Health clinics and the doctors inside them were attacked. Eight people were killed and 78 injured during the demonstrations (*Ibid.* 16). Some observers derided Capriles' rejection of the results and his and Washington's demands for a 100% audit. For instance, economist David Rosnick calculated that the probability of the audit overturning the result was "far less than one in 25,000,000,000,000,000" or one in 25 thousand trillion (Rosnick and Weisbrot, 2013). Nevertheless, on April 18th, the CNE agreed to a 100% audit of the vote. Its President, Dr. Tibisay Lucena made it clear that she agreed to Capriles' demands only to prevent further bloodshed on the streets from violent demonstrators (Carter Center, 2013: 21).

But on April 22nd, Capriles rejected the CNE's acquiescence and came up with a new set of demands which entailed checking all 15 million thumbprints and signatures individually. The Carter Center noted that this would be "technically highly challenging" (2013: 23). The CNE explained that his request was unconstitutional and beyond its remit. Under Venezuelan law the legal vote is the electronic vote and the paper tally is effectively a receipt of voting. It also noted that the 100% audit was a *de facto* recount anyway. Furthermore, voters' anonymity would have been compromised if said recount had taken place (*Ibid:* 26-27). The Carter Center noted that some international observers interpreted this explanation as a rejection of a reasonable request from Capriles, when, in reality, it was simply explaining its legal remit (*Ibid:* 21).

Capriles boycotted the 100% audit he had requested the previous week. The audit found the original result was accurate to a degree of 99.98 percent. While one explanation for this is a misunderstanding or miscommunication, another explanation for the affair is that Capriles was moving the goalposts in order to allow his allies in the international media to use their cultural power to frame the event as fraud. It should be noted that this was a common action from the opposition, who refused to recognize any *chavista* victories until 2006. One example was in 2004, where the opposition lost 41% to 59%. They claimed it was

fraudulent and took to the streets. However no formal complaints were lodged with the CNE. When the Bush administration endorsed the results, one newspaper wrote, “Bush has abandoned us” (Dominguez, 2011: 124).

While generally praising the 2013 election, the Carter Center’s report did highlight some shortfalls. For instance, it cited a number of Venezuelan civil society organizations that claimed that at a minority of polling stations both opposition and *chavistas* had used government vehicles to transport people to vote (2013: 68), while a small number of people (less than one percent) reported feeling pressured when voting, both sides being guilty of this (*Ibid*: 68). Electoral propaganda was visible inside the 200 metre legal limit at some voting stations while there were Maduro campaign posters in many government buildings. The Carter Center criticized Dr. Lucena for wearing a black armband associated with Chavez at the President’s funeral and for accepting Maduro’s request that, for security reasons, he should be allowed to vote in Caracas rather than his home state, Carabobo, in Western Venezuela. The report argued these could be examples of bias and favouritism (*Ibid*: 45). Furthermore, the majority of top CNE officials were Chavez supporters or sympathisers.

It should be noted, however, that Venezuelan civil society organizations have a strong tendency to be opposition aligned. The Carter Center has its biases as well. It is funded by Washington and headed by an academic who does not hide her criticisms of Chavez and Maduro. While President, Carter supported the right-wing military junta, who killed many thousands of left-wing activists in the Salvadorian Civil War. In March 2016, the Center’s America’s Program director, Jennifer McCoy (2016) compared Chavez to Donald Trump and his criticism of Venezuelan elites as akin to Trump’s tirades against Muslims and immigrants. She claimed Chavez showed a “disregard for law” and claimed he left the country in a “shambles.” McCoy also claimed that Chavez displayed “autocratic instincts as strong of those” as Pedro Carmona, a week after he had kidnapped Chavez and abolished the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and the CNE (*The New York Times*, April 18th). Given the biases it displays, the results from the Carter Center are particularly notable. One example of bias in the report is it spent a great deal of time scrutinizing the transgressions of the government but did not mention the well-documented US government funding, training and

support of opposition groups (Main and Beeton, 2015, Beeton, Johnston and Main, 2015: 518).

The next section will explore the empirical data with regard to the Venezuelan media and elections.

The Media in Venezuela: Dominated by *Chavistas*?

Venezuela, like most of its Latin American neighbours, traditionally has a high concentration of ownership of media institutions. During the neoliberal period, concentration of ownership increased, partly due to the free-market reforms instituted. This led to a few families like the Cisneroses and the Caprileses amassing considerable power. Only the government had the power to award new licenses for media. Scholars have highlighted numerous cases of government ministers or advisors being awarded new licenses (Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 196, Fox and Waisbord, 2002: 8-10). In order to start new media, one had to be or to have close links to a high government official. This led to a system of symbiotic dependence, where the media needed the government to grant it new licenses every few years and the government needed the media to support and validate it on political matters (Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 201). This is a prime example of the “partyarchy” at work, where those at the top of the media were often literally the same people as those at the top of government.²⁶

During the *Punto Fijo* period there was a good deal of censorship and state intrusion in the media. For example, in 1992, President Perez put censors into every newsroom in the country. Whenever a new government was elected, one could expect changes. Mayobre (2002) claims that the majority of the media, who shared the same class interests as the politicians, were happy to toe an invisible, non-declared line of behavior. Therefore, Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando (2008: 201) note, there developed an implicit understanding that “every new regime restructured media ownership to reflect its own interests.” While the media were critical of individual politicians or processes, they strongly

²⁶ For more on partyarchy, see chapter four.

supported the *status quo*. As the liberal AD and conservative COPEI parties, who had been ruling the country for decades, collapsed in the late 1990's, the media took their place as the prime opposition to the *chavistas*.

In reaction to the media's role in the 2002 coup, the government began promoting alternatives to the neoliberal, corporate model of news media. This included state-owned media, international partnerships and local, democratically managed community media, which generated much interest from scholars (Fernandes, 2010, 2011, Schiller, 2011, Burch, 2007). It also began re-regulating existing institutions. There is a great controversy as to what this represents. Naím (2015) claims that the "dictatorial" Venezuelan state, "masquerading as a democracy" has a strong grip on the media, while Corrales (2015) claims the opposition has great problems being represented on television. The Committee to Protect Journalists (2014) stated that nearly all TV stations in Venezuela are either controlled or allied with the government. As a result of this, Bennett and Naím (2015) claim that Venezuelans now receive only "half the story": the government's half.

In contrast, Hall (2012) characterized the changes as "democratizing the media." Buxton (2014) noted that the regulations introduced are no more stringent than "European-style broadcast regulations" that block open incitements to violence and insurrection and explicitly sexual content during the daytime. Ciccariello-Maher rejects the opposition narrative of limited press freedom in Venezuela, stating that it is "a blatant lie" (2014b). In short, as with so many of the other key issues on Venezuela, the spectrum of academic opinions could not be wider. Therefore, empirical data would be highly useful.

Empirical Data

Television is the dominant and most important media in Venezuela, penetrating 92.2 percent of households (Carter Center, 2013:47). It is free to watch and does not acquire the ability to read. The polling company AGB Nielsen monitored Venezuelan television market share throughout the 2000's. Private television stations such as Gustavo Cisneros' *Venevisión* dominate the airwaves. In comparison, Venezuelan state television accounts for a very small percentage

of viewership (five percent in 2010). The data in the following graph is taken from the January figure for each year.

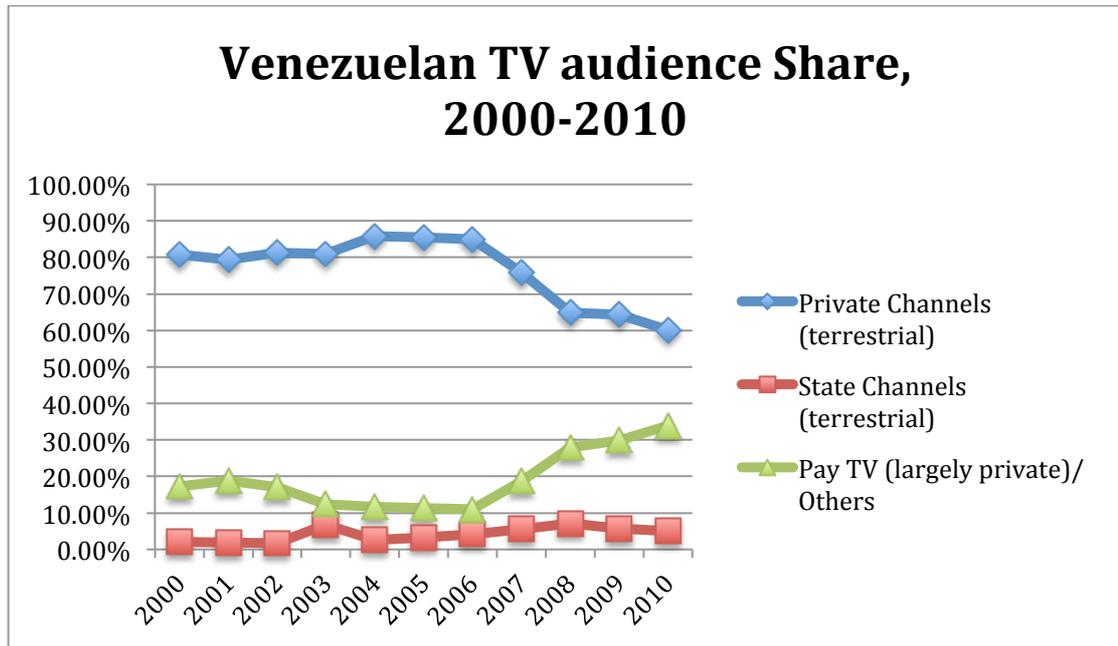


Figure 28 Venezuelan TV audience share, 2000-2010, AGB Nielsen, cited in Weisbrot and Ruttenburg, (2010: 2-4).

State television has expanded since 2000, with the expansion or creation of multiple state-owned channels, such as *TVES* and *TeleSur*. The state's share of the market expanded from two percent in 2000 to five percent in 2010. However, this remained marginal in comparison with private and paid television.

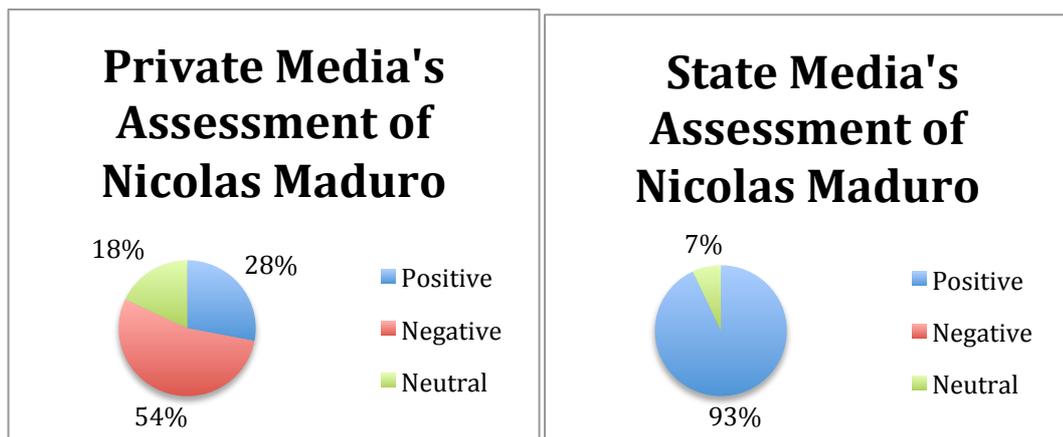
In times of political tension, more people tune in to state television in order to hear the government's point of view. This can be seen during the 2002/2003 strike/lockout, where state TV's share of the market rose from 1.7% in January 2002 to 6.7% in January 2003, at the height of the conflict. By late 2012, AGB Nielsen noted that state TV accounted for 5.4 percent of the audience share (BBC, 2012).

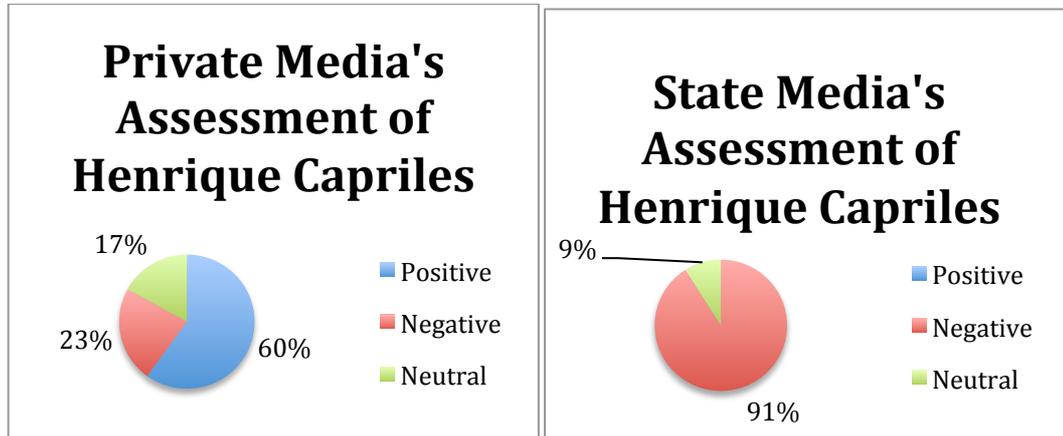
Pay television, analogous to cable or satellite television in the US and UK, is very popular. In 2007, the influential terrestrial TV channel *RCTV* did not have its license renewed, so it moved to pay television, hence the rise in pay TV and drop in private. Nearly all pay TV is private, with the exception of *Asamblea*, a state-owned pay TV channel with limited viewership. AGB Nielsen did not

distinguish between public and private pay TV channels, otherwise the numbers would have been more pronounced.

For radio, it is a similar picture. Seventy percent of Venezuela's radio and TV stations are privately owned with slightly less than five percent in state hands with private, commercial outlets dominating the airwaves (BBC, 2012). In terms of print media, four major papers, *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *Meridiano* and *Últimas Noticias* control 86 percent of the circulation (Becerra and Mastrini, 2009, cited in Lupien, 2013). The first three maintain anti-government positions while the fourth is categorized as pro-government.

The Carter Center also monitored television media throughout the April elections. One of its findings echoed previous election monitoring missions that television media in the country is deeply partisan, with state television backing the *chavistas* and private media backing the opposition. Private television concentrated on Capriles' campaign, devoting 73 percent of its coverage to the challenger while state TV's bias was even more pronounced, devoting 90 percent of its coverage to Maduro (Carter Center, 2013: 56). As shown below, the private stations displayed a strong tendency to portray Henrique Capriles positively and Nicolas Maduro negatively while state TV overwhelmingly portrayed Capriles negatively and Maduro positively.





However, an AGB Nielsen study showed that *VTV*, the main state-TV channel obtained a comparatively small 8.4 percent of the Venezuelan television market between January and June 2013. It should also be noted that *VTV* broadcast extensive coverage of Hugo Chavez’s funeral, one of the most watched events in Venezuelan history, potentially skewing their audience share upwards. Even so, *VTV* still accounted for a comparatively modest share of the market, trailing Cisneros’ *Venevisión*, which obtained 22.9 percent (Carter Center, 2013: 47).

The CNE conducted its own study of the coverage, and, thanks to the disparity in reach between private and public stations, found *that Capriles received nearly double the coverage of Maduro on the six main terrestrial TV channels in the run up to the election (Ibid. 49-50)*. The CNE studied the prevalence of campaign ads by each camp on television. While state television often exceeded the legal limit of 240 seconds per day for either candidate, *Telegen*, Cisneros’ *Venevisión* and in particular *Globovisión* broadcasted up to two and a half times the maximum legal time limit for the opposition every day in the April running up to the election (*Ibid. 51*). Charts for each of the TV stations can be found in the appendix.

The Carter Center’s study presents state and private television as binary equals in its large graphs. However, it itself notes that, in fact, *VTV*, the main state-owned channel accounted for only 8.4 percent of total audience share and twenty-six percent of news audience share in early 2013 (Carter Center: 2013). If not read carefully, it would be possible to conclude that coverage was tilted in favour of the government.

Another shortcoming of the study was that it monitored only four large terrestrial channels and none of the large number of other private, paid TV channels. While only five percent of Venezuelan TV and radio stations are state-owned (BBC, 2012) one of the four (twenty-five percent) of those in the study was, further inflating the pro-government numbers.

The data show that large, private channels critical of the government dominate Venezuela. The Venezuelan state's television market share is markedly small, not only in comparison with private channels, but also with many other countries with public broadcasters. For instance, government-owned TV accounted for 37 percent of market share in France and 38 percent in the UK over the same period (Weisbrot and Ruttenburg, 2010:6). While the smaller state television barely allows pro-opposition content, the larger, private media display a strong bias against the government and in favour of the opposition. The data *strongly* challenge the opposition narrative of a government dominating the airwaves. The next section deals with opposition leader, Henrique Capriles.

Henrique Capriles Radonski

As shown above, Henrique Capriles has been interpreted as everything from a socialist progressive to a conservative to a neo-fascist. Capriles presents himself as a progressive social-democrat whose political inspiration is Lula da Silva, the socialist former President of Brazil (Padgett, 2012). It must be stated, however, that Lula himself has rejected Capriles, claiming it “absurd” that he would support him (*Correo del Orinoco*, 2012). Lula himself publicly endorsed Maduro during the elections and actively campaigned against Capriles in 2012, stating that together Venezuela and Brazil had built,

“An international reference point for a successful alternative to neoliberalism” and that, “With Chavez’s leadership, the Venezuelan people have made extraordinary gains. The people have never been treated with such respect, love and dignity.”

He went on to say,

“Chavez, count on me, count on the Brazilian Worker’s Party, count on the solidarity and support of each...democrat and each Latin American. Your victory will be ours...and thanks comrade for everything you have done for Latin America” (Lula da Silva, 2012).²⁷

Capriles portrays himself as coming from humble origins, stating, “I come from a working family. My grandparents arrived with nothing” (Melimopoulos, 2013). His Jewish grandparents fled Europe during World War 2. However, he is also a product of two of the richest and most influential families in Venezuela: the Caprileses and the Radonskis. His mother is the owner of the largest chain of private movie theatres in Venezuela while his father is a food magnate responsible for bringing the giant Kraft Foods to Venezuela. The Capriles family also owns *Cadena Capriles*, one of Venezuela’s largest and most powerful media empires, which includes the influential *Últimas Noticias* newspaper (until October, 2013) and many best-selling magazines. He became a lawyer and studied at an Ivy League university. Capriles has generally represented the right wing of the opposition, having been a member of COPEI, the more conservative of Venezuela’s two main elitist parties in the Punto Fijo period.



Figure 29 Henrique Capriles inside the Cuban Embassy, April 12th, 2002, Youtube

²⁷ The language used by the ex-President of a much larger and more powerful country to the President of Venezuela is indicative of the respect bordering on reverence Chavez was held in by some Latin Americans.

During the coup of 2002, Capriles was mayor of the upper-middle class Baruta district of Caracas. He was a prominent member of a group that attacked and besieged the Cuban embassy. According to the ambassador, he refused to call off the crowd until the ambassador had allowed him to search the embassy for Diosdado Cabello, a prominent *chavista* politician (Sanchez, 2007: 160-173). During the coup he and Leopoldo Lopez also arrested/kidnapped the Minister of the Interior, Ramon Rodríguez, on live television, as can be seen in the image below.



Figure 30 Capriles (green) and Lopez (red) detain Rodríguez (blue), April 12th, 2002, Youtube

For those wishing to gauge Capriles' political position it would be useful to read his policy proposals for the October 2012 election, the *Lineamientos*. The *Lineamientos* are a list of over 1200 policy changes the opposition coalition proposed to make and are easily available online. Capriles' signature appears prominently under his, Leopoldo Lopez's and Maria Corina Machado's promises to rule in accordance to the proposals contained in the document. It is, therefore, the best indicator of what Capriles' positions are. The *Lineamientos* advocate a swift return to neoliberalism with a strong emphasis on wide-scale privatization and/or business influence, for instance in the Central Bank (407-9), the electricity supply (424), the oil industry (497), the healthcare service (882) and schools (822). It proposes a return to free trade (1232) and closely working with the World Bank and IMF again (403) along with a great rise in the price of water (1001). The *Lineamientos* also highlight the opposition's commitment to "private

property, economic freedom and private initiative” (43). They also plan to redesign national curriculums at all levels in order to teach all children “the connection between property, economic progress, political liberty and social development” (612) (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, 2012). Cannon (2014) noted that the *Lineamientos* represent a moderated, compromised position, as some major actors, such as Maria Corina Machado, wish their policies to be more radical. Thus, Capriles’ proposals effectively advocate a course of economic and social “shock therapy,” not dissimilar to those carried out by the IMF, World Bank and University of Chicago in Latin American countries such as Chile in 1973.

Analysis

The Elections of 2013: Clean or Not Clean?

A sample was taken of all relevant articles in the seven newspapers using the word “Venezuela” in the text or title. The sample dates were between March 1st and May 1st, 2013. The exception was *The Miami Herald*, where, in order to stop the newspaper overwhelming the sample, the weeks March 1st-8th and April 11th-18th were chosen. These dates still covered the peak periods of interest: Chavez’s death and funeral and the subsequent election between Maduro and Capriles.

In the 2013 sample the UK newspapers identified Venezuelan elections as clean 16 times and unclean 48 times. The US newspapers identified them as clean six times and unclean 76 times.²⁸

In order to qualify as an identification of possibly unfair or unclean it would not simply be enough to note the opposition demanding a recount, as that does not explicitly imply rigged or unfair elections. For example, the phrase “Opposition leader calls for recount ‘of every vote’” is insufficient, but “Opposition leader calls for recount ‘of every vote’ in Venezuela’s disputed presidential election” (*The Independent*, April 16th) does.

²⁸ The 2013 sample included articles from March that focused on Hugo Chavez’s death as well as April, which primarily dealt with the presidential election.

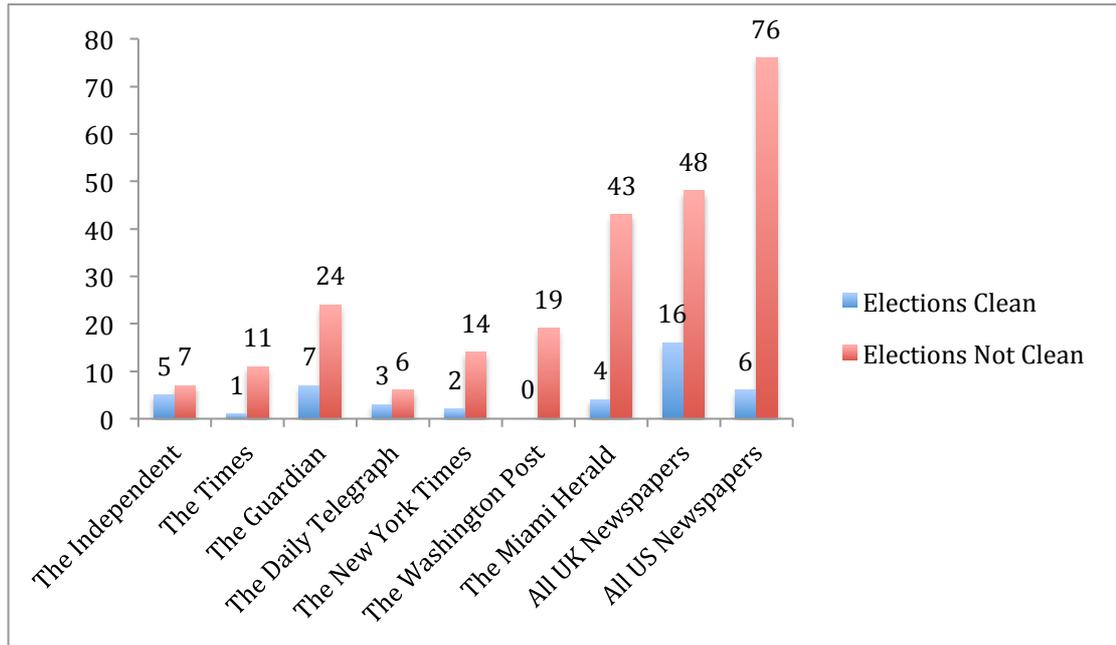


Figure 31 Venezuelan Elections: Clean or Not Clean? 2013 Newspaper Identifications

While the British newspapers showed a pronounced tendency towards describing elections as unclean (a 3:1 ratio), it produced more equal coverage than the US, where there was an overwhelming tendency to describe the elections as unfair or unclean. Of course, some of the coverage revolved around Henrique Capriles crying fraud, which would increase the number of “not clean” presentations. However, it is journalistic custom to counter an accusation with the opposing point of view from the other side, which, in this case included government officials, the CNE, election observers and the great majority of foreign governments. The results show that this was not done frequently. Indeed, many of the identifications of clean Venezuelan elections came in opinion pieces following Hugo Chavez’s death. Owen Jones wrote,

“The truth is that Chavez won democratic election after democratic election, despite the often vicious hostility of the media, because his policies transformed the lives of millions” (*The Independent*, March 7th).

Identifications of fair elections were less common in the American newspapers. However, *The Miami Herald* did note the reaction of international bodies and observers,

“The Inter-American Union of Electoral Organizations, one of the international groups invited to follow the election, said the vote was peaceful and transparent,” (April 15th).

Even when the electronic voting was not attacked, the veracity of the election results were undermined, *The Telegraph* quoted one observer stating,

“‘I trust the machines, it’s the humans I worry about,’ added Mr Marrero, ‘If Capriles wins we can expect violence. The Chavistas don’t know how to lose,’” (April 14th).

This statement is notable in that the opposition has often turned to violence following electoral defeat. In contrast, Chavez immediately accepted the results of his narrow referendum defeat in 2007. The day after this story was published Capriles supporters demonstrated and at least eight *chavistas* were killed.

There was around five times as much space devoted to the possibility of unclean elections as there was to the idea of clean elections. Sometimes the credibility of the National Electoral Council (CNE) and the believability of the audit were called into question, as in this *Times* article from April 26th,

“Earlier, the Government bowed to Mr Capriles's calls for a full recount but the election committee has not started the process. Mr Capriles said that yesterday was the deadline for the committee to release concrete details of the process. ‘We will not accept a joke audit,’ he said. ‘It's time to get serious.’”

Thus, the government was presented as renegeing on its promise for a recount. However, the statement contradicts reports from election monitoring organizations. As shown above, when the CNE unconditionally accepted Capriles’ earlier demands for a 100% *audit*, he *changed* his demands to include a *recount*, a request that is unconstitutional and beyond the remit of the CNE. The Carter Center noted that the CNE was simply explaining its remit, but some

“international” actors- i.e. the Western media- interpreted this as a rejection of a reasonable request (2013: 21).

But it was more common to attack the credibility of the elections on the idea that the *chavistas* had “slanted the playing field” (*The Miami Herald*, April 11th) by coercing voters to the polls, buying votes or using state funds to bankroll their campaigns. In British newspapers this idea was generally raised as an accusation from the opposition, whereas in the American media it was presented as a fact that the *chavistas* had a clearly unfair advantage. For instance, *The Daily Telegraph* reported,

“The allegation by Mr Capriles was only the latest in a litany of complaints against the ruling Socialist Party, which he accused of shamelessly abusing its power in order to ensure the election former president Hugo Chavez’s designated heir. He accused Mr. Maduro of ‘abusing power, abusing state resources’ by appearing on television lavishing praise on the late president over the weekend, even though officially campaigning should have stopped” (April 15th).

Meanwhile, *The New York Times* presented the slanted playing field idea as a fact,

“Mr. Chávez’s party has a strong get-out-the-vote machine, and it taps nearly unlimited government resources. Government workers are required to attend rallies... most observers say the field is tilted strongly in Mr. Maduro’s favor, citing a court system packed with loyalists and an electoral council that refuses to curb the use of government resources in the campaign” (April 9th).

The conservative American newspapers had still stronger opinions than *The New York Times*. In an editorial *The Washington Post* claimed that,

“Unsurprisingly, polls show that Mr. Maduro will win this grossly one-sided contest. If by some chance he does not, the regime is unlikely to accept the results” (April 12th).

In its editorial, *The Miami Herald* claimed,

“Mr. Chávez created a political machine that sharply curtailed the possibility that the official presidential candidate could lose... he made sure to woo the country’s large underclass by inducements such as free housing and by lavishing political attention on them, though he failed to create a path to prosperity for anyone except his political cronies, who got rich off government contracts. All of this poses a virtually insurmountable challenge for Henrique Capriles Radonski, an opposition governor and leader of the political front arrayed against the forces of the government. Hundreds of thousands have shown up at his rallies, attesting to the underlying hunger for change” (April 11th).

The 2013 election coverage mirrored the findings from the study as a whole which found American newspapers to be more critical of the government than the British, conservative newspapers like *The Miami Herald* and *The Washington Post* to be more critical than liberal ones, and editorials to be more critical than news articles.

On the subject of election monitors’ and international organizations’ praise for the quality of the elections, which contrasted greatly with way the newspaper covered the events, *The Miami Herald* published an article from Eric Farnsworth, vice-president of the Council of the Americas, who said that,

“Other groups such as UNASUR explicitly exclude the United States and Canada and have neither the competency nor arguably the inclination to review Venezuela’s election results objectively” (April 15th).

Thus, pronouncing the organizations incompetent solved the problem of contrary opinions of the elections. The problem of American isolation on the issue of recognition of the elections was solved largely by ignoring its existence.

The Miami Herald also reported claims that “during the last two votes there was also evidence that the country’s 2.4 million public-sector workers, and hundreds of thousands of government welfare recipients, were being pressured

to vote along party lines” (April 13th). This contradicts the US government funded Carter Center (2013: 68), who found that very few people reported being pressured into voting (under one percent), but, in fact, *twice as many people reported feeling pressured into voting for Capriles than for Maduro*.

It was, however, on the question of the Venezuelan media that the newspapers focussed upon most.

The Venezuelan Media

This study monitored the frequency of four positions asserted by the media: whether the Venezuelan media was free or caged, and whether state media does or does not dominate the airwaves. The “caged” frame represented any time a story implied or stated that the Venezuelan media were coerced or cowed by the government. The state dominating the media narrative included any time an article noted that the Venezuelan state had a wide array of media outlets or implied that it dominated the market. Counted in the opposite frame was any time an article mentioned that the private sector in fact dominated market-share in any category of media or simply that the government did not dominate the market.

An example of an implication “caged media” is this, from *The Washington Post* (January 16th, 2002): “Mounting US and OAS criticism of attacks by Chavez and his supporters against the Venezuelan media.” An example of a state-dominated media narrative can be found in *The Times* (April 15th, 2013): “an election skewed strongly in Maduro’s favour by his predecessor’s state dominated media.” An example of the opposite frame can be found in a *Miami Herald* (April 16th, 2002) article that quoted a *chavista* politician talking about “the country’s largely anti-Chavez media.”

The sample was recorded across the years 1998-2014. However, it was the 2013 sample that discussed the media much more often. UK newspapers claimed that the Venezuelan media was caged 56 times but did not claim they were free at all. It implied or stated state-media dominated the market 13 times in 11 articles and implied or stated it did not 3 times in 3 articles.

Over the same time period, US newspapers claimed that the Venezuelan media was caged 110 times but did not claim it was free at all. It implied that government-owned media dominated the market 38 times in 22 articles and implied or stated the opposite once in one article.²⁹

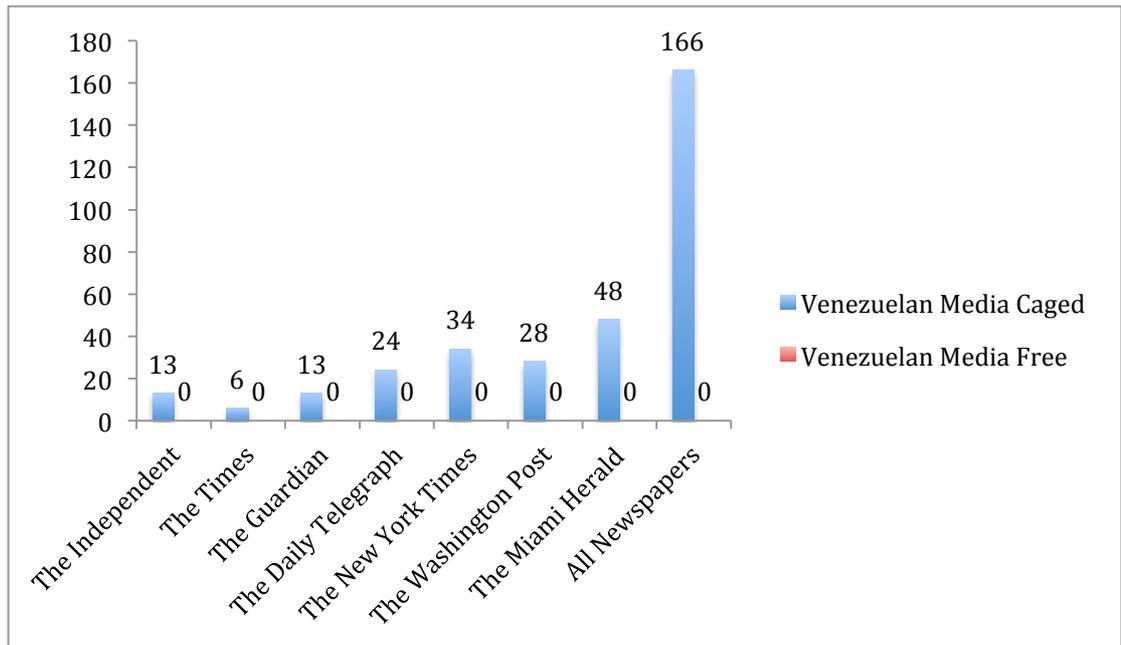


Figure 32 Venezuelan Media: Caged or Free? 1998-2014

²⁹ There were a number of mentions that some media were critical of the Chavez government, such as in *The Miami Herald* quote above. However, the notion that some, perhaps most of Venezuela's media is critical of the government, does not equate to the media being free. Indeed, many critics accept some media is critical of the government but that it is not free from intrusive government interference.

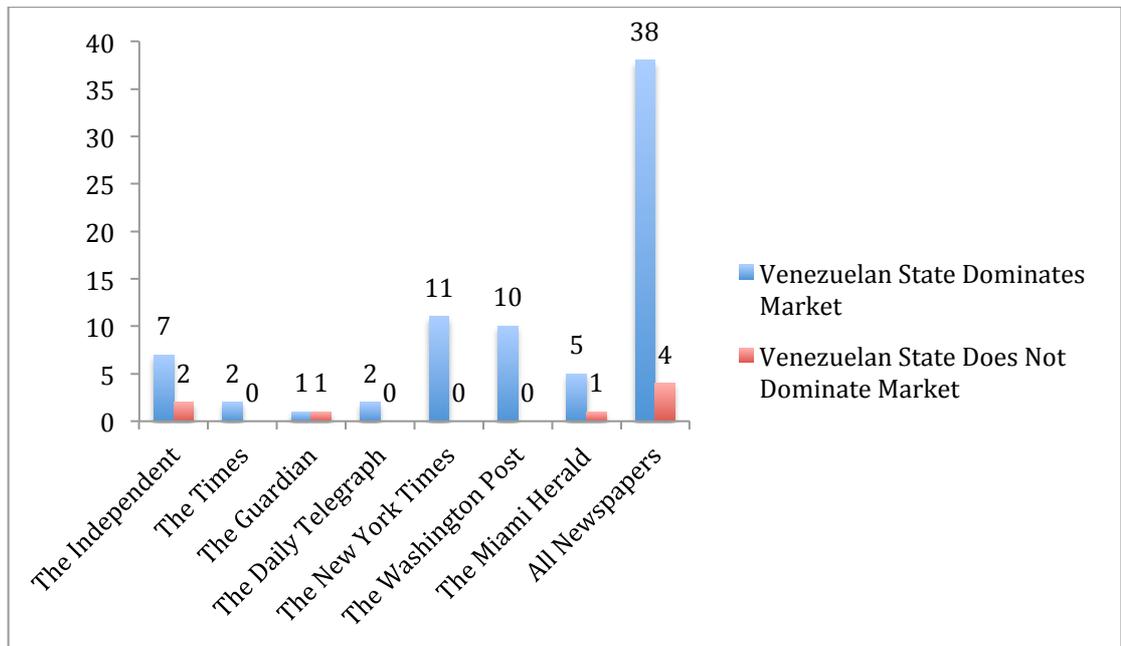


Figure 33 The Venezuelan State: Does it Dominate the Media Landscape or Not?

Similar to other issues, the data show that all newspapers largely took positions at the far end of the critical spectrum of expressed opinions about Venezuela. It also showed that conservative newspapers took a more critical stance than liberal ones and American newspapers were more critical than British ones. However, the following section will discuss how the newspapers portrayed the Venezuelan media in 2013.

Overall, the British newspapers identified the Venezuelan media as caged 18 times in 16 articles and did not identify them as free. They presented the Venezuelan state as dominating the media market seven times in five articles and that it did not dominate it once in one article.

The American newspapers identified the media as caged 36 times in 24 articles and did not identify the media as free. They implied or stated government-owned media dominated the market fourteen times in nine articles and that it did not zero times.

The Daily Telegraph (April 12th) noted,

“Opinions polls suggest that the residual sentiment from Chavez's death, and the huge advantages that Chavez built into the system during his years in

power, controlling the media and some four million government jobs, will be enough to carry Mr Maduro to victory.”

The Independent (March 7th) claimed,

“Mr Maduro, 50, would enter that race with a series of strategic advantages, including the backing of the state media empire built up by Mr Chavez - there is now just one private TV station critical of "Chavismo" left in Venezuela...And Mr Capriles, a basketball-playing, 40-year-old singleton, has proven an effective campaigner with the stamina necessary to hit the stump across the country, the only way for him to outflank the government's control of TV coverage... Mr Capriles campaigned across the country, building support from the grassroots upwards in the face of Mr Chavez's dominance of state media.”

Thus, the British press presented the elections as a David vs. Goliath battle, where the underdog Capriles mounted a “grassroots” challenge against a grossly unfair playing field where Maduro’s overwhelming state-media complex bombarded Venezuelans with propaganda and handed out jobs in return for votes. Capriles was presented as unable to get his voice heard in the media. This is in total contrast to the empirical studies and in reality the Capriles family owned one of the largest media empires in Latin America.

The American press presented the situation in a similar manner. On April 12th, *The Miami Herald* stated,

“The media disparity is one of the most visible example of the government’s campaign advantage. While a bevy of state-run media openly back Maduro, Capriles has to compete for time on cowed private media, said Carlos Correa, with the Espacio Publico media watchdog group.”

Empirical data published by sources unfriendly toward the *chavistas* showed that, not only do private media dominate the airwaves, but also that they came out strongly in support of Capriles. As noted previously, Capriles “competed” on the “cowed” private media by receiving three times as much coverage as Maduro on the four private terrestrial channels, who portrayed

Capriles positively 60% of the time and negatively 23% of the time. In contrast, they presented Maduro positively 28% of the time and negatively 54% of the time. All four of the private terrestrial channels ran more Capriles ads than Maduro ads, three of whom devoted so much attention to Capriles that *every day of the campaign period they broke the law that imposes a legal maximum limit*. Furthermore, the empirical studies did not include the dozens of private non-terrestrial TV channels. In contrast to *The Independent's* (March 7th) assertion that “there is just one private TV station critical of ‘Chavismo,’” a notion reproduced in *The Washington Post* (April 14th), who asserted that “Venezuela’s all-powerful government” was about to shut it down or co-opt *Globovisión*, the data show that *every private Venezuelan station in the sample displayed a strong anti-government bias*. Far from there being only one critical private TV channel left, the empirical data showed *every private TV channel in the sample displayed a profound bias in favour of Capriles and against the chavistas*. Far from state-owned media dominating the market, in reality state-owned media had a very small percentage of audience share, both in comparison with private media and in comparison with the UK and other Western countries.

As to the existence of any opinions straying from the narrative the media presented, *The Guardian* categorically stated that there was none. On March 11th, it noted (emphasis added),

“It is not disputed that, under Chavez, political posts were stuffed with his supporters, judicial processes gerrymandered, judges cowed, and critical media sanctioned whenever its toe strayed across a highly diaphanous line.”

Diaphanous, meaning delicate, weak and thin, suggests that any criticism of the government was intolerable and punished. Therefore, any mention of alternative opinions on the subject, of which there are very many (Schiller, 2011, Fernandes, 2010, Duno Gottberg, 2009, 2011, Gonzalez, 2014), was rendered unnecessary by stating factually that these opinions did not exist.

The empirical data strongly suggests a different conclusion to the question of the liberty and biases of the Venezuelan media during this period. The newspapers unwaveringly presented the media as caged, cowed and not

free to say what they wanted. They also presented the state-run media as dominating the airwaves, an assertion proven incorrect. In short, the Western media consistently contradicted the best empirical evidence available in order to side with the positions of their governments and corporations at the critical extreme of the spectrum. The empirical data used was taken from well-known reputable sources unsympathetic to the government of Venezuela, easily available online in English. It would, in other words, be the *first place* a journalist might turn to for quotable and dependable statistics about the media. In the interview section of the study, Pascal Lupien said,

“I have a hard time understanding how anyone can argue that there is no critical TV media left in Venezuela because it is so clearly not true. One can simply watch television for five minutes or read any of the newspapers to debunk that myth,”

A statement that begs the question what journalists covering Venezuela had been doing.

The above quotes about the media presented Henrique Capriles as an underdog mounting a grassroots, bottom up campaign that inspired millions of Venezuelans who want change. The final section deals with him in more detail.

Henrique Capriles Radonski

In total, Capriles was identified positively 45 times in 33 articles and negatively six times in four articles. His involvement in a coup was mentioned twice, although on both occasions his guilt was unclear. Indeed, *The Miami Herald's* allusion to it presented it as an accusation, that charges against him had been dropped, his counter that he had been “defraying tensions” and a quote from him saying “I am a democrat” (April 12th).

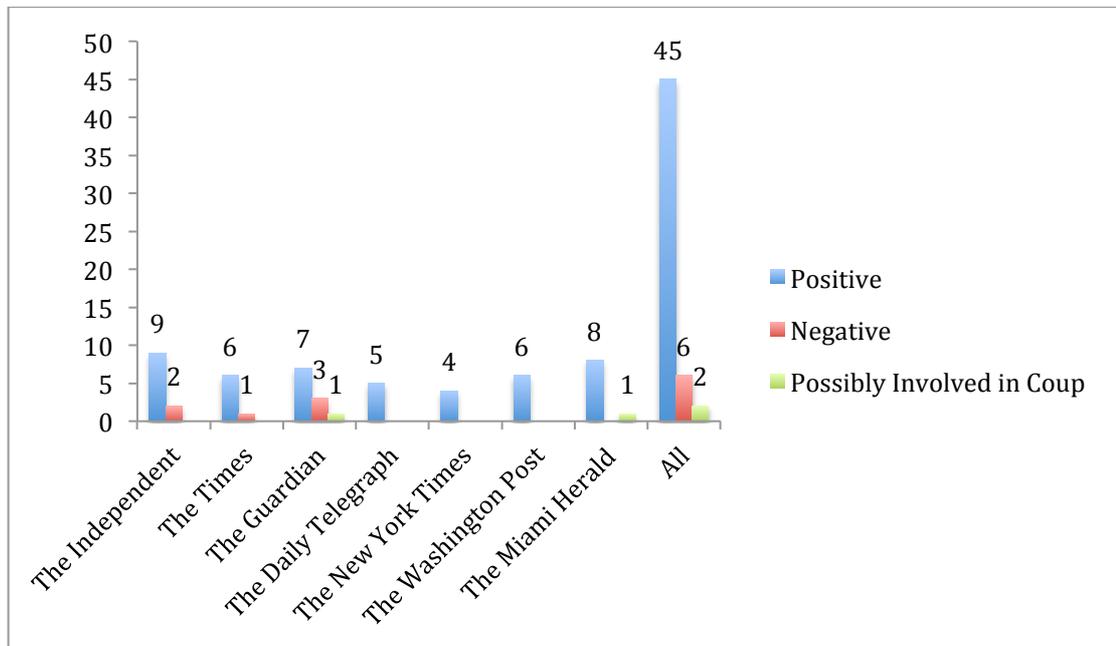


Figure 34 2013 Newspapers' Identifications of Henrique Capriles (2013)

The quantitative analysis suggests there was a very strong tendency to portray Capriles positively. However, qualitative analysis shows that the presentation of Capriles was *more* positive than the quantitative analysis suggests. All six of the negative identifications came from senior *chavista* politicians literally cursing at him. Five articles mentioned a politician calling him a “fascist” while the sixth mentioned that Maduro “scoffed” at him, calling him a “little prince of the parasitical bourgeoisie” (*The Times*, March 8th). Thus, all negative identifications of Capriles came in the form of insults levelled at him by politicians the newspapers had been defaming for years in contexts trying to illustrate the supposed intolerance and bitterness of the *chavistas* and therefore were of a very low weight.

In contrast, the positive descriptions of Capriles were presented as statements of fact, not opinions or hearsay. When described at all, Capriles was consistently portrayed as a youthful (eight articles), charismatic (three articles), energetic (six articles), underdog with great organizing skills campaigning against a mighty government apparatus. Indeed, in the October 2012 Presidential elections against an ailing Chavez, *The Financial Times* (Rathbone and Mander, 2012) characterized the contest as a “David and Goliath contest.” Given that Capriles’ wealthy upbringing, his family’s ownership of one of the largest media empires in South America, the Venezuelan media’s bias against

the government, the opposition's corporate backing and the US government's sponsorship of the to the tune of "hundreds of millions of dollars," according to Weisbrot (2014), the analogy may prove inexact. A typical description of Capriles came from *The Independent* (March 7th), that wrote,

"As the energetic governor of the state of Miranda, Mr Capriles campaigned across the country, building support from the grassroots upwards in the face of Mr Chavez's dominance of state media."

Capriles' political position was frequently discussed in the articles. *The Times* (March 8th) noted,

"Henrique Capriles, the progressive governor of Miranda state...40, a baseball-loving bachelor who models his economic and social manifesto on that of the leftist Brazil, will have sought the presidency."

The Daily Telegraph (April 7th) continued the Brazilian comparison stating,

"Capriles, 40, a state governor, says Venezuela needs a fresh start after 14 years of Chavez's hardline socialism, and is vowing to install a Brazilian-style administration of free-market economics with strong social policies."

Both articles presented Capriles as a progressive and a Lula disciple, despite the fact that Lula had very publicly rejected Capriles and consistently stated that he and Chavez were comrades and brothers in the struggle against neoliberalism. As noted previously, Lula presented himself as part of the same movement as Maduro in October 2012 (Lula Da Silva, 2012).

The Miami Herald also presented Capriles as a left-winger, noting that he was "running as a center-left reformer who wants to weed out corruption and cronyism but has also vowed to protect the poor and needy" (April 11th) and claiming that "chavistas abandoned Maduro in droves as Capriles' center-left platform and calls for political reconciliation struck a chord" (April 18th).

Other newspapers presented Capriles as a moderate. *The Independent* (March 7th) identified him as “the centrist governor of Miranda state” while one *Times* article did the same, calling him “the centrist state governor” (April 8th). Identifications of Capriles representing the right-wing were virtually absent, although *The New York Times* did note that Capriles had managed to “inject hope” into the opposition and build “a coalition of groups from across the political spectrum” (April 15th).

The idea of Henrique Capriles representing a centrist, a social-democratic, a progressive was presented as factual information whereas any idea of him representing the right wing was mentioned only as an allegation in the mouths of individuals the newspapers had been criticising for years. This is particularly noteworthy as Capriles’ background, the political groups he was part of, his actions, and his policy proposals all support the right-wing thesis.

To conclude, all newspapers sampled, with some variation in tone and presentation, portrayed the 2013 Presidential Elections as, at best, disputed and at worst a “grossly one-sided” sham presided over by a dictatorship. This went against the opinion of every country in the world except the United States, and against well-respected American election monitoring organizations the US government had paid to observe it. The media unanimously presented the Venezuelan media as caged, not free, and dominated by the state, going against the best empirical studies. In short, the media presented minority opinions on highly contentious issues as incontrovertible facts, often not even acknowledging the majority opinion’s existence, despite empirical data overwhelmingly supporting the majority’s view. When it was mentioned, it was usually presented in the form of an accusation made by a source of little validity.

Chapter Seven, The 2014 *Guarimbas*

In 2014, Venezuela was gripped by street demonstrations against the government of Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro. There were large marches in the capital. However, these marches were overtaken by barricades erected by some demonstrators. The "*guarimbas*," as they were called, sparked a great deal of interest on social media. The Latin American Bureau detailed how huge numbers of images of police and military violence against protesters from the Syrian Civil War, the Egyptian Arab Spring or demonstrations in Chile were being circulated on social media, often with thousands of retweets and shares, purporting to be images of government repression of human rights in Venezuela (Bracchi Roa, 2014). Pop stars like Cher and Madonna tweeted using the opposition's "SOSVenezuela" and "PrayforVenezuela" hashtags, while actor Kevin Spacey called for US intervention on his blog. The *guarimbas* flared up in February and had largely petered out by March, but some continued throughout the year.³⁰ There was a very wide range of interpretations of the events. Eight key themes have been identified in which there are competing explanations,

1. Is this a legitimate protest or a coup attempt?
2. Who is demonstrating?
3. Why are they demonstrating?
4. Do they have links to outsiders, specifically the American government?
5. How violent are they and who is responsible for the violence?
6. What has been the government's response?
7. How widespread are the demonstrations?
8. Are the demonstrations designed to overthrow government?

Presented below are two major explanations of the *guarimbas*, together with a range of views from other academics.

³⁰ In English, the terms "protest" and "coup attempt" connote strongly differing circumstances and respectability. "Protests," the term used by government critics, connote legitimate activities while "coup," a term used by the Venezuelan government, connotes a dishonourable and violent overthrow. Therefore, the Spanish term "*guarimba*" will be used to refer to the events, as, in English, it carries no connotations (although this is not the case in Spanish). "*Guarimbas*" in Spanish, specifically refers to the barricades built by the protesters, and not the movement overall.

Competing Explanations

The Anti-Government Frame

At this end of the spectrum of opinions, the anti-government frame depicts the events as a respectable protest encompassing a wide spectrum of people led by “unbelievably brave” students facing down a “budding military dictatorship” (Toro, 2014b). They claim the movement itself was a genuine “grass-roots” (Corrales, 2014a) campaign that went viral and attracted thousands of people from all walks of society to its cause (Corrales, 2014b).

Naim (2014) states the protestors were demonstrating against “disastrous” government policies that have led to inflation, food shortages and rampant crime but due to the government’s “brutal repression” have morphed into a protest against a “repressive regime that treats them as mortal enemies.”

He (*ibid.*) also ridicules the allegation that the protestors are in league with the CIA, and claims that Maduro’s assertion is laughable. Corrales (2014a) claims the movements objectives did not seek to overthrow the government. For him, this represents a spontaneous, grassroots citizens’ uprising, akin to the Arab Spring.

While Toro (2014b) concedes that the students have been guilty of violence, including throwing Molotov cocktails, firing guns and rockets at civilians and even *beheading passersby*, he contends that government forces and armed *chavista* mobs instigated a great deal more violence and the response from the national guard was disproportionate, pointing to protestors being arrested, tortured or killed in what was nothing less than a “tropical pogrom” (Toro, 2014a).

Corrales (2014a) claimed the government “made a fool of itself” by labeling the students as “fascists.” He (*ibid.*) also characterizes the protests as extremely widespread, across the whole country and the most serious the country had seen in over a decade. And yet, Toro (2014a) stated that they garnered virtually no interest from the international community and the media,

who largely forgot or even ignored Venezuela in its hour of need, participating in a “blackout” of coverage of the events.

The *Chavista* Frame

In contrast, the government and pro-government media frame the 2013 affair not as a protest at all but a “right-wing rampage” of violence by Venezuela’s far right aimed at unconstitutionally removing President Nicolas Maduro from power in a “coup” (Committee of the Victims of the Guarimbas and Continuous Coup, 2015). This was a concerted and planned effort by sections of the extreme end of the opposition coalition, working closely with Washington to disrupt economic and political life in Venezuela.

For the *chavistas*, those protesting are not a grassroots group of dissidents but students from the elite, fee-paying universities and light-skinned and privileged elites who had complete impunity to terrorize the majority of the non-white, non-right-wing citizens, a right they have enjoyed in perpetuity. For pro-government sources, the *guarimbas* were a concerted campaign with one goal: to overthrow the President under the guise of protesting over crime and the economic downturn. They claim that the protesters committed the large share of the violence, pointing to confirmed reports of protesters shooting journalists, attacking food stores, setting national parks ablaze, attacking ambulances and trying to burn doctors alive, poisoning city’s water supplies, ransacking Bolivarian (free) universities and in one instance, even setting fire to a kindergarten where nearly 100 young children lay frightened (*Ibid.*). In short, they attacked any physical reminder of collective property built up over the past 14 years of collectivist government. In April, Maduro claimed the total damages caused by the “rampage” at US\$15 billion (Pearson and Mallett-Outtrim, 2015).

The victims of the violence claim there has been almost nothing done about these crimes (Committee of the Victims of the Guarimbas and Continuous Coup, 2015). Pearson and Mallett-Outtrim (2015) contend that, while there were cases of serious misconduct by the police, the authorities’ response was “amazingly restrained”, considering the daily provocation offered by the demonstrators. For all the violence, this school of thought insists that the highly

unpopular demonstrations were actually limited to isolated pockets of protest, usually in the wealthy, light-skinned districts where the protesters lived and did not shut down daily life for the majority.

Chavistas claim that the image of privileged far-right opposition thugs violently trying to force Maduro out of office did not fit the international media's narrative, so it was therefore either ignored or in some instances twisted to make it seem the government was repressing peaceful students (*Ibid.*).

Other Academic Opinions

Between these two extremes, there was a range of academic opinions. Buxton (2014) characterized the demonstrations as violent actions carried out by light-skinned students from elitist institutions who were defending the *ancien regime* and their own privilege. Since being defeated electorally, the Venezuelan elite has used student politics as their ideological spearhead. Furthermore, she claims a section of the student movement in Venezuela is deeply embedded with Washington. Cicariello-Maher (2013: 117-118) noted that student leader Yon Goicoechea was awarded the Cato Institute's US\$500,000 Milton Friedman Prize for advancing liberty for his role in organizing previous anti-government demonstrations and was a member of Leopoldo Lopez's political party. Ellner (2014a) noted that provoking violence and blaming it on the enemy is a "time-worn tactic" of the opposition, using it, for instance, during the coup of 2002. He stated that the protesters actions were "terrorism," cataloging the long list of attacks against civilians, such as the destruction of the Caracas Metro and 90 Metro buses with hundreds of passengers attacked, the complete demolition of a campus of the military school UNEFA and attacks on the Housing Ministry, state-owned food distributors and 162 Cuban doctors (2014a). Buxton (2014b) characterized the violence as an attempt by the extreme-right of the opposition coalition to grab the initiative against the conciliationist centre-right of Henrique Capriles who now advocated the electoral road to victory, rather than the putschist method (2014b). Bhatt (2015) claimed that the opposition conducted a "social media coup" with the help of the international media who willingly presented rumours as facts.

However, McCoy (2014) noted that the government was far from blameless and was guilty of fomenting a polarized situation where there was no room for middle ground. Smilde (2014) went further, claiming that it was the “wild” government repression of the protesters that greatly increased their size and engulfed the country in chaos.

Reaction from International Actors

The international reaction was varied. Many Latin American and Caribbean states and institutions immediately backed the government and condemned what they saw as a US-backed coup attempt.

“On behalf of the Bolivian people, we send our energy and support to the courageous Venezuelan people and president Nicolas Maduro” announced President Evo Morales, “this coup attempt is being financed from abroad, by the United States” (Cadena Agramonte, 2014).

Mercosur “rejected the criminal actions from violent groups that want to disseminate intolerance and hatred as an instrument of political struggle in the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela” (AVN, 2015).

The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) expressed its solidarity with the government and the families of the victims of violence and rejected attempts by the opposition to destabilize the country (Rosas, 2014). The European Union (EU) advised that the only way out of the situation was through peaceful dialogue (European Parliament News, 2014). British Foreign Minister William Hague said that he was “very concerned” about “the arrests of opposition activists” and called on the government to uphold freedom of the press and opinion (*El Nacional*, February 18th). The Spanish Foreign Minister urged Venezuela to “respect human rights” and “guarantee basic freedoms of expression” (*El Universal*, February 24th). Meanwhile, there was strong condemnation of the government in the United States, with Vice-President Joe Biden accusing it of,

"Confronting peaceful protesters with force and in some cases with armed vigilantes; limiting the freedoms of press and assembly necessary for legitimate political debate; demonizing and arresting political opponents; and dramatically tightening restrictions on the media,"

And said that instead of working on dialogue,

"Maduro has thus far tried to distract his people from the profound issues at stake in Venezuela by concocting totally false and outlandish conspiracy theories about the United States" (Bajak, 2014).

Senators immediately began discussing sanctions on Venezuela due to human rights violations, which were eventually passed in March 2015. President Obama himself declared a "national emergency" with respect to the "extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States posed by the situation in Venezuela" (White House, 2015). In March 2016, he extended the state of emergency for the same stated reasons. Therefore, the United States has been in a continual state of emergency for over a year because of the Venezuelan government's actions. The British government repeated the anti-government narrative and the US government's reaction was the most extreme with regards to its negativity. These facts would be worth noting as we analyse the data from the media.

Empirical Evidence

In all, 43 people died in the 2014 *guarimbas*. The number of pro- and anti-government deaths is disputed but the range of statistical evidence indicates that they are approximately equal (Johnston, 2014). There were also a number citizens killed who were not affiliated with either side. However, media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting stated that "The presence of the protest barricades appears to be the most common cause of deaths: individuals shot while attempting to clear the opposition street blockades, automobile accidents caused by the presence of the barricades, and several incidents attributed to the opposition stringing razor wire across streets near the barricades" (Hart, 2014).

Wikileaks cables (Main and Beeton, 2015) have shown that the US government funded a number of the leaders of the *guarimbas* and that funding for anti-Venezuelan government activists had increased by 80 percent from 2012 to 2014. The cables also show that the US State Department was well aware that many of the leaders had exceptionally violent pasts. For instance, Nixon Moreno had led a crowd to the state capital of Merida to *lynch the governor* in 2002, and later was accused of murder and of the rape of a police officer, yet it continued to train and support him (Beeton, Johnston and Main, 2015: 525-526).

Evidence strongly suggests the demonstrations were designed from the beginning as a coup, an attempt to forcefully remove Maduro. Inside Venezuela, their leaders were open about their intentions. When asked how long he planned the demonstrations to go on, the movement's leader, Leopoldo Lopez replied, "until Maduro goes" (Tinker-Salas, 2014). Indeed, the name the movement gave itself was "*La Salida*" or "the exit" [of Maduro]. In October 2013 Lopez gave a speech in the United States, where he said,

"We have to hurry the exit of the government...Nicolas Maduro must go out sooner than later from the Venezuelan government. Nicolas Maduro and all his supporters...from my point of view, the method is secondary, what is important is the determination to reach our goals at any cost."

During an interview at the time, he was asked when the opposition protests would end. "When we manage to remove those who govern us," he replied (Fuchs and Vivanco, 2015).

The violence of the protesters, particularly the beheadings of passing civilians Elvis Rafael Duran and Delia Elena Lobo strongly challenge the idea that the demonstrations represented a respectable, peaceful protest against inflation, crime and food shortages, as some anti-Chavez scholars believe. Furthermore, the targets of attack by the protesters: kindergartens, universities, health clinics, more than 160 Cuban doctors (some who protesters attempted to burn alive) (Ellner, 2014b), the Caracas Metro etc. all have a clear political message: the buildings and institutions targeted were representations of the

flagship programs in education, health, transport, etc. of the Missions, the epitomes of the collectivist, social-democratic state the government had been trying to build since 1999.

It should also be noted that the problems of crime, inflation and food shortages mentioned as reasons for protesting are issues that least affect the wealthy and disproportionately affect the poor. For instance, 70 percent of homicides in Caracas occur in the poor El Libertador municipality while less than one percent in rich Chacao (Humphrey and Valverde, 2014: 157). Yet the polling company IVAD found a strong class correlation to supporting the *guarimbas*, with those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds much more likely to approve of the actions (Nagel, 2014a). Empirical evidence showed the protests *did not* grip the country, shutting down cities, but occurred in eighteen of the country's 335 municipalities, primarily affluent, opposition-controlled districts and *did not* spread to other areas (Tinker-Salas, 2015: 213). Light-skinned private university students led the protests; *The New York Times* (March 1st) remarked that the poor were notable in their absence. Thus, the people most affected by crime and violence were the *least* likely to protest while those least affected by violent crime were the *most* likely to protest.

When asked themselves by polling firm International Consulting Services, 11.6% of the Venezuelan people agreed with the *guarimbas*, while 85.4% of those asked were against them (Noticias24, 2014).

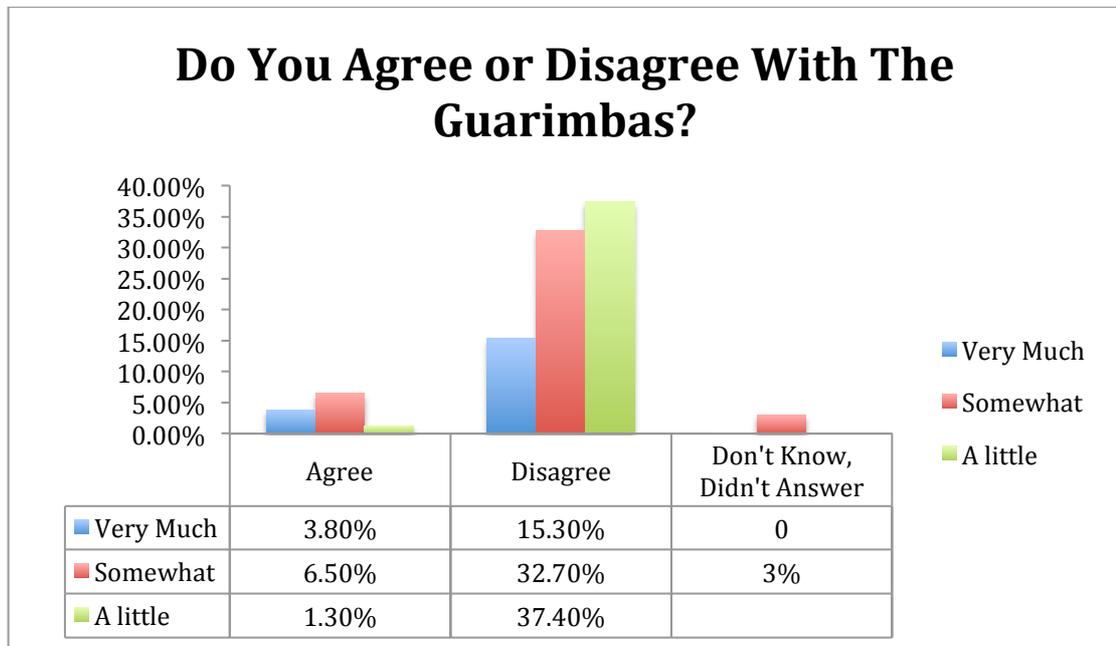


Figure 35 Do you agree or Disagree with the *Guarimbas*? Venezuela, 2014 Source: Noticias24

Although the survey found support for Maduro was low, another polling firm, Hinterlaces, found that 87% of Venezuelans were against the violent demonstrations, 79% felt any form of protest was making the country worse and 86% agreed with the electoral results and reject “unconstitutional shortcuts” (Noticias24, 2014). An anti-*chavista* polling firm found that although demonstrations that originally had the support of most of the population, by April 2014, two-thirds of Venezuelans were against the protests (Datanalysis, cited in Nagel, 2014a). The opposition’s leader, Henrique Capriles, *did not* support the *guarimbas* and tried to start peaceful dialogue with Maduro as they were going on, effectively shunning the more extreme movement within the opposition, lead by Lopez and Maria Corina Machado³¹.

We now move from the thematic analysis part of the thesis to the content analysis of the newspapers.

Analysis

Protests, Riots or a Coup Attempt?

³¹ See chapter four for more on Lopez and Machado.

A sample of newspaper articles covering the protests was taken. All articles including the word “Venezuela” covering the unrest from February 1st to May 1st were included, except for *The Miami Herald*, which was from February 1st to March 1st. As before, this was done to prevent *The Herald* from swamping the survey, as it publishes more articles on Venezuela than other newspapers. There was a very wide range of interpretations of the events among academia and from international actors. Eight key points of contention were identified.

1. Is this a legitimate protest or a coup attempt?
2. Who is demonstrating?
3. Why are they demonstrating?
4. Do they have links to outsiders, specifically the American government?
5. How violent are they and who is responsible for the violence?
6. What has been the government’s response?
7. How widespread are the demonstrations?
8. Are the demonstrations designed to overthrow government?

The primary question of whether the *guarimbas* constituted a coup or a protest will be dealt with first. This is an important point of contention as the framing of the events as a protest or as a riot conveys a great difference in legitimacy. “The 2011 London Protests” conveys a great deal more legitimacy to the event as does “The 2011 London Riots.”

In total, the UK newspapers identified the actions as protests 194 times and a coup or riots 45 times. The American press identified them 395 times as protests and 32 times as a coup or riots.

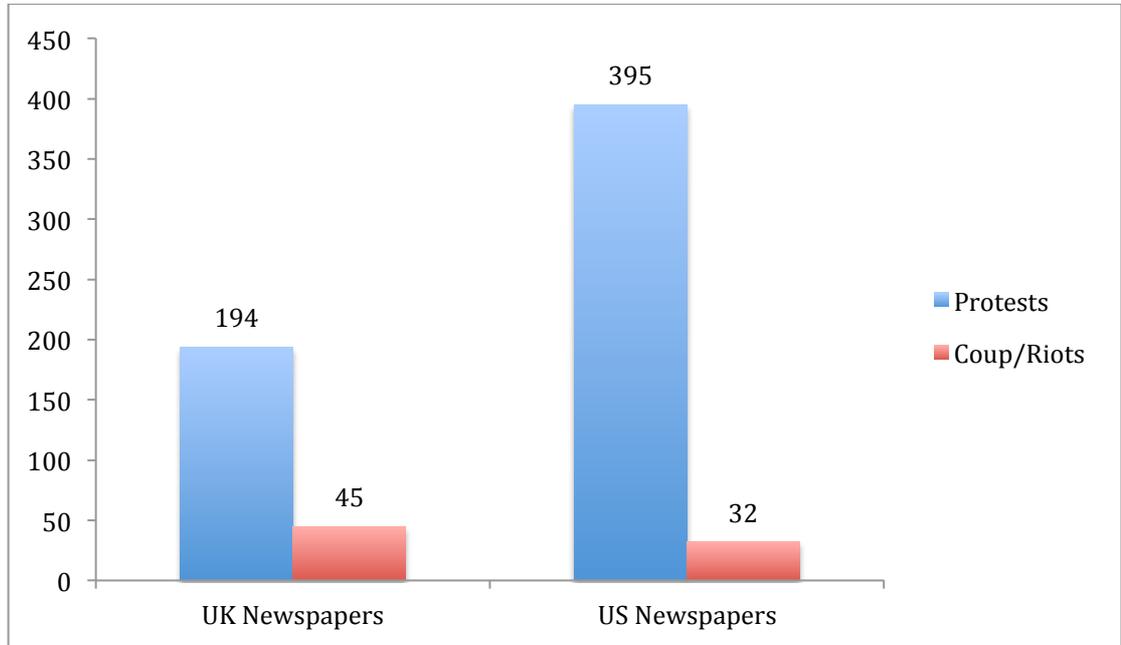


Figure 36 2014 *Guarimbas*: Protests or a Coup?

There was a strong tendency in both countries to identify the *guarimbas* as a protest rather than as riots or a coup attempt. The UK media identified it as a protest at a nearly 5:1 ratio but the tendency was exceptionally strong in the United States, where that figure was over 12:1. Typical examples of how the affair was identified as a protest include the following,

“Death toll from Venezuela street protests rises to 18; Anti-government protests continue to Caracas and across Venezuela,” (*The Daily Telegraph*, March 1st).

“Venezuela’s crackdown on anti-government street protests is a threat to democracy across Latin America,” (*The Guardian*, April 10th).

“Faced with a government that systematically equates protest with treason, people have been protesting in defense of the very right to protest,” (*The New York Times*, February 25th).

However, the considerable quantitative inequality is not an accurate reflection of the true level of disparity in the articles, as it does not take into consideration the *quality* of the references. Virtually all of the articles framed the *guarimbas* overall as protests, and often emphasized their peaceful and

respectable nature while very few took the notion that these were violent riots or a coup attempt seriously. A small minority of reports, mostly in *The Independent* and *The Guardian* had any articles did as such. It was presented as a matter of fact that the events were protests being repressed by the government, thus mirroring the line taken by the US and UK governments. When mentioned at all, the idea that this constituted a coup attempt was often stated as an accusation in the mouth of a Venezuelan official, from a supposedly repressive government that the newspapers have been undermining and attacking for years, as seen earlier in chapter four of this study. For example,

“The protests, which started last Saturday in the state of Merida, were initially led by students demanding the release of classmates jailed after earlier protests and an attack on the governor’s residence in Tachira state. Since then the street actions have mushroomed to include people from all walks of life who have seen their salaries evaporate under the heat of inflation. Others have joined in to express their anger at a spiraling murder rate, or over food shortages. But supporters of the government...see the demonstrations as a desperate push to oust Maduro by the radical opposition” (*The Guardian*, February 15th).

This example was quantitatively coded as one framing as a protest and one as a coup. However, it is presented as *a matter of fact* that the events constitute protests about crime and economic issues whereas the idea that this was an attempt to overthrow President Maduro is presented merely as *an assertion* that exists only in the mind of supporters of a repressive and incompetent government. It should be noted that this framing was among the *more sympathetic* to the government found in the sample, as it at least states that there is an alternative viewpoint. The majority of the articles did not consider the idea that these were anything else except legitimate protests. Thus, some readers were not even exposed to the idea that there was any debate over the issue, let alone that the balance of evidence pointed to a different conclusion to those given in what they were reading. Other articles were more dismissive (emphasis added),

“Mr Maduro has gone out of his way to inflame tension by making *wild allegations* that the protests are an attempted coup by the far Right with backing from the United States.” (*The Times*, March 12th).

“The government, for its part, is *sticking to the old script*: Venezuela is falling victim to a fascist *conspiracy* cooked up by American officials who are terrified of its revolutionary aspirations...The government has also mobilized its sprawling propaganda apparatus -- newspapers and radio stations, half a dozen TV stations, hundreds of websites -- in a concerted campaign of vilification to demonize the protest leaders as a *shadowy fascist cabal* in cahoots with American imperialists. *The claim is outlandish*, yet its ceaseless repetition reveals that to the Venezuelan government, all dissent is treason” (*The New York Times*, February 25th).

“The president portrays moderate opponents as “fascists,” claims that he is the target of incessant plotting by the CIA and increasingly depends on force - delivered by riot police or organized groups of thugs - to answer popular protests” (*The Washington Post*, March 30th).

Phrases such as “wild allegations,” “sticking to the old script” and “shadowy fascist cabal” demonstrate the tone of the media and what their opinion of these allegations is. Yet these examples all counted towards the “coup” identification total. But these were not wild allegations. As highlighted previously, US government documents prove many of the *guarimba* leaders received money and training in leading demonstrations from the US, who immediately did back the protests.

As stated above, both countries’ newspapers displayed a pronounced tendency to describe the events of 2014 as protests, although the American newspapers did so overwhelmingly. The British newspapers displayed a strong tendency to describe the *guarimbas* as a protest. In the United States, all three newspapers were more than ten times more likely to describe the *guarimbas* as a protest than a coup. This contradicted the stance taken by Latin American governments *and even the guarimba leaders themselves*, who, as shown above, were explicit in their intentions to oust Maduro from office. Thus, all major

actors in Venezuelan society agreed the *guarimbas*' goal was to get rid of Maduro. Yet the media treated this idea as marginal, at best, and usually as risible or even non-existent. This was despite interviewing protesters *who told them that that was exactly what they were trying to do*, as can be seen in the following quotes.

“...We are urging the international community to assist us in ridding Venezuela of this government” (*The Miami Herald*, February 22nd, 2014).

“‘The fate of Castro-ism may be at play in Venezuela,’ Mr. Pardo said. ‘What we were not able to topple in Cuba, we may be able to topple there’” (*The New York Times*, March 26th, 2014).

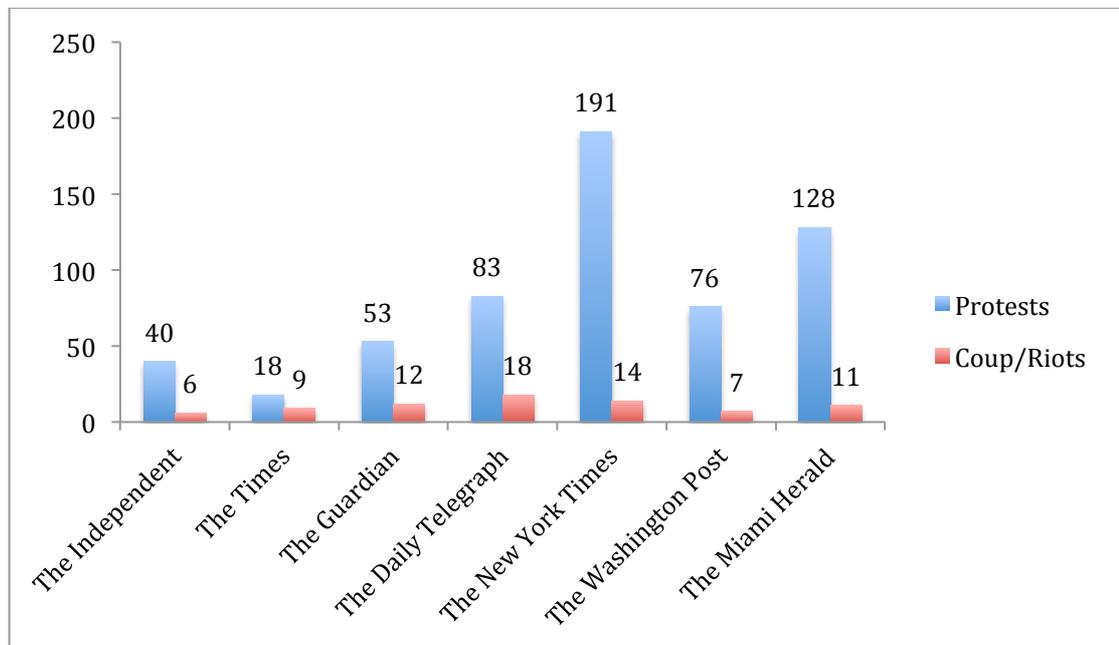


Figure 37 The 2014 Demonstrations: A Protest or a Coup?

Who is Protesting and Why?

Despite the pronounced class aspect to the protests, which was remarked upon immediately by respected commentators, experts (Sullivan, 2014, Buxton, 2014) and the government (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 27th), a comparatively small one in seven articles from the 2014 sample mentioned that there was anything that could mean class was an important factor in the makeup of the

protesters. The sampling was particularly generous, including any comment or statement that could be construed to note that there was a class aspect to the protest, even if it were only to immediately repudiate the idea, as seen below,

“The violence occurred in the neighborhood of Los Ruices, one of many areas in the wealthier parts of Caracas where protesters have built barricades to stop traffic” (*The New York Times*, March 7th).

“While the protests are strongest in middle class areas, they have sporadically spread to poorer neighbourhoods which are traditionally aligned with the Socialist government,” (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 21st)

“Today, large rallies continue in the middle-class neighborhoods of all the main cities... the protests have spread from middle-class neighborhoods to the slums,” (*The New York Times*, March 11th).

In total, there were 33 references in 17 of the 124 articles to the high class-correlation of the protests. British newspapers were more likely to mention this theme (10 of 52 articles) than American (7 of 72). Thanks largely to Seumas Milne’s work, *The Guardian* was the most likely British newspaper to discuss this aspect of the protests. *The Guardian* referenced it in five of 17 articles, *The Telegraph* in four of 16, *The Times* in one of eight, there was no discussion of class in *The Independent’s* eleven articles. *The New York Times* mentioned class in four of 28 2014 articles, *The Washington Post* in three of 15 articles and *The Miami Herald* in zero of 29 articles. Sometimes the mentioning of class was put in the form of an accusation from the government, as in this example,

“The protesters (which the government insists are spoilt rich kids and saboteurs in the pay of foreign powers, who have nothing to do with “the people”),” (*The Independent*, February 27th).

In addition to the limited discussion about the class aspect to the protests, many newspapers not only rejected this, but put forward the opposite analysis, that the protests were widespread across class lines, such as in this quote;

“Since then the street actions have mushroomed to include people from all walks of life who have seen their salaries evaporate under the heat of inflation,” (*The Guardian*, February 15th).

In addition, this study monitored the explanations offered as to why people were in the streets. They were split into four categories: economic concerns, concerns over crime, a coup attempt or other explanations. These “other explanations” were primarily government human rights abuses and the rape of a student on campus. Typical ways of presenting the explanations for protesting included the following two examples,

“...Protesters who are angered by spiraling crime, high inflation, shortages, and a crackdown on freedom of speech,” (*The Times*, April 9th).

“...Street demonstrations by students and average citizens fed up with soaring inflation, shortages of basic goods, one of the world's highest murder rates and a government whose only response has been to shout senseless populist slogans,” (*The Washington Post*, February 19th).

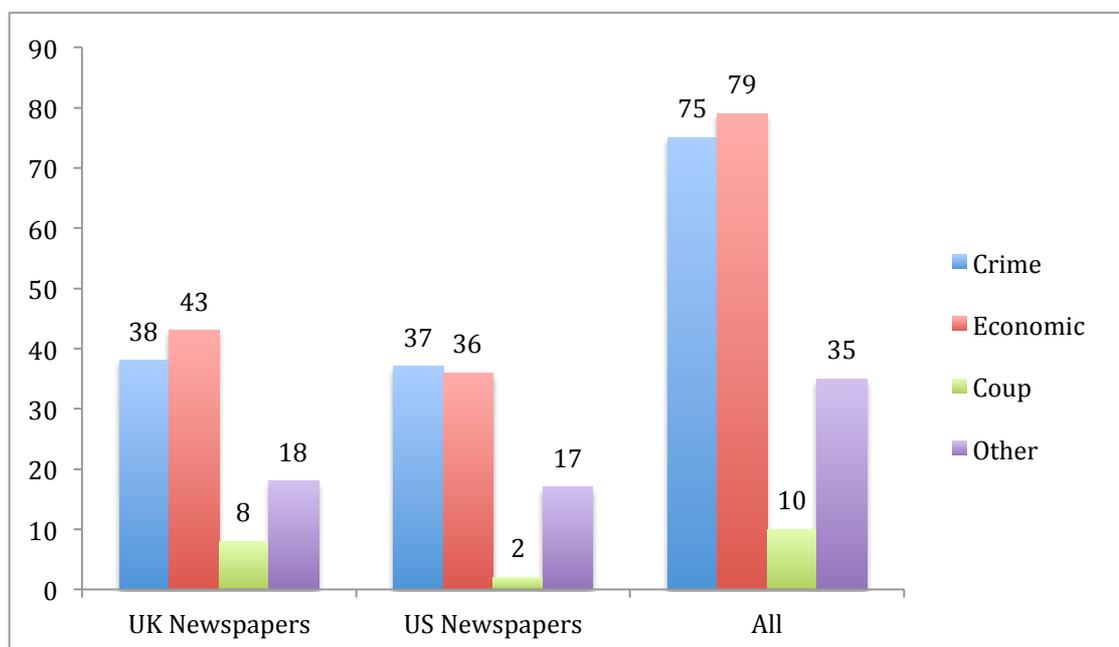


Figure 38 Why Are there Street Protests? Explanations offered by sampled newspapers.

Overall, crime was identified 75 times as a trigger for the protests, economic problems 79 times and other reasons 37 times in 17 articles. A coup attempt was identified a comparatively small ten times as the reason for the *guarimbas*, despite *guarimba* leader *Leopoldo Lopez* continually stating that the objective of the protests was to depose President *Maduro* (Tinker-Salas, 2014, Fuchs and Vivanco, 2015).

Links to the American Government?

Of the 124 2014 articles, around a third, 44 mentioned the possibility of US government involvement with the *guarimbas*.

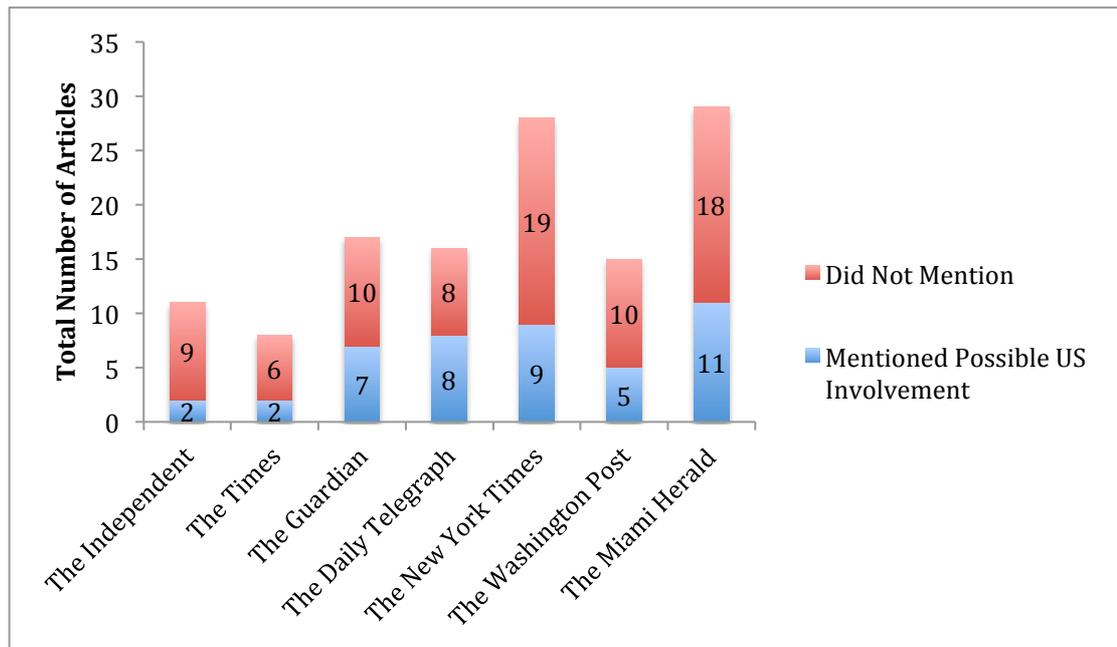


Figure 39 Mentioning of Possible US Government Involvement in 2014 Protests, UK and US Newspapers

As before, however, only looking at the quantitative data gives an inaccurate picture of the situation because very often the idea of US involvement was brought up only to ridicule the notion, as exemplified in the following examples (emphasis added),

“Mr. *Maduro's predictable response* in the government-controlled news media has been to blame it all on “fascists” and the United States” (*The New York Times*, March 15th).

“The Maduro government blames the protests on “fascists” and, *of course*, the United States. He ordered the expulsion of three US diplomats, claiming *disingenuously* that these consular officers organized the protests” (*The Miami Herald*, February 26th).

All of these sorts of examples counted towards US involvement. The second is particularly notable as the article was written by Charles Shapiro, the US Ambassador to Venezuela in 2002 and an actor in the coup attempt to remove Chavez that year!³² There was a greater tendency among the right-wing press (*The Daily Telegraph*) and the US press to treat the notion as “absurd” (*The Miami Herald*, February 28th, 2014), despite the fact that released official documents strongly implicate the US government in one aborted coup against the government and that leaked documents showed the US government increasing its effort to “penetrate” and “divide” *chavismo* in order to produce regime change (Main and Beeton, 2015, Beeton, Johnston and Main, 2015: 518). Furthermore, Hillary Clinton’s (2014: 266) memoirs revealed that the US government had recently been involved in a coup in Honduras that removed democratically elected left-wing President Manuel Zelaya from office, a move that was universally condemned. One notable exception to this trend was Seumas Milne, who wrote four articles in April for *The Guardian*, which treated US involvement seriously and took a critical stance towards the *guarimbas*. Without Milne’s articles, *The Guardian’s* coverage would have been similar to the other newspapers’.

Who is Responsible for the Violence?

In total, there were 207 separate identifications in 89 articles that the government or pro-government groups were behind the violence and 90 identifications in 58 articles that the opposition was responsible.

³² See chapter four.

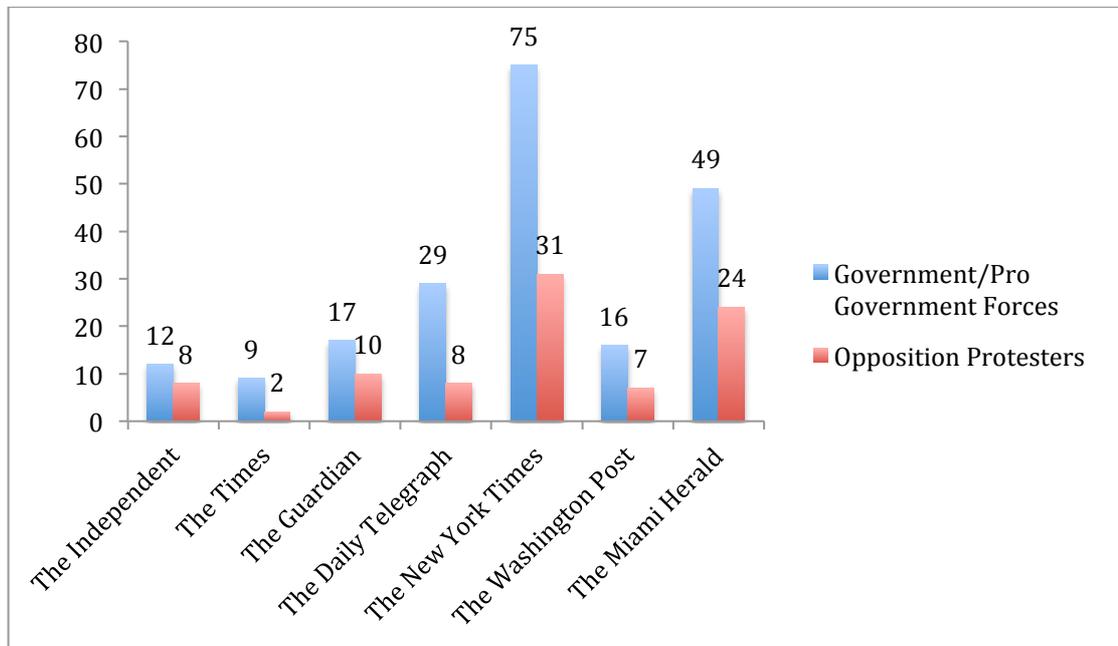


Figure 40 Who is responsible for the violence? Identifications in Selected Newspapers

As seen before, the left-of-centre British newspapers allowed for some degree of nuance to their positions, with some content sympathetic to the government. However, they still displayed a tendency to identify the *chavistas* as those primarily guilty. Those on the right and the American newspapers showed a stronger tendency to identify the government or pro-government groups to be responsible for the violence.

Furthermore, the quality of the identifications of violence differed greatly. The left-of-centre UK papers were worried about authoritarian repression,

“White House spokesman, Jay Carney, voiced concern that the government was using security forces and armed gangs to break up peaceful demonstrations,” (*The Independent*, February 19th).

Whereas the American papers reported on full-scale massacres of innocents, as seen in the following quotes,

“Thus we have the odd situation of President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, who was tortured as a student by the Brazilian military, defending, or at least

tolerating, the armed repression of students in Venezuela,” (*The New York Times*, February 28th).

“Many Latin American experts in Washington agree that the Obama Administration cannot look the other way as peaceful protesters are massacred by government-supported armed thugs,” (*The Miami Herald*, February 26th).

The first quote is particularly notable, as Dilma Rousseff, who supports the Venezuelan government, was tortured by units from a fascist dictatorship, backed and trained in torture techniques by the United States (Rabe, 2015). The US (Blum, 2003) and *The New York Times*³³ supported the overthrow of the progressive Goulart administration in 1964 favour of the dictatorship, a similar sort of regime the *chavistas* claim the opposition is trying to implement now. However, in this example, it is the left-wing government who are the fascists and the right-wing protesters who are the reformers.

In contrast, in 58 of 124 articles was there any mention of opposition violence. As before, when the opposition was connected to something negative, it very often came in the form of an accusation in the mouth of a Venezuelan official, whose credibility has been undermined through years of negative reporting. For example,

“Both sides blame each other for the bloodshed,” (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 21st).

“Mr Maduro had blamed more than 50 deaths in a fortnight on the ‘fascist’ opposition,” (*The Times*, February 28th).

But the articles often undermined even these weak accusations (emphasis added),

³³ On Goulart, *The Times*’ editorial board wrote, “We do not lament the passing of a leader who had proved so incompetent and so irresponsible” (April 3rd, 1964) and claimed there was a “widespread feeling of deep relief and of optimism” among all of Brazil (May 8th, 1964) that he had been overthrown.

“The government *quickly* accused Mr. López of being responsible for the unrest and the deaths,” (*The New York Times*, February 19th).

“Mr. Maduro *immediately* blamed a prominent opposition leader, Leopoldo López, for the violence,” (*The New York Times*, February 27th).

The emphasis of accusing someone immediately connotes a sense of hastiness or a knee-jerk reaction based upon political expediency, rather than one based on evidence. Thus, the veracity of the claims appears dubious. Government accusations of opposition violence were often immediately met with statements that said the government had no evidence whatsoever for their accusations. Furthermore, the scale of the violence mentioned in connection to either side differed greatly. The violence the opposition was accused of tended to be relatively minor, such as smashing windows or throwing Molotov cocktails while the government was guilty of a full-scale crackdown on basic liberties. Thus, *The Guardian* claimed the protesters had “only sticks and rocks” (February 21st) while the government had “army tank, helicopters and paratrooper regiments” (February 22nd).

Only two articles of 124, from Seumas Milne and Owen Jones, mentioned that the protesters had beheaded two innocent passers-by as part of the *guarimbas*. This cannot be because it was not known, as it was widely reported inside Venezuela and on social media. It cannot be because the information was not pertinent, as other deaths were reported. And it certainly cannot be because the story was not newsworthy. The events provided a particularly easy story and striking headline. Furthermore, the murders happened on the 21st of February, in the first month of the survey, giving the newspapers months to include it. Events such as the attacks on universities were barely reported, only by Milne and an op-ed by President Maduro in *The New York Times*. The attacks on kindergartens and on Cuban doctors were not mentioned whatsoever. Opposition protesters who died, such as Genesis Carmona, were regularly named and discussed in detail; many stories were based around them. In contrast, government supporters or people killed by the opposition, such as those beheaded, were not.

Indeed, the protesters at the *guarimbas* were often identified as paragons of virtue, as peaceful model citizens standing up for their rights. The portrayal of the protesters as respectable, peaceful or heroic was more common than any identification with violence.

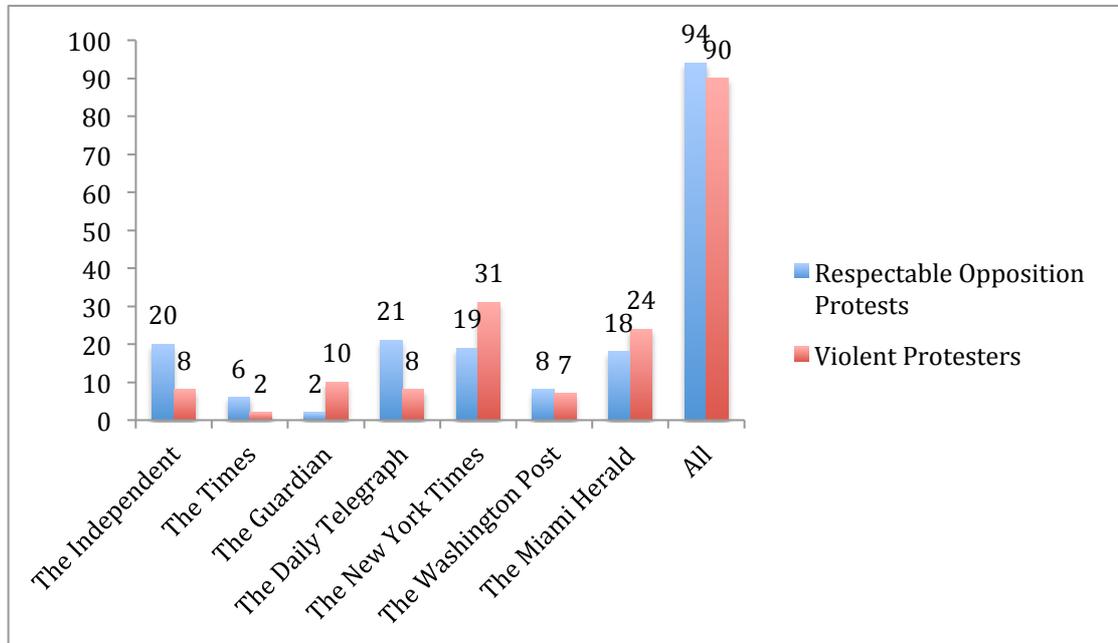


Figure 41 Respectable or Violent Protesters? Selected Newspapers

In total, the newspapers emphasized the respectability, virtuosity or bravery of the protests 94 times in 60 articles. A good example of this comes from *The Daily Telegraph*, which, on April 1st wrote,

“When demonstrators, many of them family matriarchs carrying Bibles after Mass, tried to stage a peaceful march down the avenue after the first attack, they were greeted by a fresh barrage of tear gas.”

This narrative was more common in *The Independent*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Times* and *Washington Post* and comparatively less common in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

Leopoldo Lopez and Other Opposition Leaders

Guarimba leader Leopoldo Lopez is a controversial figure in Venezuelan politics. He is a former mayor of Chacao, one of the richest municipalities in Latin America. He comes from one of Venezuela's most elite families, his mother being a high executive at the Cisneros Group, a global media conglomerate that allegedly organized the coup against Chavez in 2002 (see chapter four), while his father is a business tycoon and journalist at one of the most prestigious newspapers in Venezuela, *El Nacional*. He was educated at Harvard University. Lopez is a direct descendent of Simon Bolivar and his family has been at the top of Venezuelan society since. During the 2002 coup, he led demonstrations against the government and arrested the Interior Minister, Ramon Rodriguez. Although he did not sign the Carmona Decree, which liquidated all democratic institutions in the country, such as Congress and the Supreme Court, his father and many of his close associates did, as did other leaders of the *guarimbas*, such as Maria Corina Machado. In 2005 he was banned from politics for three years after it was found his mother had stolen US\$120,000 from state-owned oil company PDVSA in order to fund his political party.

The study looked at how the media portrayed Leopoldo Lopez. Three issues were recorded: whether Lopez was portrayed positively or negatively and whether articles mentioned his connection to the 2002 coup.

In total, he was portrayed positively 45 times in 25 articles and negatively 32 times in 24 articles. However, there were considerable differences between how different newspapers presented him.

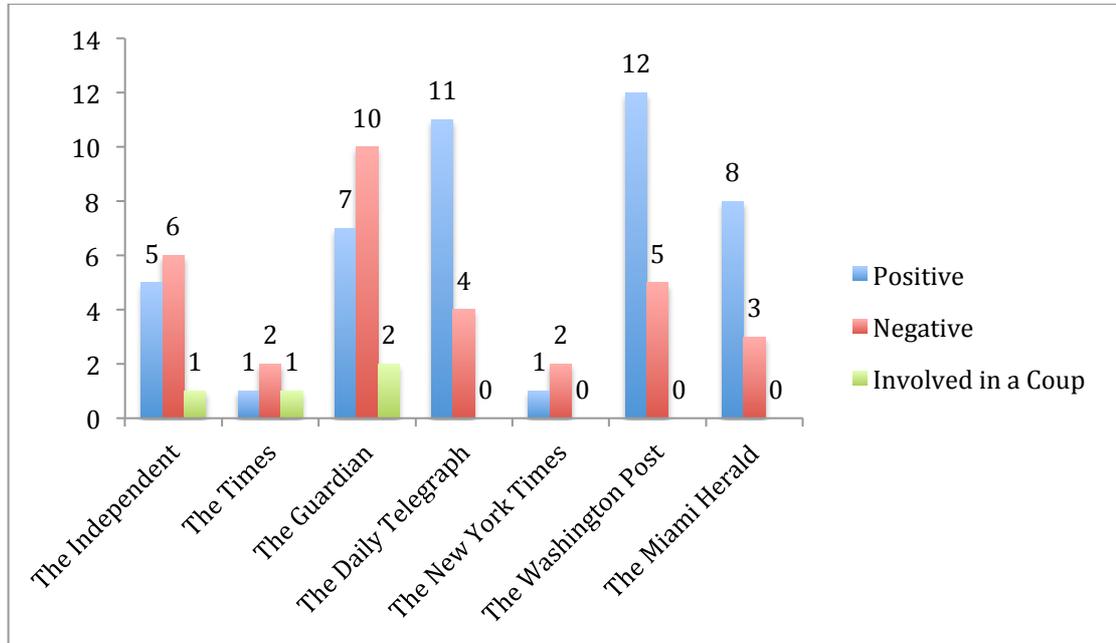


Figure 42 Identifications of Leopoldo Lopez.

The more liberal newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The New York Times* portrayed him negatively while the more conservative *Daily Telegraph*, *Washington Post* and *Miami Herald* portrayed him distinctly more positively.

The positive coverage concentrated on Lopez's good education (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 21st) charisma (*The Guardian*, February 22nd) and good looks (*The Washington Post*, February 20th). One *Newsweek* (February 21st) article described Lopez's "twinkling chocolate-colored eyes and high cheekbones." Philip Sherwell gave a colourful, sympathetic portrait of Lopez as a wrongfully jailed patriot, describing how his "one-year-old son, also called Leopoldo, just took his first faltering steps in his father's cell," (*The Daily Telegraph*, April 5th) mirroring how he portrayed Machado as a "mother of three" who "faces a 100-year jail term after campaigning for 'free elections'" (2006b).

The negative identifications of Lopez and Machado tended to simply describe them as hardliners outflanking the more moderate Capriles (*The Independent*, February 17th) or reporting accusations from Maduro that they are hardline fascists (*The New York Times*, February 19th). However, when it came to their involvement in *coup d'états*, the media was largely silent. In 4 of 83 articles (5%) the media mentioned Lopez's involvement in the 2002 *coup d'état*.

Machado's involvement was mentioned just once in 29 articles (3%) involving her, while Henrique Capriles' involvement was mentioned two times in 136 articles (2%). This is highly relevant background knowledge, considering that many academics and foreign governments considered what they were reporting on at that moment to be an attempted *coup d'état*. There was, however, sufficient space to inform readers about Capriles' fondness for jogging and basketball (*The Independent*, March 7th, 2013) and in *four articles* that Lopez's wife is a former kite surfing champion. Even in long biographical articles (2000+ words) about Henrique Capriles and Leopoldo Lopez there was no mention of the coup.

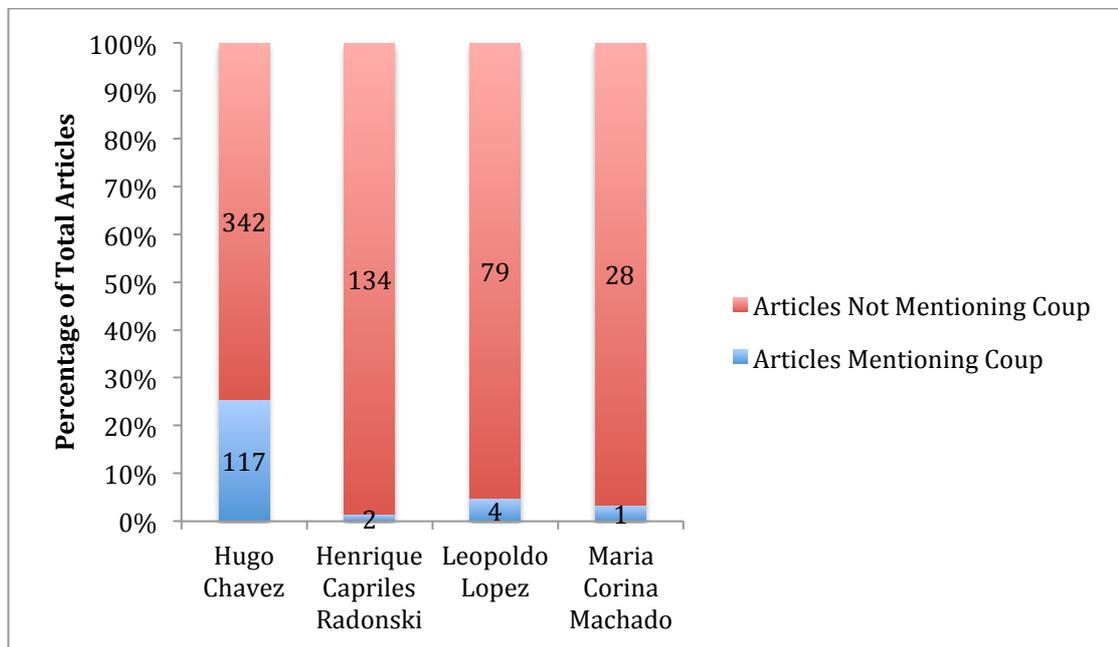


Figure 43 Venezuelan Figures' Coup Attempts, UK and US Newspapers

Compare that to the frequency with which the media informed its readers about Hugo Chavez's involvement in a coup in 1992: it was mentioned in 117 articles of 459 that he featured in (25%). The media were far more likely to inform its readers about Chavez's involvement in a coup than key opposition figures'.

However, once again, even these numbers obscure the disequilibrium between the references as the quality of the identifications with coups for the three opposition leaders was much lower. The sole mention of Machado's involvement does not even identify her with a coup, merely as somebody who

signed a decree dissolving state institutions “during Mr. Chavez’s removal from office” (*The Daily Telegraph*, March 19th, 2014). In the case of Lopez, only two of the four mentions of his involvement in the 2002 coup are definite, coming from Owen Jones and Seumas Milne. One more is uncertain and the sole mention in *The Times* comes in the form of an accusation that is rebutted,

“He has long been a serial irritant for the Socialist Government, which accused him of participating in a failed 2002 coup attempt against Hugo Chávez, a claim that Mr López denies,” (February 21st, 2014).

Neither of the mentions of Capriles’ involvement in the coup is definite, leaving doubt over whether he was involved at all. There is no doubt about their involvement as they appeared on television announcing their actions to millions. Furthermore, this was an unambiguous coup, which was deeply unpopular, unlike Chavez’s attempt in 1992, which had popular support and is sometimes not even referred to as a coup, but rather a “rebellion of the angels” (Levine, 2002). However, Chavez’s coup was mentioned as a fact 209 times in 118 articles, often prefixed by the word “bloody” (five times) or “violent” (four times) despite the fact that the 1992 coup had fewer fatalities than the 2002 coup. All 209 mentions of his coup attempt were treated as a fact, not an accusation.

Even if journalists did not believe that the fact that many of the major opposition figures had been involved in the kidnapping of the President was relevant information, the facts themselves are so striking that it is impossible to comprehend why it would not appear in reporting. This is doubly so, as journalists specifically said in the interviews (chapter 9) they actively seek out titillating or shocking information to put in their stories; they mentioned that Venezuela had a toilet paper shortage on 32 separate occasions. The virtual absence of this information is beyond explanation.

How Widespread were the Demonstrations?

With regard to the nature of the *guarimbas*, the study tracked whether the articles identified them as isolated and or unpopular or widespread and or serious.

As noted above, the *guarimbas*, while certainly not insignificant, were notably isolated, appearing in a limited number of Venezuela’s districts, most of them in conspicuously wealthy areas. From a peak in February, the demonstrations petered out, leaving a hardcore of students in isolated pockets. Furthermore, multiple surveys have shown they were decidedly unpopular. However, the media showed a distinct preference to treat the protests as widespread and serious. “Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have taken to the streets,” (*The Miami Herald*, February 28th) “all over Venezuela,” (*The Independent*, February 27th) actions that have “rocked their country,” (*The Washington Post*, March 30th) creating a “crisis” (*The Times*, February 28th) that is “the loudest things have gotten in a decade” (*The Washington Post*, March 2nd).

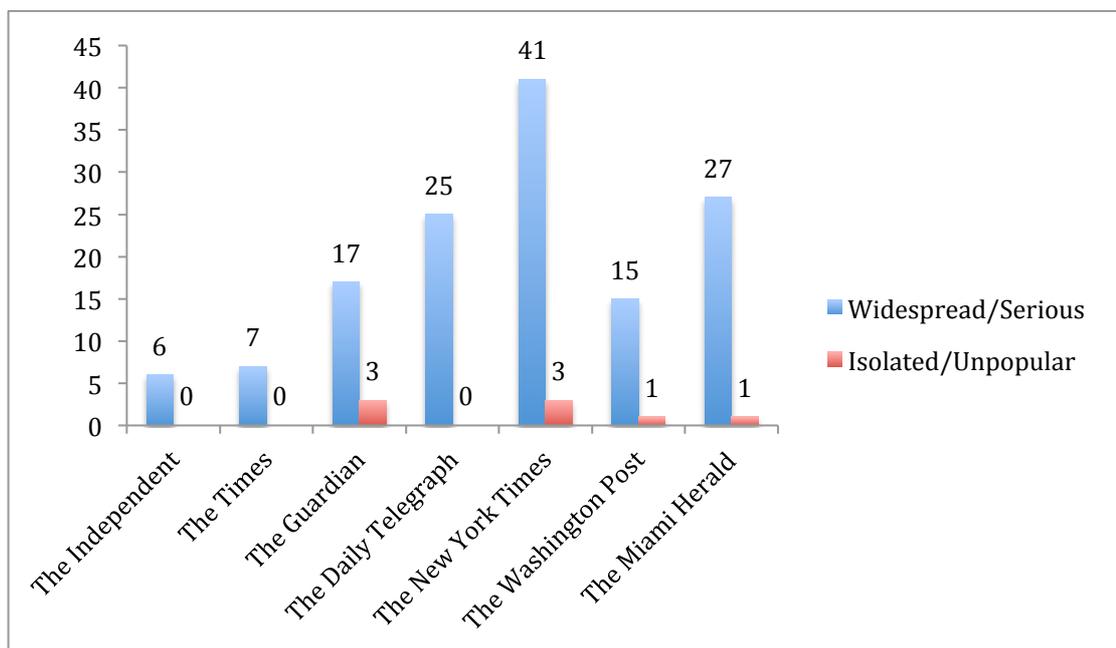


Figure 44 The Venezuelan Protests: Isolated and Unpopular or Widespread and Serious

With regard to the Isolated or Unpopular frame, very little was offered. There was near unanimity among outlets that the protests were widespread and serious, despite the evidence strongly suggesting that the *guarimbas* were unpopular and limited in their scope.

The Miami Herald did note that the street protests were “sporadic” (February 18th) while *The Washington Post* quoted pollster Luis Vicente Leon saying “not all the country is protesting” (February 27th). *The New York Times* (March 1st) noted that in the poor west side of the city there were no protests. The majority of *The Guardian’s* dissenting opinion was once again supplied by Seumas Milne, who noted that the demonstrations were overwhelmingly in white, middle-class areas (April 10th). This amounted to the majority of information suggesting the *guarimbas* were not countrywide and a serious, popular challenge to the government.

The Reaction of Regional Bodies

In a political situation where confusing events takes place, the reaction of regional bodies can often help one gain perspective. As noted, the reaction of Latin American and Caribbean international institutions was to condemn the violence, express solidarity with the Venezuelan government and people and urge for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Some went further, condemning the protesters and the United States for interfering. However, the only discussion of this came from Seumas Milne (*The Guardian*, April 8th). Their reaction was mostly ignored or alluded to euphemistically. *The Miami Herald* stated, “the international community is not rushing” to negotiate a compromise to the government repression (February 26th), while *The New York Times* stated that the “Response from Latin American leaders...is muted” (February 22nd). As noted above, the President of Bolivia had announced “this coup attempt is being financed from abroad, by the United States” (Cadena Agramonte, 2014) and UNASUR, representing every South American nation had “expressed its solidarity with the government” and “rejected” the opposition’s attempts to “destabilize the country” (Rosas, 2014). On February 16th, The President of Uruguay “repudiated all forms of violence and intolerance that attempt to destroy democracy and its institutions” (*El Universal*, March 2nd). On the 18th, The Caribbean Community, representing 15 members, 5 associates and 8 observers called for “respect of the democratically elected government of the Bolivarian Republic” (*Ibid.*). On the 19th, the President of Ecuador warned that there was a “soft coup is underway in Venezuela (*Ibid.*). On the other hand, on the 16th the

President of Chile reminded the government that it had signed a charter that committed it to defending the freedom to demonstrate (*ibid.*) The response from Latin American leaders was anything but muted.

Overall, both the British and American press displayed a strong tendency towards presenting the *guarimbas* as widespread, respectable protests against an authoritarian government. They presented minority opinions on exceptionally contentious issues as facts while rarely mentioning the opposing, majority opinion. When it was mentioned, it was rarely taken seriously. While some newspapers, notably *The Guardian*, had a small amount of space for dissenting opinions, the overall picture built up across every newspaper studied jarred violently with the empirical data available. It also jarred strongly with the coverage of the protests in other outlets. For instance, *RT*, a Russian-based network, took a critical stance to the protests, as can be seen by looking at their headlines,

“It’s simply about regime change, not improving Venezuela’s economy,”
(March 25th)

“Protesters in Venezuela ‘don’t seem to have clear demands,’” (February 26th)

“Venezuela is low-hanging fruit for US,” (February 25th)

“S. American leaders call for peace in Venezuela amid violent protests,”
(March 8th)

“Venezuela coup? Gunfire, clashes as 3 dead in violent Caracas protest”
(February 13th).

In many of its news articles and op-eds, *RT* reported the reaction to the *guarimbas* from Latin American leaders, took seriously the idea that the affair was a US-backed attempt to force President Maduro out, while simultaneously presenting the contrary viewpoint of Lopez, Machado and the protesters. Unlike the newspapers in the survey, *RT* is state-funded. *RT* receives funding from the

Russian government, which in recent years has enjoyed a largely cordial relationship with the Venezuelan government. In contrast, the newspapers in this survey, particularly the American ones, are based in a country whose government is entirely hostile to the Bolivarian project in Venezuela. Therefore, journalists and editors of *RT* do not have to consider flak from their governments that could undermine their jobs, or even their outlet's existence if they present Venezuela positively or neutrally. Furthermore, unlike *RT*, the newspapers in this survey rely on advertising from transnational corporations for the large majority of their funding. The Venezuelan government espouses an ideology (21st century socialism) contrary to the interests of these corporations (neoliberalism). Therefore, *RT* journalists and editors have no reason to provide content that conforms to and promotes the neoliberal worldview of transnational corporations. Thus, the journalists at *RT* are relatively free to interview progressive or socialist academics in their op-eds and present Venezuela how they choose to. However, they would perhaps not feel free to present the Russian government or issues critical to the Russian state negatively, whereas the newspapers in this sample have taken a critical stance towards the Russian government.

It was evidently possible for *RT* to present a nuanced or even critical content. If *RT*, Jones and Milne had access to relevant factual information then the specific framing of the Venezuela protests cannot be explained due to a lack of information. The newspapers systematically presented the protests in the fashion most favourable to neoliberalism with nuanced or critical opinions pushed to the margins. By and large, the media followed the same analysis as those on the critical end of the spectrum of opinion.

It was often virtually impossible to distinguish between the newspapers in this sample and the Venezuelan opposition's position. The newspapers presented repeated opposition talking points as matters of fact while ignoring or deriding government counterclaims. This can be seen in the following example. Three passages will be shown. One is written by Leopoldo Lopez himself, while the other two are op-eds from the editorial boards of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The only things changed are pronouns. It is up to the reader to decide which one is from Lopez. The answer is in the footnote.

“For 15 years, the definition of "intolerable" in the country has declined by degrees until, Venezuelans' dismay, they found themselves with one of the highest murder rates in the Western Hemisphere, a 57 percent inflation rate and a scarcity of basic goods unprecedented outside of wartime. Its crippled economy is matched by an equally oppressive political climate... On Feb. 12, Leopoldo Lopez urged Venezuelans to exercise their legal rights to protest and free speech -- but to do so peacefully and without violence. Three people were shot and killed that day. An analysis of video by the news organization Últimas Noticias determined that shots were fired from the direction of plainclothes military troops”.

“People hit the streets -- driven to despair by rampant crime, including one of the highest murder rates in the world; chronic shortages of basic staples, often including milk and toilet paper; raging inflation, which last year reached an annual rate of 56.2 percent; and frequent blackouts. Mr. Maduro's predictable response in the government-controlled news media has been to blame it all on "fascists" and the United States”.

“Anyone watching Venezuela's descent into economic and social chaos in recent months could predict what would come next: street demonstrations by students and average citizens fed up with soaring inflation, shortages of basic goods, one of the world's highest murder rates and a government whose only response has been to shout senseless populist slogans...But the regime has also resorted to more extreme measures. Several demonstrators were shot and killed last week by gunmen likely affiliated with security forces or pro-government militias. Meanwhile prosecutors charged an opposition leader, Leopoldo Lopez, with murder and terrorism. On Tuesday, Mr. Lopez courageously surrendered to police authorities”.³⁴

If we compare Lopez's position to those of the newspapers' editorial boards, we see that they are functionally identical, including many of the same talking points (inflation) and turns of phrase (one of the highest murder rates in

³⁴ Quote 1 is Leopoldo Lopez in *The New York Times*, March 26th, Quote 2 is the *Times*' editorial board, March 15th, quote 3 is *The Post*'s editorial, February 19th.

the world) and accusations about the government being responsible for the deaths. When removing the by-line, there is no discernable difference between opposition propaganda and supposedly balanced reporting.

Across our five samples we have seen how the media have consistently taken positions critical of government and sided with critics of regime, often despite the large weight of easily verifiable evidence suggesting the opposite conclusions. Now it is time to turn our attention to *why* this is happening.

Chapter Eight, Who are the Journalists?

Journalists' Backgrounds

As discussed in the literature review, the professional background of journalists is an important point of notice. The Sutton Trust (2006) noted that over half of Great Britain's leading journalists were educated in private schools, which account for only seven percent of the population as a whole. The proportion of the top one hundred journalists coming from independent schools is rising, while only fourteen percent of the most influential journalists attended comprehensive schools. Nearly forty percent were Oxbridge graduates and seven out of ten went to one of the country's most prestigious universities. Increasingly, British journalism is a fully middle-class profession, a job exclusively for those from privileged families in London and the Home Counties.

The reasons for this are manifold. More journalists work in London and the South East than the rest of the UK combined (Spilsbury, 2013: 23). The extremely high costs of living in London prohibit many from starting their careers. The high price of university tuition fees dissuades many from following that career path. Students from modest backgrounds saddled with high levels of debt are less likely still to move to an expensive city. Low pay and insecurity at junior levels also lead many to quit (Jones, 2014: 85-102). Still more are sacked as news organizations shed staff to reduce their payroll, yet journalists' workload has increased, as they are expected to produce more content for both print and online publication, effectively compensating for smaller newsrooms (Reinardy, 2011). Unpaid internships are increasingly necessary way to gain access to a job in the media, meaning those without free accommodation in London are even less likely to apply or advance. Therefore, it is less likely that those from modest backgrounds will apply for positions at all. In addition the study posited that the informal recruitment process biases towards those with personal connections within the industry. Consequently, journalism is increasingly the preserve of those from high socio-economic backgrounds.

The situation in the United States is similar. According to the Pew Research Center (2015) newsroom employment figures dropped by a third between 2006 and 2013. In their study, *The American Journalist in the Digital Age*, Wilnat and Weaver (2013) found that 59.7 percent of journalists see the profession going the wrong way. Job autonomy has fallen rapidly, with only 33.6 percent of journalists stating that they had complete autonomy in their job, compared with 60 percent in 1982. Men outnumber women nearly two to one in the newsroom. Like their British counterparts, American journalists today are far more likely to be a college graduate than previously- 92.1 percent obtained a degree as opposed to 82.1 percent in 1992 and 58.2 percent in 1971. In both countries women are underrepresented. The report also highlighted journalists' reliance on social media for information and communication.

Journalists coming from this narrowed background tend to have similar political views. Herman (1982: 149) put it succinctly that journalists are,

“Predominantly white middle class people who tend to share the values of the corporate leadership, and they are affected by the fact that approval, advancement and even job survival depend on an acceptance of certain priorities. The biases at the top are filtered down by long-term penalties and rewards. The mass media top leadership puts into key position individuals who reflect their values.”

Jones (2014: 102) has argued that journalists who come from a privileged background are increasingly distanced from the everyday reality of the population, and therefore less likely to share the views of the community at large. They are less likely to report on social issues and deal sensitively with problems affecting working-class people and less likely to accurately gauge public moods. In a country such as Venezuela, which is far more unequal than either the United States or United Kingdom, this problem is exacerbated greatly, as we shall see.

Furthermore, the rigid, top down structure of news organizations mean journalists thinking about career advancement will not “rock the boat” by producing content that they know is contrary to the views of the editors and

owners. Those who do not conform will be passed over for promotion and not have their contracts renewed. The study found that editorials tended to be more critical of the Venezuelan government than news articles, suggesting editors may hold more critical views than journalists. Thus, the system selects for conformity to the dominant ideology of the owners and editors: neoliberalism. Former US Federal Communications Commission Chairman Nicholas Johnson described the five stages of conformity and self-censorship in newsrooms,

“A reporter... first comes up with an investigative story idea, writes it up and submits it to the editor and is told the story is not going to run. He wonders why, but the next time he is cautious enough to check with the editors first. He is told by the editor that it would be better not to write that story. The third time he thinks of an investigative story idea but doesn't bother the editor with it because he knows it's silly. The fourth time he doesn't even think of the idea anymore...One might add a fifth time when the reporter bristles with indignation at the suggestion that he is in on an ideological leash and is not part of a free and democratic press” (quoted in Parenti, 1993: 41).

The journalists themselves were very generous with their time, often offering to contact others who may help the research. They were also willing to answer follow-up questions. Most were Latin American specialists or correspondents. They were evidently more willing to speak about a subject they wrote a lot more about than a staff writer in London who did not specialize in Latin America.

The findings were in agreement with the Sutton Trust and Wilnat and Weaver's findings about the background of journalists. In general, the cohort was a group of liberal professionals. Seven of the nine were male. All the journalists asked went to universities. Most had been journalists their entire careers and had no other profession. All the journalists surveyed came from privileged backgrounds. The following quotes are representative of the cohort's experience.

Sibylla Brodzhinsky: “A journalist is all I have ever been. It has been almost thirty years now. I have done quite a bit of freelancing but before coming

to Colombia I worked at *Agence France Press* in Washington, doing their English service. I am from the United States, grew up mostly here and the Dominican Republic.”

Journalist 1: “Six or seven months after I graduated college I got a job at a newswire. It used to be the real-time news service of some finance companies. I was writing about the US stock market and other mundane things. Then started writing about developing countries and then came to Venezuela and since then I have been writing for both my newspaper and the newswire. I have been here for four years.”

However, the backgrounds of the dissenting journalists were slightly different. Matt Kennard read and studied Chomsky and Herman’s “Manufacturing Consent” before starting his master’s degree went into the industry with a critical theoretical background of how the media function. Bart Jones described how he originally came to Venezuela with Maryknoll, a US-based Catholic organization that sends people around the world to work mostly with poor people, and lived with the poor,

Bart Jones: “This was in a neighbourhood where there was no running water, no paved streets, most people lived in mud huts, similar to what Chavez grew up in or in tin shacks. They were very poor people. It was a great experience as a journalist because I really got a first hand view of how the poor lived in Venezuela and Latin America and why they were supporting a guy like Chavez. My experience there was a little bit different to most journalists.”

Journalists’ own Views on Venezuela

Since 1998, the *chavistas* have controlled Venezuela. The cornerstone of their support has been the social-democratic and liberal reforms brought in to help the majority of the population, such as introducing free education and healthcare. Yet, as seen in chapters 3-7, liberal journalists writing in liberal newspapers have been highly critical of the government. Some explained the discrepancy by discussing the structural factors impacting reporting. For instance, Hudson argued that either through editorial control, thoughts of

promotion or journalists practicing self-censorship, journalists produce articles that run contrary to their political beliefs.

Ian Hudson: “One of the things that we tried to think about is you have got a set of people that declare an ideology that is not representative of the articles they write. How does that happen? So one of the ways we thought about this was to argue that no matter what the journalists claim themselves, journalists are predominantly the employees of a firm. And there are very few firms that let the employees do whatever they want. Most firms, in fact, try and create a set of rules that make their employees do things that are going to enhance their profitability. And it is not clear why the media would be an exception to that rule. Through one mechanism or another it might be true that although journalists think there is not editorial control and they can write what they want, there must be some explanation as to why it is so similar all the time.”

However, Hudson also noted that wealthy Western liberal journalists might not be in support of the *chavistas*' policies. It is therefore crucial to ascertain the journalists' own viewpoints on the political, economic and social situation in Venezuela. However, this is not a straightforward question to ask. The question of asking journalists their own political views is obviously a loaded question that will receive a bland response. One would have a similar problem asking a journalist for whom they voted for in the US election while researching a politically volatile subject like abortions or gun rights. When asked anything overtly political, the journalists may have refused to answer. The idea of neutrality and objectivity is central to the modern culture of journalism and journalists were understandably hesitant to answer a loaded question like that. Instead, the question “how would you describe the last sixteen years of Venezuela, socially, politically and economically?” was asked. This question was designed to allow the journalist to respond in whichever way he or she felt fit. It allowed them to discuss the successes and failures of the government and positive and negative developments in society and the economy. However, most journalists described it in exactly the same way, seemingly trying not to take sides. The most common answer was to say that recent developments were good

for journalists, as it meant that there was a lot of news coming out of the country, as Journalist 1 expressed,

Journalist 1: “Journalistically it has been a goldmine. When I look at the news that comes out of Venezuela compared to the news from my colleagues in other parts of the region I sometimes say I am in a much luckier position because I get to write about much more interesting things. So it is definitely very exciting. It has its living standards limitations, but other than that it is very exciting, journalistically.”

Others were not as careful to hide their beliefs,

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “Well, I got here two years ago which you could call the tail end of this political process of the Bolivarian Revolution. By now the vast majority of enthusiasm, passion and commitment people had for the potential of this change to improve the country has gone. People are still with the government because it gives them the economic perks to buy things they want rather than actual belief in the idea of socialism. So yeah, it is a pretty depressing place in that sense. Most people are trying to leave the country. It is very difficult, the security situation makes everyone really paranoid and no one really believes the slogans any more.”

The journalists that produced the dominant narrative were skeptical, if not openly hostile to the changes the government have been making.

In fact, in nearly ten hours of interviews, there was virtually nothing said by journalists reproducing the dominant narrative that could be construed as supportive of the government at all. Most journalists, when given opportunity to talk about Venezuela, had nothing positive to say about the country and the political and social changes that have taken place in the past seventeen years. Thus, the claim that the lack of positive coverage is due to journalists self-censoring cannot fully explain the phenomenon. Some journalists do self-censor, as will be discussed in chapter ten, but in this case *the lack of positive coverage in the press about Venezuela is mirrored by a lack of anything positive to say about the country at all from most of the journalists interviewed*. Although the

dissenting journalists admitted to self-censorship, as shown below, in the majority of cases, the content of journalists' stories matched their own opinions on the country. In other words, journalists appear to be accurately expressing their own views when it comes to Venezuela, rather than hiding their own pro-government views in negative coverage. In chapter ten we shall see that journalists reject the idea of being ideologically constrained by their editors.

We should keep in mind that in the United States the liberal attitude to Venezuela is very much antagonistic, as it is inside the country. The traditional liberal *Acción Democrática* party was challenged by the left-wing *chavista* movement. In Venezuela, it is common to identify as a liberal and be completely against the government. Indeed, the opposition's last presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles, presented himself as a progressive.

Philo and Berry's (2004, 2011) studies of the media's coverage of Israel/Palestine found that many journalists were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause but were intimidated into giving Israelis better coverage. *This was not the case with Venezuela*. While journalists may self-censor, a phenomenon much more peculiar than self-censorship explains the overwhelmingly hostile coverage. One important explanatory variable is the socio-political context in which journalists are placed when they go to Venezuela.

Journalists' Lack of Expertise

The majority of journalists spoken to specifically covered Venezuela for a living. Yet many of them admitted that there were serious holes in their understanding of the social and political situation, especially at first, as can be seen in the following examples.

Interviewer: "How familiar are/were you with the social, political and cultural issues of Venezuela?"

Girish Gupta: "I came *very* ignorant actually. The first year or so I was just trying to learn and get my head round things, both learning journalism and

about the industry, which can be two separate things and also learning about Venezuela, politics, and economics.”

Journalist 1: “It was just random. I always wanted to travel and in college I dreamed of being a war correspondent or something. And so I started looking abroad. I had been writing about stock market from an investor viewpoint then covered Latin America a bit for my newswire. Then I came to live here.”

Some of the correspondents also began their jobs without speaking Spanish.

Interviewer: “Did you speak Spanish before you got here?”

Girish Gupta: “When I got here my Spanish was non-existent. I just bumbled along and now it is obviously pretty good.”

Journalist 1: “No, I just promised my bosses that I could learn very fast! I used to speak Italian very well so when I got here I did not have trouble reading Spanish. I had trouble with the accents but I would say I was functional *within a few months*” (emphasis added).

Thus, many journalists were functionally incapable of speaking Spanish *for months*. Very few people speak English in Venezuela. The country lies behind states such as Oman and Yemen in English proficiency, and fluency is highly correlated with socio-economic position (Education First, 2015). There is a serious problem in journalists residing in the richest, most exclusive areas of Caracas, being dropped into a political cauldron with little experience, often without even the ability to speak to the bottom 90-95 percent of the population. Most others, however, were already fluent in Spanish and felt they had a good grasp of the situation. However all journalists confidently agreed they had a firm understanding of the ins and outs of Venezuela. Despite this, the majority was unaware of the controversy surrounding the reporting of Venezuela in the media.

Interviewer: “And are you aware of any of the academic arguments on the media and Venezuela?”

Jim Wyss: “No, I guess not. I can’t think. No, I guess not.”

Sibylla Brodzhinsky: “No, I am not. But I can guess. [laughs].”

Many of those spoken to covered Venezuela often, many of them daily. Furthermore, these two journalists have covered Venezuela and Latin America *for decades between them*, yet were unaware of the academic arguments surrounding their work and the country they covered- a central issue of contention in academia. Both these journalists have been specifically named in media criticism of the country. Yet most were unaware of critiques of their work. Journalist Bart Jones, who took a critical view of some of the reporting, and who detailed the arguments in his book, stated,

Bart Jones: “I don’t think it is on their front burner [laughs]. I don’t think they see a lot of heat, at least when I was there. There was definitely an atmosphere of ‘Chavez is a bad guy,’ you know? And we need to fully present and almost take the side of the ‘resistance,’ the ‘dissidents,’ or whatever you want to call them. They would *actually use* those terms. If they were aware of this kind of academic debate I don’t think it bothered them much.”

Many (Gott, 2011: 246, Salter and Weltman, 2011, Ali, 2006) have argued that part of the issue with the international media’s reporting of Venezuela is that foreign journalists invariably inhabit the wealthy areas of Caracas and rarely venture into the hillside slums where over fifty percent of Caracas, and most of the working-class population resides. This is what is now going to be explored.

Chapter Nine, The Journalistic Bubble

Where Journalists Live

All of the journalists spoken to lived or stayed in Chacao, Caracas. As discussed in chapter one, Chacao the wealthiest municipality in Venezuela, completely unrepresentative of Venezuela as a country. Chacao had a population of 71,000 according to the 2010 census.

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “I live in Chacao municipality. It is the richest borough in Venezuela because that is where all the multinational companies are based. It is also the safest part of town probably. Nothing is safe here but it is probably the safest place so that is where pretty much all foreign reporters tend to congregate, [there are] a lot of diplomats and that is where we have our offices.”

Journalist 1: “Everybody lives fairly close to one another.”

Interviewer: “Do all the journalists hang out together?”

Journalist 1: “Yes and no, I have a couple of journalist friends I hang out with more than others but *I guess it could be seen that way*” (emphasis added).

Jim Wyss: “I can see the house of the reporter for *The Guardian* from where I am sitting right now...I think almost everyone is living on the wealthier area because it is really one of the few places that is safe to walk around. Security is a real issue in Venezuela.”³⁵

Here, one issue is journalists’ safety. The *barrios* of large Latin American cities are among the most dangerous urban spaces in the world (Koonings and

³⁵ At the time of the interview, Wyss lived in Bogota, but the quote is illustrative of the small world of journalists in Latin America.

Kruijt, 2007). Outsiders are generally not welcome, particularly those identifiable as foreign journalists. Through no fault of their own, journalists are discouraged from venturing out of the relative safety of Chacao. However, this is a crucial problem if journalists are cutting themselves off from the ninety-eight percent of poorer Caracas residents who do not live in Chacao, especially because they will rarely encounter working-class people at work, in their neighbourhoods or social circles. *This is particularly important because social class is the fundamental fault line along which Venezuelan society is split.* Trying to analyze Venezuelan society without knowledge of or constant contact with the majority of the population is akin to trying to understand a chess game without seeing black's moves, or even knowing about black's pieces. This problem in understanding is certainly not helped by the horror stories of crime and violence that circulate around the upper-middle class Caracas echo chamber. As discussed in the literature review, local media often fans the flames and many see ordinary, dark-skinned Venezuelans as subhuman criminals and thugs (Duno Gottberg, 2004, 2009, 2011, Salas, 2005). Even without these critical roadblocks in understanding, it would be a pertinent question to ask if there were little crime in the barrios, how often would reporters enter? How many foreign reporters in Africa live in, or even go to the corrugated-iron shantytowns of Nairobi, Mumbai or Lagos? Thus, journalists live in a socially constructed bubble that will be discussed in the following section.

The Bubble

Most of the journalists interviewed confidently asserted that they are largely free to think and write whatever they want about Venezuela. If we accept their assurances, however, we are left with an extremely important question: Why do all these different journalists from all around the world, representing a wide range of news organizations, all have distinctly similar opinions on what is one of the most controversial political topics in the modern world? The range of opinions of Venezuela could not be wider; Former Brazilian President, Lula stated, "A victory for Chávez is not just a victory for the people of Venezuela but also a victory for all the people of Latin America...this victory will strike another blow against [US] imperialism" (Da Silva, 2012), whereas senior analysts at the Heritage Foundation consider Venezuela to be a "terrorist

state” (Walser, 2010). There is a much narrower range of opinions shared in the majority of reporting.

Julia Buxton raised a crucial insight in answering this question. Foreign journalists become part of an intermeshed international ex-pat community of the wealthy middle-class,

Julia Buxton: “Overall those networks of circles of influence are interconnected, so if you are a journalist from *El País* or *The Miami Herald*, you would feel quite comfortable sitting down with a journalist from *The Guardian* in the cocktail lounge of the Hilton Hotel. Those people would all coincide on their views and perspectives but those would in turn also be framed by domestic political readerships in those countries.”

One *Guardian* journalist I interviewed seemed to corroborate this view,

Sibylla Brodzhinsky: “I stayed in Altamira [a neighbourhood of Chacao]...I checked with colleagues here- Maria from *Associated Free Press* and Jim Wyss from *The Miami Herald*- and they helped me with updating some phone numbers and getting some new contacts.”

Some may be surprised to learn that journalists who write for the most left-wing major newspaper in the English-speaking West, home of the far left, is close friends with journalists with people writing for the most conservative sources in the English speaking world on the topic. However, media studies experts may not be surprised. Bennett (1990), for instance, has argued that the left-wing private media and the right-wing private media have long shared more opinions and interests in common than they have had disagreements. This phenomenon is becoming stronger as neoliberal economics has shrunk the gap between the “official” left and right parties, media ownership has become increasingly concentrated and reliance on advertising revenue has increased. Thus, there is less political debate than ever before, as neoliberalism has become common sense.

Indeed, Brodzhinsky had also written for *The Miami Herald*, as well as the voice of global capitalism, *The Economist*. Francisco Toro has also written for the left-leaning *Guardian* in addition to the right-wing *Washington Post* and the extremely conservative *Miami Herald*. A reader might expect that writing for both extreme ends of the political spectrum to be impossible. However, *on the issue of Venezuela the entire Western media gamut is sufficiently narrow as to be traversed by one single voice. There is largely only one opinion expressed. And it is a neoliberal one.* While there may be some room for small differences, virtually the entire catalog of news and opinions on Venezuela in the international media is sufficiently similar as to seem plausible that it was written by the same person. As previously noted, journalists come from increasingly privileged backgrounds. For many people, a well-heeled journalist wearing a red tie has a lot more in common with a well-heeled journalist wearing a blue tie than he does with the ordinary population at large. Note the language *The Guardian* journalist uses; her “colleagues” at *The Miami Herald* and the *Associated Free Press*, not her competitors. Bennett (2001: 164) and Davies (2009: 147) have highlighted the solidarity among journalists and their propensity to hunt in packs, spending a great deal of time together and developing a sense of group solidarity and resulting in the phenomenon of groupthink on many issues. This is particularly the case with foreign journalists.

Most of the experts spoken to raised similar concerns about journalists living in a privileged bubble in Eastern Caracas, living their professional and social lives in an area of opulence. The nature of Caracas’ geographical and social reality means that journalists are severely limited in the areas they live, where they visit on a regular basis, and correspondingly the sorts of people they encounter, interview, and form friendships with. A foreign journalist covering the United Kingdom who rarely travelled outside of, and spoke to anyone except residents of Kensington would very likely find their work compromised and the opinions and work skewed by this constraint. Living in a privileged island, a hotbed of anti-government activity and thought, an echo chamber forms. These crucial constraints are bound to influence journalists’ opinions and work. As we shall see, the journalists themselves were well aware of this constraint and agreed with the academics on the problematical nature of the journalistic bubble.

Michael Derham: “How many journalists are based in little towns around Venezuela? None are. The whole press core, the whole transnational CEO class, all the professional workers, ex-pats, they all live (apart from some in the oil industry) they all live in the nicer areas of Caracas, the Altamiras, the Chacaos.”

Francisco Toro: “It is *clearly* a problem. It is *clearly* a problem. Venezuela is a very polarized society...Obviously when journalists arrive, Caracas is an incredibly dangerous city, even the safe areas are really dangerous and the dangerous areas are absurd. So there is a tendency to cave up in the little eastside bubble in Caracas, where the fancy mansions are and where the English-speaking sources are- this is another thing, it is so nice having a source that speaks English! So the foreign press does get accused of being blinkered in its social scope and having a hard time piercing that bubble. I think that is a fair criticism.”

Salter described the average life of a journalist and how it seriously affects the coverage. His words deserved to be quoted at length here,

Lee Salter: “Take Nathalie Malinarich’s BBC article ‘Venezuela: A nation divided’ for instance. This is something I only understood when I stayed in Caracas. She says, “”You’ll find siblings who no longer speak to each other because one supports Chavez and the other doesn’t,” says a man in the well-heeled Altamira neighbourhood.’ The paragraph after next, ‘Talk to a Chavez supporter in Chacao- a municipality where opposition candidate Manuel Rosales has widespread support- and some nervousness can be detected.’ The next paragraph ‘In Las Mercedes, another affluent neighbourhood,’ and then the very last paragraph you can see, the way it is phrased is interesting, ‘*Go to one of the many shantytowns, or barrios, which hang from the hillsides and you will find,*’ not support for Chavez, but ‘Rosales supporters being shouted at by *Chavistas.*’ When you go to Caracas, you understand what is going on. Nathalie Marinarich presumably lives in Altamira, which is like Kensington in London. Chacao is two steps away. She woke up in the morning and had a coffee in her local bar in Altamira. Then she walked down the road, from Kensington to Pimlico, and went to another really nice part of town and chatted to someone

else. Then she went to Las Mercedes, which is two paces down. It is a little circle. It is like going to Kensington, Pimlico and Chelsea to get a sense of 'Britain: a Nation Divided.' And that last paragraph is hypothetical: 'go to one,' so if you *were* to go to a barrio. They don't go to a shantytown, they hypothesize, because they couldn't be bothered to go or they didn't have time or whatever the reason. And if you do go to a barrio, you will find hundreds of thousands of people who support Chavez, not 'Rosales supporters being shouted at' because there are no Rosales supporters in the barrio."

"I talked to a BBC journalist who was furious at me. He said I didn't understand how dangerous a city it was and I said to him, 'look, we have been sitting here for two hours in the poshest part of town. All of the time we have been here, all of these wealthy Venezuelans have been coming up to you and have been hugging you and inviting you to their garden parties. Don't you get that is the world that you inhabit?'"

Furthermore, there is a social pressure exerted on journalists living in bastions of anti-government sentiment and working in organizations hostile to the government to conform to the conventional line of thought. Journalists expressing alternative opinions are risking being shunned or having to deal with constant arguments. Salter explained this phenomenon,

Lee Salter: "There's an institutionalized pressure that occurs in these news organizations. Correspondents are housed in well-heeled parts of Caracas. *If you ever go there, you cannot mention, in English, that you think the Bolivarian Revolution is anything other than some Nazi Blitzkrieg over Venezuela. If you say anything other than that then they are on you...* So there is that social pressure. These people invite you to their garden parties. You want to go for a drink in your local bar or café and if they think you are a supporter of Chavez then you are going to get it in the neck all the time, so you just nod and smile when they tell you things."

In his book about Venezuela, Irish journalist Michael McCaughan (2004: 5) claimed that after mentioning to him that he was going to a Chavez rally, he was physically assaulted by a "literally frothing mouthed" hotel manager. The

manager kicked him out the hotel and he *needed an armed police escort* to go to another hotel. He also claimed he saw 8 year old children at a wealthy private school in East Caracas who had been trained to chant “death to Chavez” (*Ibid*, pp. 156-157). Journalists’ safety may be at risk if they step outside the established paradigm. This outlook of the Caracas elites is mirrored across Latin America and the developing world. The answer for why foreigners do not express alternative opinions to the “Nazi *Blitzkrieg*” theory is partially due to their reliance on English-speaking elites in Latin America who tend to hold reactionary political beliefs and have collaborated with Western countries to share control of highly unequal countries.

Since their “discovery” by Europeans, Latin American societies have played a service role to the European, and later, American economies. These countries were stripped of their remarkable wealth, which was taken off to the countries at the core. This was emotively described by Eduardo Galeano as the “open veins of Latin America,” (2009). According to Frank’s seminal (1969) essay, this led to the development of Europe and the US and the underdevelopment of the rest of the world. Branford and Kucinski (1990), claim the elites of Latin America know their role in the world system and allow their countries to be pillaged on condition they shared in the spoils. They put their own short-term interests ahead of the country’s long-term needs. They argued,

“Latin America’s bourgeoisie is not nationalistic in its views, but content to be integrated with industrialised economies in a subordinate way (1990: 134).”

Any progressive movement aimed at reducing inequality could be a threat to this elite’s fundamental existence at the top of society. Any movement representative of the people is going to at least attempt to address the underdeveloped economic model that allows a small percentage of people to gain enormous wealth while simultaneously forcing the majority into spirals of extreme poverty. Thus, the *chavista* government is potentially an existential threat to the power and status of the wealthy of Chacao. It is this community that journalists are largely consorting with. Whether the *chavista* government

really does represent a threat to the wealthy minorities and does represent the poor majority is another question.

The journalists were in agreement with the academics that the polarized political landscape hindered reporting. They particularly noted that those who are parachuted into the country without a great deal of background knowledge of the situation are prone to simply staying in their hotels, meeting one or two prearranged contacts, then leaving, making little attempt to critically engage with the debate.

Brian Ellsworth: “Definitely, correspondents that rotate a lot, there is a certain echo-chamber that you can get sucked into and a certain outside vision of the way people want to see a country.... Yeah, there are people who live in the ex-pat cocoon but I would not describe my life that way.”

Journalist 2: “You are not going to understand everything from day one. It is a very complicated country with a history of mistakes and changes and I feel a lot of journalists misjudge the people. I am talking about the low people in the streets, because they don’t get involved with them. You see a foreign journalist arrive in Venezuela; their typical experience is they are in the high middle class so that is their circle. And that is wrong. I have always complained about that.”

The level of crime in Caracas frustrated journalists. Many felt it had significant negative impacts on the quality and depth of their reporting. Journalists felt constrained by not being able to walk around on their own. A common theme was also the difficulty in finding “objective” sources of information due to the extreme political polarization of the country,

Journalist 1: “When you are covering people out in the slums there is that safety issue which I think sometimes people feel limits them in terms of how they can cover it. In terms of trying to get that other side in the story, I know journalists who try to minimize risks and not go out there.”

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “The violence in Venezuela, the security situation makes it difficult for you to just go out there and do objective, broadly sourced

reporting you would do in other countries because you just cannot go and walk around the streets. You just cannot go and walk into a favela and walk around and speak to anyone you want. You can't speak to the police because they might kidnap you etc. So you are constrained because you are living in that bubble, staying at the Marriott because it is relatively safe, staying in that zone, meeting a couple of economists who everyone else talks to. And polarization is another aspect of it. It is very difficult to meet someone who will have an objective opinion about what is going on here; there are either on one side or another.”

The echo chamber of living in the bubble in Eastern Caracas can go a considerable way to explaining the peculiarly similar and anti-government coverage of Venezuela in the international media. Journalists arrive in the country with little knowledge of affairs, are housed in the most exclusive areas and rarely speak to anyone in their day-to-day lives who has a differing opinion about the society. The situation in one-sided reporting is not aided by the actions of the Venezuelan government.

The Silent Treatment: The Venezuelan Government and the International Media

A further explanatory element is the actions of the Venezuelan government. Being a non-traditional political movement, the government conducted itself differently and had a different set of protocols to the previous administration. Officials appeared uninterested in wining and dining foreign journalists, having different priorities. The result is an estrangement between the press and the government, where the government often does not even answer journalists' questions and calls.

Julia Buxton: “The normal way of making journalistic contacts is by phoning or emailing people to arrange meetings. When these people do roll into town, the reality for a lot of the *chavistas* is that usually they would not respond via email or pick up the phone so the default position of a lot of journalists is to go to the people who are the easiest to talk to which has always been the opposition. They speak the same language as the journalists. Julio Borges [a key

opposition member] went to Oxford University. Leopoldo López was at Harvard. These networks of friendships are very easy for journalists to fall back on.”

The new government has not prioritized keeping good relations with the media, seeing their primary constituency as the Venezuelan public. Julia Buxton described how the traditional, elitist channels of contact between high officials and journalists were closed off by the actions of the *chavista* government. Foreign journalists were used to preferential treatment and easy access to high officials, something that seemed to be anathema to the *chavistas*. Thus, the traditional mechanisms of connection between foreign media and the Venezuelan government broke down, exacerbating the trend of UK and US journalists taking a very negative view of the country,

Julia Buxton: “A lot of journalists have this perspective that they represent a significant international broadsheet so they should by default have access to whomever they want to speak to, that just was not the audience that the *chavistas* were particularly interested in or holding interviews with. For them the most important thing was community relations and reaching out to other new and emerging left forces in Latin America and Europe. So that blindsided the traditional diplomatic and journalist cocktail circuit and the challenge they had then was that a lot of these journalists never went into the *barrios* or interviewing the people. They never gave that view from the grassroots and as a result of that, they just did not understand the power or the dimensions at the local level of *chavismo*. It was fundamentally underestimated. This was because it required, for once, the journalists to leave the Hilton Hotel bar and go into some reasonably poor and dangerous parts of *barrio* Venezuela, and they simply were not prepared to do that...they did not have the kind of access that they needed to write easy stories.”

Journalists agreed with Buxton that the lack of access was a serious problem that affected the content and quality of their journalism, as the following three quotes demonstrate.

Francisco Toro: “People in the government will not talk to you; *chavistas* will talk to you but people in the government no. And you need sources and you

are living in this socially constructed bubble in the East side of Caracas so that is who you are going to talk to...I think a lot of that is just down to the fact that the government is really bad at public relations management. It is not written down that they have to blindside every foreign journalist who asks them a question and just assume that they are the enemy. That is their own fault.”

Bart Jones: “The government were not always that accessible either. And I think after a while they really gave up on the international media. [They thought] ‘These guys keep telling lies about us so why should we waste our time talking to them?’ So I think at a certain point the government decided they were not going to waste their time with these people. Even when Chavez sits down and gives a long interview to *The New York Times* and they still do a hatchet job on him. ‘Why are we going to waste our time with these people? They are just out to get us’ - I think that is how the government began to view it.”

The result of this is when journalists hear rumours or accusations from the opposition, there is no response from the government, meaning their claims often run unchallenged in stories. The opacity of the Venezuelan government clearly adds to journalists’ frustrations and negative coverage. The government not only effectively gives the media ‘the silent treatment,’ but also often fails to release key statistics and information that would improve the reporting of the country. The standard channels of communications for journalists are the telephone and email. However, the *chavistas* are more interested in grassroots, face-to-face contact and do not see foreign journalists as their primary constituency. The result is that journalists are forced to turn to other sources of information for quotes, references and analysis. Journalist 1 explained they often wanted to give the government a voice because it would make their story better but were met with silence from them.

Thus, the government does not answer its phones, and when officials do they are uncooperative. While the government is dismissive of the foreign media, a second problem is that it rarely appoints official spokespeople or communications officers. Added to this is the constant shuffling of cabinet positions. President Chavez was infamous for continuously changing his ministers, with the result that many arriving at new posts were not well briefed

on their areas of responsibility and did not feel confident speaking on complicated issues. The constant upheaval negatively affected the country in a number of ways. Therefore, as the previous quote demonstrates, journalists have lost their primary pro-government voice and are likely to turn to English-speaking, media savvy anti-government intellectuals who are more than happy to share their opinions and meet them in the cocktail lounge of the Hilton.

It is also important to remember that in Latin America, telephone ownership is far from ubiquitous, the further down the social ladder one is, the less likely owning a phone becomes, let alone a computer. Therefore, the two primary methods of journalistic communication are fundamentally elitist, leaving out large swaths of the population, some of whom are virtually uncontactable through standard journalistic methods. This should be added to the class segregation of the city already noted. In general, the poor of Caracas support the government and the rich oppose it (Cannon, 2008). Journalists felt this constricted their reporting,

Jim Wyss: “I think you miss a lot of the feeling of what is going on in the street. You miss a lot of subtleties...you are restricted to have phones, which, in Latin America, leaves a lot of people out.”

The government has effectively shunned the foreign press, whom it feels goes out of its way to present the country poorly. Many international newspapers, such as *The New York Times* endorsed the coup that overthrew it in 2002. Delacour (2005) studied found that on the opinion pages of the twenty-five highest-circulating newspapers in the United States, ninety-five percent showed open hostility towards the government. As such, the Venezuelan government has given up on the foreign press as beyond hope, and focused its efforts in building alternatives to traditional media. Whether or not being more open to foreign journalists would ease the tensions is a point of debate. Certainly, many of the interviewees felt this way. Francisco Toro felt the Venezuelan government had developed a bunker mentality- “They are convinced that foreign media are part of some giant conspiracy against them, so they do not want to talk to them.”

Brian Ellsworth explained how this led into a vicious circle,

Brian Ellsworth: “The implicit strategy there is that the questions never get answered. And I think it also has to do with the fact that for quite some time the government decided that the press was an enemy and that there was no value in trying to promote its image in the press, simply because there was no respect for the press...*it ends up being this vicious circle where you talk less to the press so there is less actual information and rumors just bounce around and no one responds to them, so they just become truths*” (emphasis added).

Consequently, allegations became facts, as we saw in chapters 3-7. As we can see, journalists were aware that the government and much of the population considered them dishonest and siding with their governments and the Venezuelan elite. However, most seemed to view this notion as risible. New journalists arrive in Venezuela and are met with hostility by the government, who distrust them. In contrast, the light-skinned upper-middle-class opposition are very accommodating and are keen to attend to their needs. They are happy to give interviews and answer emails and calls. They usually speak good English, dress in a similar fashion and live similar, westernized lifestyles, often attending the same universities as the journalists themselves. In short, their appearance and outlooks are distinctly similar to the newly arrived journalists. In contrast, the poor, dark-skinned, Spanish speaking *chavistas*, who live on the other side of the city and are suspicious of foreign journalists are unlikely to befriend them. Therefore, the intersection of class, race, education, and outlook mean foreign journalists slip into life in the opposition’s cultural bubble, unless they actively fight against it. Particularly after the 2002 coup, the government gave up on cultivating a good relationship with the international media, whereas the opposition prioritized it.

Furthermore, in Venezuela, because of the class nature of politics, the traditional elites tend to be dismissive if not hostile to government policies and associate themselves with the opposition. Therefore, the traditional “objective experts” that journalists may turn to in Western societies- university professors, think tanks, business representatives, judges etc. have very particular views on each subject. This is true in all countries but particularly the case in unequal Latin American societies where social mobility is very low. As a consequence it

can often seem to a journalist that “everybody” has negative views of the situation in Venezuela. This is because a disproportional amount of Venezuelans a journalist meets do, because *they are meeting a pre-selected subset of the population that coincides closely with opposition supporters.*

The next chapter deals with the inner workings of how news gets made, and how this shapes the coverage.

Chapter Ten, Inside the News Factory

Girish Gupta: “The journalism industry is a mess.”

A Lack of Interest

The first thing to say about Western coverage of Latin America is that there is not very much of it. This is especially true of tabloid newspapers. Although interest in Venezuela in particular has greatly increased, there is markedly less coverage of Latin America than of Europe and North America. There continues to be almost complete silence with regards to entire countries such as Paraguay, Ecuador or Bolivia in the Western media. *Virtually all the information that British and American people receive about Venezuela and South America more generally is created and cultivated by a handful of people.* In 2009, Davies (2009: 104) noted that more than forty percent of the world’s nations have no major newswire staff stationed inside them, and that that figure is rising. Judging by the amount of column inches the continent receives, there is a distinct lack of interest in the West.

Girish Gupta: “A lot of the British press do not care too much for Latin America. I remember one foreign editor of *The Times* saying that Britain’s interest was centered around the old colonial countries, and you see that in the press, when you flip through *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, etc. Therefore that means that Venezuela coverage is not that good in the sense that there is not much of it and the stuff the British papers have generally is not very good. They do not put much effort in to it; they do not put much money into it. Without money and effort you do not get good journalism... And you see that a lot with the British press’ coverage of the country.”

There was a distinct feeling among the interviewees that Latin American news mattered little, and there was a shift towards Asia, particularly China, as

that is considered the future, geopolitically, and for Western investors. However, due to the connections between Latin America and the US- the region was considered “America’s backyard” for a long time- there is more coverage in American newspapers, with *The Miami Herald* providing the most. This is due to the high number of Latinos living in the city that is often referred to as “the capital of Latin America.” Therefore, there is still high demand for news on Venezuela from some quarters.

Executives and editors who make these decisions often assert pressure on the content of the news in other ways as well.

Editorial Lines and Pressures from Higher Ups

The possibility of an editorial line affecting the nature of the content was an issue that the academics wished investigated further. Most of the academics felt that there was clearly an editorial line with some, if not most of the media in the sample. Indeed, Hudson stated that,

Ian Hudson: “Unless you have got some sort of theory about the editorial line of the newspaper and the interests that that newspaper serves, you do run into trouble in terms of explaining the stories that get run.”

Therefore, the journalists were asked about how the news is made and where the initiative for the stories comes from. There was a mixed response. The ideas for most of the stories they run come from themselves. However, on occasion, they were instructed to write about a particular topic or incident. The following two responses are representative of what they said.

Girish Gupta: “Sometimes I will pitch stuff. Sometimes editors will come to me. Sometimes I will say ‘no’. There is a bit of negotiation as well. It depends what I want to be doing.”

Journalist 1: “I guess it is a little bit of both. My colleague and I will constantly be pitching story ideas and pursuing things. Sometimes an editor

might say ‘this issue is really interesting and I don’t think we have covered it very much’ and we might do a story into that.”

The interviewees were asked how much pressure they felt they were under from their editors. They initially rejected the idea that they were under any pressure to conform to a certain editorial line, as some academics believed. Furthermore, journalists who reproduced the dominant narrative on Venezuela dismissed the claim that editors censored them. Jim Wyss said,

Jim Wyss: “I have never heard anybody in the international press saying they were being restricted in any way.”

Yet the dissenting journalists, Jones and Kennard, contradicted this idea.

Bart Jones: “What you might see from [your editors in] New York a little bit more would sometimes be some of the direction too, when it came to the political stuff anyway. *They were very careful to make sure that a certain point of view was strongly in there...I think you definitely had to temper what you were writing. There was a clear sense that this guy [Chavez] was a threat to democracy and we really need to be talking to these opponents and get that perspective out there.* You know, there was an emphasis put on that” (emphasis added).

When told that his colleagues said they do not temper what they write, Jones responded,

Bart Jones: “Right, because they are with the anti-Chavez and anti-Maduro line now. So that is acceptable, that is ok for these organizations to write that way.”

Kennard claimed he practiced self-censorship in anticipation of editorial censorship,

“I just never even pitched stories that I knew would never get in. What you read in my book would just never, ever, in any form, even in news form,

get into the FT. And I knew that and I wasn't stupid enough to even pitch it. I knew it wouldn't even be considered. After I got knocked back from pitching various articles I just stopped.

Interviewer: “So it sounds like it is self-censorship.”

Matt Kennard: “Completely. But most people don't realize they are doing it...if Simon Romero of *The New York Times* started writing pro-Chavez articles, he'd be out on his ear soon enough.”

Kennard also gave specific examples of editorial censorship in favour of state power,

Matt Kennard: “At the *FT*, I actually carried on writing as I would. So I put in things like ‘US-backed’ when describing US-backed dictators, when the convention is to just put ‘Russian-backed’ or ‘Iranian-backed’ if they are a bad guy. But I kept doing it because I wanted to test out that *Manufacturing Consent* idea. *And it was explicit. What happens if you put ‘US-backed’ into a newspaper? Will they take it out? Yes.* And the funny thing is that no one would ever know because the journalists would just never [even] *think* it. It is a form of mind control because everyone thinks they are free. And the best people to write censored articles are people who don't even realize they are performing self-censorship.”

It should be remembered that in large news organizations these editors are not in the same building as the journalists. In fact, they are not even on the same continent. For example, Anatoly Kurmanaev said for many pieces he needs the approval of editors in Brazil or New York to write and it subsequently gets dissected in many stages of editing by people who may never have been to the country. Bart Jones commented on the system; “It is bizarre. Certainly, some editor in London or wherever, what is he going to know about the place?” The multiple levels of editorial bureaucracy a story has to pass through filters the content. Editors are effectively deciding what is news and what the public hears about Venezuela from desks in Brazil, London or the United States. Thus, the worldwide understanding of Venezuela is generated not only by a handful of

people, but shaped and edited by administrators who do not live in the country and may have never been there. Editors for large news organizations are likely to have a very particular outlook on the world. Kurmanaev stated that,

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “You always have editors and they have their ideas, they have a particular way of looking at things which, because they do not live in the country, they do not really see how it really is, they do not really understand it- especially a country like Venezuela which is really hard to get your head around. So, of course, your journalistic output is constrained by your editors’ beliefs. But that is normal in any large news organization.”

However, the influence of higher-ups on the coverage of Venezuela is not limited to editorial input. Sometimes journalists are essentially instructed to cover an issue by high management and ownership. Jim Wyss confided that,

Jim Wyss: “Every now and then you will get something from my boss’ boss. They will be like ‘hey, what do you think about this?’ and what that means is ‘go out and investigate it.’ Or at least prove to them that it is not a story. Every now and then at a cocktail party they will hear something they think is a story and they say ‘hey, what do you know about this?’ and you have to go and shoot things down. But that is the same with any organization, when your high-up bosses make mild suggestions, you take them very seriously.”

The question may be asked whether what an executive or owner hears at a cocktail party about a country with a self-declared socialist government may be accurate and whether rumour and hearsay deserve to be news, or whether their opinions should translate into coverage. Venezuelans at cocktail parties in the United States are likely to be ex-pats with strongly negative views about the country. *The Miami Herald* (March 5th, 2013) noted that more than 95 percent of Venezuelans in the US voted for the opposition. The Miami ex-pat community is disproportionately comprised of wealthy businesspeople with links to the old elite. In contrast, it is unlikely to find a Chavez supporter outside of Venezuela. As Kennard noted,

Matt Kennard: “If you meet a Venezuelan in London or Glasgow they’re going to be someone who can afford to leave Venezuela and get a plane ticket here to holiday or study. The people from the *barrios* you never hear, just for the prosaic reason that they are just a completely different demographic. When you talk to them, they are a displaced elite. They have had their power taken away from them. They are not going to be happy about it.”

The ex-pat community, known to be bastions of hardline conservative anti-*chavista* sentiment also directly contributes to what news and opinions are shared about Venezuela. In addition to flak they give journalists who are not hard enough on the government, according to Wyss,

Jim Wyss: “Every now and then editors will hear something that the Venezuelan community or the Miami community is interested in knowing about. [They say] ‘Hey, why don’t you look into this?’”

Therefore, the notorious Miami ex-pat community sometimes dictates the stories and issues that *The Herald* covers. Perhaps this could explain its reputation as particularly antagonistic with regards to Venezuela and Cuba.

When journalists cover breaking news and very small stories, they are not constrained by editors because they are not expected to seek or wait for editorial consent. But they are under other pressures, those of time and concision.

Time and Space Constraints

Journalists have always worked to a deadline in order that their stories can make it into the newspaper or the television programme. However, with the rise of the Internet, the time pressure has been upped significantly. This is particularly a concern for newswire journalists, whose aim is to beat the competition and make sure their story is picked up before their competitors’. Journalists’ professional lives can include hours of boredom followed by minutes of frantic, high-adrenaline action putting together a breaking news story. The pressures are raised due to the fact that newswire journalists are competing

over milliseconds to be the first on the wire because people are buying and selling bonds based on what they write. Many journalists agreed that the quality of coverage is often sacrificed to the speed,

Journalist 2: “You have got to be very fast because you are supposed to first in covering anything you are covering. And that speed competes with the depth of the news sometimes.”

Jones noted that time pressure made it less likely for journalists to represent the views of ordinary Venezuelans,

Bart Jones: “You are always working fast at these agencies. You have got to get the news out right away. And that could be a factor in terms of ‘whom can I get a hold of quickly to give me a comment?’ Well it is not going to be Juan or Maria over there in the *barrio* because they don’t have cell phones. So you can often get a guy like [anti-government pollster] Luis Vicente Leon on the phone very quickly.”

This raises the question of how can a journalist really challenge a narrative if they have only a few minutes to write a story. In the era of 24-hour news and Internet journalism, there is a heavy emphasis put on speed (Barnett, 2011: 214-215). This emphasis has the effect of forcing the journalists to stick to tried and tested narratives and explanations, reproducing what has come before. The importance of being first to print also means that journalists cannot go into detail either, leaving the content both shallow in terms of analysis and similar to previous content. Kennard summed it up,

Matt Kennard: “Even if we were inclined [to challenge dominant narratives], there’s no time to even do it anyway. If we’re on the deadline and we have about five minutes to write a story, we can’t go into some extensive analysis of why some term that is used by everyone is wrong.”

A second, related problem that pushes journalists towards reproducing dominant narratives is that of concision. The journalists said they usually have a very small word limit to fill in their stories, Journalist 1 saying that 800 words

would be considered a “pretty meaty story.” Venezuelan news is usually not considered important enough to merit a great deal of space in newspapers meaning in-depth stories about the country are few and far between. As many news sources predominantly look for short pieces, more thoughtful reflections are harder to pitch. For instance, Girish Gupta said, “I normally know what I am getting into. If I want to write a big magazine piece I am not going to pitch it to *Reuters* who only allow 500-600 words.”

Herman and Chomsky (1988) have argued that the effect of concision- having to produce brief pieces of media- has the effect of regurgitating stereotypes and well-trodden narratives. How can somebody cogently argue against a dominant narrative in four hundred words of type or sixty seconds of airtime? Concision has the effect of limiting debate, as views that depart from the standard, hegemonic, running narrative cannot be fully articulated in a few words or seconds. In contrast, arguing for the hegemonic worldview is much easier, as the journalist can draw a reservoir of background knowledge and assumptions about the country. Therefore, what we find in the media is many of the same tropes, ideas and facts repeated over and over again.

The journalists were asked why many of the tropes and stereotypes appeared. They responded that the level of knowledge and public understanding of the situation in Venezuela was so low that they were forced to keep their articles very simple and constantly remind their readers of what they considered the key actors and events. Toro articulated this well,

Francisco Toro: “It is more about what level of knowledge you can take for granted. It is still 2015 and even today I have to take ten words out of my precious 800 to explain who Hugo Chavez was! You have to say something because you cannot assume a reader is going to remember that.”

There was also a sense that editors want something that will resonate with readers, and that is usually a stereotypical portrayal of an exotic country, when, in fact, everyday life in Venezuela is quite mundane,

Brian Ellsworth: “Definitely, correspondents that rotate a lot, there is a certain echo-chamber that you can get sucked into and a certain outside vision of the way people want to see a country. They want something really exotic when the place is just normal...that kind of thing sells really well.”

Journalists operate under a standard capitalistic framework. The question they ask themselves is “will this resonate with readership?” If their stories resonate with readership, they will get clicks, which drives up audience numbers and profits. As discussed in the literature review, today many organizations employ increasingly sophisticated algorithms to track what audiences search for online and to suggest what topics new articles should cover (Anderson 2011a, 2011b) in order to generate the most popular content. The problem, as Ellsworth explained, is that often these assumptions that underpin interest in a country prove to be quite outdated, if not false. However, these assumptions drive readers to their websites, something discussed next.

Wacky Stories and Clickbait

Journalists said they felt that their editors often wanted to cover stories they knew would be read and shared online. Editors are primarily interested in the bottom line, rather than good journalism. As we have seen, there is a great deal of salacious stories about Venezuela in the Western press. One explanation for this is that outlets were more interested in providing clickbait than news. Clickbait is a pejorative term for sensational or provocative stories designed to pique the reader’s interest. It is generally considered a cheap trick in the profession. However, in the drive for more views and shares in a competitive marketplace, there was a tendency even for highly-respected news organizations to sex up their stories with catchy titles³⁶. Even the BBC, which carries no advertising, told its staff to “emulate *Buzzfeed*” and produce clickbait to generate pageviews (Burrell, 2015).

³⁶ In chapter seven we saw how the media presented the 2014 *guarimbas* as widespread, serious and bringing the nation to the brink of collapse. Headlines such as “Caracas chaos: Venezuelan general on the run; Death in the streets, rationing by fingerprints and a general on the run: how oil-rich Venezuela has descended into chaos” (The Daily Telegraph, April 5th) exemplify this.

Girish Gupta: “A lot of journalists who are staff journalists complain to me that clickbait is what they are being asked for. And they have to do it because they are contracted by the company to do it. That is a big problem.”

One example of clickbait is in 2016 where *Agence France-Presse* erroneously reported that due to socialism, burgers cost US\$170 in Venezuela. It was widely picked up by other media despite it being baseless. One updated story read “The story has been killed by Agency France-Presse due to errors in the exchange rate. You may still be able to buy a burger at somewhat affordable prices but it doesn’t negate the fact that Venezuela is in a death spiral thanks to socialism” (Vespa, 2016).

The drive to pander to their audience was felt by some journalists. But Anatoly Kurmanaev defended clickbait as a way of drawing readers in to read about serious problems. He gave the example of the complex, multiple-tiered exchange rate system in Venezuela, which is designed to discourage people from exchanging money and the shortages in some goods. This was a very dry story, therefore Kurmanaev argued,

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “Your challenge is how do you make this exciting, interesting for an average reader, for a housewife in Hertfordshire. A couple of times from my experience you try to use, I wouldn’t call them ‘cheap tricks’, but yeah, kind of sexy tricks. Just last week we had a story about condom shortages in Venezuela. At the official exchange rate condoms were at like \$750 dollars or something and the headline was something like ‘\$750 dollar condom in Venezuela’ and everyone clicks it, everyone is like ‘Jesus, why do they sell it for like \$750?’ But once you click hopefully that reader is hooked and he or she will keep reading about really important issues like HIV problems, teenage pregnancies, the social impacts of lack of contraception, the public health impact. Things that I do feel are important to tell the world, but you do have to use sexy tactics for it.”³⁷

The journalists agreed this was a common tactic. Ellsworth said,

³⁷ This story has been criticized by other journalists in Venezuela as baseless, sensationalist clickbait making the same deliberate exchange rate mistake as the burger story. They report that the cost of condoms is no higher than US\$8, not US\$755 as widely reported (Koerner, 2015).

Brian Ellsworth: “Yeah, Anatoly is under a lot of pressure to get clicks. I would say all reporters have to do that. Who wants to read about an exchange rate? That is endemic to journalism...They tend to push the same buttons over and over again, hit the same themes and use the same catchphrases...Editors want you to write the most clickable thing and if you can write a story.”

It should be noted that nearly all the journalists interviewed knew each other. Journalist 1 was unrepentant and defended the practice,

Journalist 1: “I think you are right. If I were to put the words “condoms” and “\$755 dollars” in a headline of my story I will probably get a lot of traffic and probably a pat on the back for it. But in my experience it has not been much of an issue. But I imagine for newer media- for websites that need traffic...like *Buzzfeed* or something may go for that sensationalist strategy to generate traffic. I am not very critical of that.”

This is one factor in the amount of melodramatic headlines about Venezuela. Some of the interviewees decried the lack of coverage of the missions: the huge health, education and other social programmes that have generated great interest in academia (Angosto-Ferrandez, 2014, Brouwer, 2011, Muntater *et al.*, 2008). Brodzhinsky was asked whether the editors’ focus on sensationalistic stories of conflict meant a lack of focus on important social improvements:

Interviewer: “So things like social issues, health and nutrition are quite hard to sell to editors?”

Sibylla Brodzhinsky: Yes, unless it is ‘sexy’.

Today, clickbait stories are prevalent throughout journalism, even if journalists are not specifically instructed to produce it. Wyss said that he gets a daily list of the most clicked-on articles on his website but says that there is no one telling him to “get more mentions of Lady Gaga and tits into your story.” The problem with clickbait is that it draws attention away from much more

important stories about social issues and politics. Furthermore, because of the prevalence of wacky stories about Venezuela there has been a tendency to not see it as a serious country, being presented as a dysfunctional tropical banana republic.

Certainly Presidents Chavez and Maduro had eccentric streaks and a willingness to make colourful statements, which added to the zany portrayal of the country. Toro explained that every time the President made a silly comment, editors would telephone him and ask him to explain it in writing for the paper. Certainly this aided journalists getting their work published. It is much easier to sell a story about Hugo Chavez comparing President Bush to the Devil than it is one about health reforms or organic food cooperatives. There was “a steady supply and demand of insanity.” The problem was that it became difficult to get anything other than wacky articles published.

Francisco Toro: “Venezuela tended to get pigeonholed into this ‘in other news’, ‘and now for a wacky, humorous break from reality let’s laugh at these South Americans paying \$755 for a pack of condoms.’”

Western audiences have little background knowledge of Latin America. Western journalists are in a similar position. The problem of a lack of understanding among both parties, added together to the problem of time pressure and concision mean that many running narratives, or memes, are formed about the country which prove hard to break down. Therefore, Venezuela becomes a non-serious country run by a crackpot dictator rather than a progressive democratic experiment. These memes become powerful constraints on introducing alternative perspectives. As a result, no evidence is needed in order to claim Hugo Chavez is a dictator, because it is part of the running narrative. Indeed, some journalists spend an entire article arguing that he was democratically elected, something that should be redundant, like spending an article arguing David Cameron is a Conservative. To describe in an off-hand manner President Barack Obama as a dictator (as 74 articles in the sample described Chavez) or David Cameron as an authoritarian strongman (as 44 articles did) would be considered a grave breach of journalistic rules. Yet this is the power of the running narrative; ideas that go against it are discarded,

ridiculed or attacked because they do not fit the established meme. Davies (2009: 129) describes the danger of the meme:

“The unstated consensus assumption becomes particularly dangerous when it becomes part of a running narrative, so that media outlets are trapped by the story they have told so far, unwilling to allow uncomfortable facts to become part of the story.”

For all of this, however, it does not explain in great detail the coverage. Journalists like Owen Jones and Seumas Milne argued against the established narratives and presented the country in a more favourable light. It should be noted Jones and Milne are both well-established journalists in high positions and were very well read. They would therefore have more leeway to argue against the editorial line than many new journalists who have to fear being sacked as newspapers continue to cut staff.

Cuts, Cuts, and more Cuts

The worldwide phenomenon of newsrooms cutting staff is well-documented (Noam, 2009, Nicholas and McChesney, 2013, Curran, 2011). Newspapers, television and radio have all suffered sharp drops in audience numbers. Furthermore, the advent of companies such as Google AdSense has enabled corporations to directly target the exact audience they want, bypassing media organizations, leading to reduced advertising rates across all platforms.

Journalists are expected to write more in less time and with fewer resources than ever. Today, there are far more PR staff than journalists (Davis, 2003: 28-32, US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2015). This was a common thread in the interviews. Today, there are fewer and fewer foreign correspondents in Latin America. It is also expensive to send a reporter to Venezuela. Flights, hotels, an interpreter, security and a stringer or a fixer are a significant outlay, even for rich news organizations. Smaller news organizations such as regional newspapers rarely spend the money, instead simply mirroring the coverage of the larger newspapers. As news organizations try to trim their payroll and cut

costs, they have become increasingly reliant on news wire services and local journalists. The resultant effect on the quality of journalism has taken its toll.

Michael Derham: “What we have seen is the death of the foreign correspondent...it is really problematical. Often foreign correspondents came from the wealthy upper-middle classes as well, but at least they were nearby what was happening. Now you get reports on Venezuela written by somebody in Buenos Aires. And it is the same in other parts of the world, it is just ludicrous. They do not really know what is happening, they are not experts in the country.”

The result has been a great increase in parachute journalism: foreign journalists who fly into a country for a short period to cover a specific event or story and then leave shortly thereafter.

Davies (2009: 106-107) has documented how often “news” appearing in print is simply regurgitated from press releases and wire services, sometimes rewritten and editorialized to different perspectives but sometimes literally *verbatim*. This was seen in the sample. For example, *The New York Times* regularly published *Reuters* newswires *verbatim*, whereas *The Daily Telegraph* did the same with both *Reuters* and *AP*. Much of *The Miami Herald's* content came syndicated through The McClatchy Company, which owns more than 30 newspapers in the United States.

This is a serious threat to the public’s right to a wide range of viewpoints on key issues as major newspapers on the opposite side of the political spectrum may have the same news and views. Thus, the Overton Window, the range of political expression in the country, narrows. There are fewer specialist correspondents than ever and their work is now being done by journalists who are ill equipped to replace them. The journalists themselves often lack the academic background and the detailed knowledge necessary to accurately describe what is an extremely complex and detailed political situation. The continued budget cuts have stripped news organizations of some of their best staff, according to some.

Girish Gupta: “One newspaper’s correspondent was down here recently. His pieces were not good, frankly. They were not right. They did not really understand what was happening...Nowadays with the drop in resources you are getting editors who do not know as much as their predecessors. Three years ago my direct editor was a man who knew Latin America inside out. He worked here twenty years and interviewed Hugo Chavez- he really knew it inside out. He got kicked out because he was too expensive. Since then there have been maybe half a dozen editors who, frankly have been lower and lower quality every time. And it is frustrating to deal with people like that because they can’t see the nuances in the story...That is a bigger constraint than the Venezuelan government... Ironically, one of my biggest constraints is just the industry.”

Leaving aside whether that is ironic or not, serious questions have been raised about the viability of this style of journalism. Increasingly, stories about Venezuela are being filed from Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo or even London. What insight a reporter could have from those locations is debatable. Correspondents who are stationed in Latin America are instructed to cover multiple countries’ news from their posts. Two of the interviewees lived in Colombia and only rarely even visited Venezuela. One lived in the United States. The problem with reporting from afar is at least as pressing as the problem of living in the Caracas bubble. How can journalists accurately gauge the public mood if they never interact with the Venezuelan public? What news can journalists report on other than repeating statements from officials or copying something they read on the newswire? Talking to Jim Wyss, *The Miami Herald* correspondent in Bogota, the magnitude of the problem became clear.

Jim Wyss: “I report mainly on the Andean region: Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. But when something really big happens elsewhere then sometimes they can find the budget to allow me to go and cover it. But really it comes down to whatever I can cover from my desk here in Bogota.”

Interviewer: “So does that cause problems when you have to do a story about Ecuador or Venezuela?”

Jim Wyss: “I am luckier than most. I can usually figure out a way to get there. I travel cheap. But the budget is an issue and there are certainly things we haven’t covered as fully as we should have because there simply was not the money to get on an airplane.”

Interviewer: “So there is a lot you want to cover but can’t for whatever reason?”

Jim Wyss: “I wouldn’t say lots but I would say on occasion. *Part of the problem is that I am the only person [for the Latino newspaper Miami Herald] in South America.* I have my hands quite full between Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador but it does happen every now and again that something interesting will be happening elsewhere and I just cannot rationalize it.”

Interviewer: “I thought *The Miami Herald* had a really high rate of Latino readership and you are the only one in South America?”

Jim Wyss: “Well, it does, in theory. *But with years of budget cuts the paper is about half the size it was when I first started there in 2005. There are three reporters on the world desk, two of them are reporting from Miami, one covers Cuba and Brazil from Miami, the other one covers mainly Haiti and the other parts of the Caribbean. But in terms of in the field, I am it right now...When you talk about full-time newspaper correspondents in Latin America you are talking about The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Miami Herald...And that is it as far as I know*” (emphasis added).

Therefore, there are four correspondents for all of Latin America for the entirety of the American press. The death of the foreign correspondent is an accurate metaphor. Even *The Miami Herald*, a newspaper that positions itself as being the voice of the Latino community in the United States, has only one correspondent in South America. Wyss is paid to cover three countries himself, keeping him occupied. Thus, for *The Miami Herald*, news simply does not occur in Chile, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia or a number of other South American countries. *In terms of foreign correspondents, Wyss said for major English-*

language newspapers, only The New York Times has one in Venezuela. There are no full-time correspondents stationed in Venezuela for any British news source. It follows that, for the entirety of the English-language press, there is one full-time correspondent in Venezuela. The effect on the public understanding of Venezuela is that it creates a vacuum of understanding. Davies (2009: 100) describes a further effect,

“This tends to produce a consensus- and conservative- account of the world: reporters are flown out from their home bases at a few hours notice and arrive in today’s trouble spot with nothing but their preconceptions to guide them; then they plug in to a handful of obvious sources, usually including their own embassy, to have those preconceptions reinforced by official sources.”

As we will see, news organizations therefore are highly reliant on news wires and local stringers. However, this comes with its own problems.

Reliance on Newswires and Stringers

In an attempt to save money, newspapers worldwide have reduced the amount of original content they create by sacking journalists, correspondents and editors, outsourcing their work to stringers or simply repeating the information from newswires such as *Bloomberg* and *Reuters*. In terms of the objectivity and accuracy of the content, this has serious consequences. Firstly, international news agencies are fundamentally linked to the international business class and powerful Western interests, whose interests are diametrically opposed to the stated aims of the Bolivarian Revolution. In the authoritative history of the company, Read (1999) chronicled how *Reuters* grew as the official news service of the British Empire, entwined with the British goal of conquering the world and growing with it. In the late twentieth century, as British power waned and neoliberalism grew, it changed to serve the business community as its new master. Similarly, Boyd-Barrett (1980) argued that news agencies are agents of neoliberal globalization, which the Venezuelan government has identified as the major threat to the world in the twenty-first century. Davies (2009: 52-53) noted that sixty percent of British broadsheet news stories

consisted wholly or partly of wire service stories or PR material but only one percent of stories admitted their source.

Inside these news organizations, journalists are not free to write about what they want. Mirroring the trend other forms of media, there has been a continued stripping down of staff numbers, the journalists increasingly having to cover only what sells and appeals to their clients: international business. The primary audience for newswires such as *Bloomberg* is traders. Therefore, the imperative is to deliver content that resonates with hedge fund managers. It should not come as a surprise that Wall Street bankers and brokers have a very particular view about neoliberal capitalism and the enemies of neoliberal capitalism, and that stories about free healthcare or organic food co-operatives in South America may not appeal to them. Instead, the news has a decidedly economic slant to it, and stories casting the government in a positive light would seem incongruous at best. The second buyers are broadsheet newspapers, which cater to a privileged, middle and upper-middle-class Western audience. Again, this is hardly the audience most likely to be in support of redistribution of income.

Journalists who fit in well with the culture at such a neoliberal organization are distinctly likely to hold anti-Venezuelan government sentiments. Indeed, during the interviews, the newswire journalists held the strongest anti-government opinions, or were at least the most frank about it. Newswires hold enormous influence in the way in which foreign affairs are framed, due to the worldwide reliance on their content. Virtually everything that appears on a newswire will be picked up and reproduced somewhere, often in dozens, if not hundreds of publications. As a result, content aimed at Wall Street traders, hardly a representative group, is reproduced, often *verbatim*, around the world for mass consumption.

Likewise, the tendency to outsource news reporting to cheaper, locally-based stringers is just as problematic. As we have seen in chapters 3-7, the media landscape inside Venezuela is extremely polarized. Journalists working for the traditional news media and able to communicate in English are overwhelmingly likely to hold highly negative views of the government and

recent developments in society, given their class background and the editorial positions the Venezuelan media has taken. Yet these journalists are trusted because they work for well-established news organizations. The journalists feed news stories to international news organizations that are subsequently reproduced in the West.

Consequently, we have a situation where copy from local Venezuelan journalists, writing from a particular ideological slant, can be amplified to an enormous extent through the practice of saving money by outsourcing reporting to them. Journalists who work or have worked for well-established publications are likely thought to provide objective, fair information. However, as explained in chapter four, those newspapers were not neutral organizations, taking a leading role in opposing the *chavista* government. For instance, Journalist 2 worked for both *El Universal* and *El Nacional* in 2002, the year in which those two newspapers took the lead in attempting to overthrow the government two times in less than one year. Yet these are the figures charged today with providing honest, fair and objective reporting on the country. Thus, the world is increasingly and largely reliant for impartial news about a country from news organizations that were involved in overthrowing the president. This speaks to an important phenomenon which deserves to be noted at length: the interconnectedness of the Venezuelan and international media.

The Interconnectedness of the Venezuelan and International Media

The Close Professional Links Between the Venezuelan and “International” Media

There exists an extremely close relationship between the local media and the international press in Venezuela. As documented in chapters 4-7, the local press is characterized by its hostility towards the government. Academics have cited numerous examples of government ministers or advisors being awarded media licenses during the pre-Chavez period, leading to a situation where much of the media had extremely close ties to the old business and political elites, existing to propagate their views (Canizalez and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 196, Fox and Waisbord, 2002: 8-10). As Julia Buxton stated,

Julia Buxton: “The backgrounds of so many of the Venezuelan media houses, [are] with the old political regime...you cannot understand the Venezuelan media as this bastion of free thinking. These are people who are intimately connected and have a vested interest of the pre-Chavez period.”

She went on to catalog what she saw as a serious fault with the reporting of the country; that the international press is intricately intertwined with the traditional Venezuelan media through personal, political and professional relations,

Julia Buxton: “I do not think that the Venezuelan media and the international media are separable. There are contacts, networks, family and alumni links and business relationships between people in Venezuela and people in the US media so it is absolutely no surprise to me that there would be any overlap between these people. Another issue is that journalists are very lazy. It is very easy to just cut and paste that you have already seen in the media. Rather than having investigative journalism what we have instead is a recycling of the material. If your newspaper’s previous position is to ally itself with the opposition, then it is in your interest to cut and paste or follow the same line as what is being pursued in the US and the UK media. But these people are all interconnected; they are not separate media outlets who happen to coincide, these people are closely related.”

Being so closely associated with a bastion of anti-government activism influences journalists’ reporting. As noted previously, all seven newspapers in the study consistently took editorial positions strongly against the Venezuelan government. As we have seen already in chapter nine, journalists live in a bubble of privilege where they spend an inordinate amount of time with members of the Venezuelan elite. New journalists arrive and are socialized into the opposition camp and are immersed into a strongly anti-government culture. They also spend a good deal of their job conversing and working with traditional local journalists, some of whom were complicit in numerous attempts to violently overthrow the government. Journalists confirmed they had close contact with their local colleagues. However, those spoken to did not see this as

a problem. Indeed, some felt that working with locals deeply enriched their own views, experiences and work,

Brian Ellsworth: “I have quite a bit of contact with local reporters. I was involved in a group in 2002-04 that came up as a result of concern of the media blackout of 2002. And I met a lot of local reporters that way and I became very close friends with a lot of them and I think it is hugely beneficial to the correspondent because there is a natural, symbiotic relationship there with local reporters. They cover things in more detail than the foreign reporters do so they can help you get ahead on things. And in the other direction, foreign correspondents frequently come into town and say ‘I need someone to help me with this’ and I say ‘go talk to so-and-so’ so you can send jobs to people and if they need information from out of the country we can use our own networks to get that sometimes.”

Here we can see how personal and professional contacts grow. Foreign reporters are sent to work closely with local journalists, whom they believe to be neutral professionals, for help and information. This is another strand to the way in which the journalistic bubble is created and maintained. As we shall see shortly, journalists do not see a conflict of interest in working with local journalists because they consider the local journalists not to be radical anti-government activists, but impartial professionals under attack from an authoritarian government.

In her assessment of the coverage, Associate Dean Buxton highlighted the familial links that coloured some journalists’ coverage,

Julia Buxton: “There was also a lot of familial and personal interest tied in there as well. I know some journalists like Phil Gunson³⁸ were married to a Venezuelan and there was a tendency to bring in strongly personal perspectives on what was happening in the country.”

³⁸ Gunson has written about Venezuela for a great number of Western publications, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Newsweek*.

It was found to be the case that some journalists in the sample did have familial ties in Venezuela, but again the journalists saw this as a positive factor in their coverage, helping them step out of the bubble,

Brian Ellsworth: “People do like to cast reporters such as myself as clueless and privileged and have never set foot in the *barrio* and that is frankly absurd...my wife is Venezuelan, I have extended family and they are Venezuelan. Yeah, there are people who live in the ex-pat cocoon and I would not describe my life that way.”

However, it is crucial to note that the ties to the Venezuelan media are closer even than marriage. In fact, many of the people producing content for English-language media are, in fact, Venezuelans themselves. Even more than that, media organizations are hiring Venezuelan journalists with a past record working in organizations radically opposed to the government and representing a very specific socio-economic class. *In this sense, it can be said that there is little difference between the internal Venezuelan media and the international media. The Venezuelan media is the international media and vice versa.* All the major international news organizations and most newspapers have ex-opposition Venezuelan journalists on their staff. For instance, *The Guardian* and the BBC have employed Virginia López-Glass, a local journalist hostile to the government, while Emilia Díaz-Struck, who writes for *The Washington Post*, also wrote for *El Nacional* and *El Universal*; two newspapers that helped overthrow the government in 2002. She also co-founded the news site *Armando.info*, which runs stories with one thing in common: an aversion to the Venezuelan government. Thus, it may be difficult to tell whether she is a journalist or an anti-government activist. As we have seen in chapters one and 3-7, the Venezuelan media landscape is highly polarized, and, therefore, individual journalists cannot be trusted to simply provide accurate stories. Journalist 2 shared their professional background,

Journalist 2: “I have been working at this news organization since 2009. I am Venezuelan. I started at *El Nacional*, which is one of the biggest newspapers in Venezuela. Then I was at *El Universal*, the other standard newspaper for seven years. I wrote a book and then I moved here.”

The two publications mentioned were, at the very least, completely in favour of violently overthrowing the government- the day before the 2002 coup against Chavez *El Nacional* told its readers to “take to the streets, not one step backwards!” while *El Universal*’s front-page headline read “A Step Forward!” after Chavez had been deposed.³⁹ Journalists providing supposedly accurate, impartial and fair information for extremely influential news organizations have been associated with the two major establishment Venezuelan newspapers. This proves problematic if we are interested in impartial news. News organizations are even more influential than usual, as we have seen the reliance on news organizations for content on Venezuela is huge. On the subject of working with Venezuelans in news organizations, Bart Jones said,

Bart Jones: “Some of them were outright government haters. One of them said it to me once, ‘we have got to get rid of this guy.’ I think there is a problem in such a heated political environment with people trying to maintain their professional objectivity.”

Thus, many journalists working for Western media see themselves as anti-government activists.

But even without Venezuelans writing the content themselves, the content of the traditional private Venezuelan media finds its way into the international media. Journalists are under significant time pressure and there is a tendency to simply repeat uncritically what they are hearing in the local media. Buxton attributed this to laziness. However, it is natural that what journalists write about are influenced by what they read, hear and see in their daily lives. Therefore one explanatory reason for the particular negative international coverage of Venezuela is the internal coverage is negative as well. If, as the journalists and opposition academics claim, the coverage of the government has softened internally in the past few years, we should see a drop in hostility in the international press. But no such drop was noted in this study. Journalists spoken to agreed that the local media influenced their stories, with

³⁹ See chapter four for a full discussion

Bart Jones explaining the problem with regurgitating content from Venezuelan media,

Bart Jones: “We would all definitely read those local papers. That would be your first duty of the day, to see what they had. And they could even directly take from it and make a story out of it. ‘*El Nacional* reported blah blah blah,’ you know? Obviously the local media down there was totally anti-Chavez...they were not just anti-Chavez but they were trying to overthrow him. So if you are an international journalist and you are relying on those publications for your information it is a little bit problematic. Especially if you are not even going to do your own reporting and you are just going to take what they say and turn it into a story.”

Thus, time-pressed journalists often simply copy stories from local newspapers. These newspapers are strongly critical of the government. Therefore, ideas and assertions against the government are repeated, amplified, given credence and a much larger, international audience.

Venezuelan journalists and academics that subscribe to the authoritarian government theme are given a platform in the international media. However, those who do not share this viewpoint are ignored. Lupien described the phenomenon,

Pascal Lupien: “In various news sources you see certain Venezuelan journalists or academics who have left the country and live in the US commenting on stories from Venezuela. They are given legitimacy by the fact that they are from Venezuela, but of course they are all coming from a particular socio-economic background and represent a particular set of interests. There are quite a few journalists in Venezuela who are *chavistas*. Venezuela has an entire system of community-run media which is not associated with the government. It tends to be pro-government but it is not state-run. And they have grassroots journalism, but we do not see them. The ones the Western media call on tend to be from the same socio-economic group.”

Prominent opposition figures are awarded the opportunity to write for influential newspapers and magazines. For instance, writers for the influential opposition blog *Caracas Chronicles* also wrote for the flagship journal *Foreign Affairs* and the paper of repute, *The New York Times*. *Caracas Chronicles'* founder Francisco Toro wrote news for *The New York Times* until media watchdog organization, *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* lobbied the newspaper, pointing to the conflict in interest in employing perhaps Venezuela's most prominent and opinionated opposition blogger to provide objective reporting about the country. In contrast, pro-government journalists in Venezuela are not asked to help with stories for the foreign press and academics sympathetic to the *chavistas* are rarely contacted for quotes on current events, let alone asked to write articles for establishment publications. As Derham said when asked if he is ever contacted by the media, "Press interest? Absolutely not. I don't think my opinions would fit in with what they want to broadcast."

Kevin Young found the idea of being contacted by journalists asking his opinion so unlikely as to be laughable,

Interviewer: Do you get contacted by journalists asking your opinions?

Kevin Young: Uh, no! (Laughs). I am not angry that they are not contacting me in particular because there are more qualified experts on Venezuela who approach the issue from a progressive and analytical perspective, like Steve Ellner. People like him are the sorts of experts who I think the media should be turning to, at least to accompany the other voices they have in their reports...*The sources that are consulted, who the media tend to turn to are people who agree with the official line on Venezuela, and critical voices tend to be shut out*" (emphasis added).

Unfortunately, it transpired that some academics that did not toe the editorial line of the press had, in their own words, been "blacklisted" from the Western media, a "really common" occurrence for academics who do not repeat the official line, according to Buxton. She explained that,

Julia Buxton: “Some of these opinion formers around Venezuela are connected to things like the Carnegie Foundation, Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institute- the usual think-tanks. These are populated by Venezuelans who are absolutely antithetical to what happened in 1998 and are recalcitrant in their opposition, but they have the access to the think-tanks to be able to articulate that, which is absolutely not the case for people from the pro-government side.”

“[People like Maria Corina Machado and Leopoldo López’s wife are]... moving in and out of the country talking about the terrible restrictions about the freedom of movement and access to the media. But as I said, it just chimes well with a lazy US press which has a vested interest in supporting these people and probably family connections to them.”

The Brookings Institute, funded indirectly through the US Government and directly by some of the largest banks and corporations in the world, sponsors much of the most anti-Venezuelan government intellectuals and studies, such as Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold (2011). As noted before, senior analysts at the Heritage Foundation are lobbying that Venezuela should be placed on the US government list of terrorist states (Walser, 2010).

Another example of this is Moises Naím, who was former Minister of Trade and Industry under President Carlos Andres Perez. He was one of the key figures behind Venezuela’s neoliberal package, which plunged the country into poverty. He was also a major government figure during the *Caracazo*, a government-ordered massacre of the civilian population and the worst massacre in modern Venezuelan history (see chapter three). Naím went to the United States, where he was appointed Executive Director of the World Bank. He has spoken at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, and was editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy*, the most prestigious foreign affairs journal in the world. He is one of the key intellectual and political figures in neoliberal globalization. His views appear syndicated in a wide variety of publications: *Le Monde* (France), *El País* (Spain) *The Washington Post* (USA), *TIME Magazine* (USA), *La Repubblica* (Italy), *The Financial Times* (UK), *Berliner Zeitung* (Germany), *The Atlantic* (USA), in addition to many others. Despite being in charge of the economy during the

worst economic collapse in Venezuelan history, Naím is presented as a politically neutral expert rather than an opinionated actor.

Buxton also discussed how there are interconnected familial connections between politicians, human rights organizations and media outlets,

Julia Buxton: “*The New York Times* gives a very large platform for people like Thor Halvesson. He runs something called the Human Rights Foundation, which is really stretching the concept of human rights. He is always commenting on op-eds in *The New York Times* but what he does not ever disclose unless pressed is that he is the cousin of Leopoldo López. As a point of principle, if somebody like Halvesson is going to be writing commentary on Venezuela for *The New York Times*, that should be disclosed... But better typifying this is Leopoldo López. Again, isn't it this great tragedy that this billionaire is denied access to the media and his human rights when he has got about 90% of the US media and these farcical so-called Human Rights Foundations of his cousin, Thor Halvesson, who are actually working outside of Venezuela to lobby on behalf of him? It is a farce.”

Thus, the opposition is often presented as unable to access the media, when, in reality, it has a great amount of access to the most powerful media in the world. Furthermore, as seen earlier in chapter four, much of the Venezuelan media is openly allied to or even owned by the Venezuelan opposition and takes an anti-government stance.

The newsroom has changed considerably in recent years. As newspapers have lost advertising revenue to online competition, they have cut large numbers of staff. However, with newspapers providing more online and social media content, there is more work to complete. Thus, those remaining journalists are under increasingly severe time pressure to produce more content. Many newspapers have decided that South America is not an important source of news, and have sacked specialist correspondents and primarily cover the area from afar, meaning journalists with limited knowledge, time and experience have to write news about Venezuela. Editorial pressure and pressure from executives make dissenting journalists temper what they write, limiting the

range of debate in the media. Very often, editors are located in different continents and have little experience of the country and are unlikely to understand the realities of what is happening on the ground. The twin pressures of space and time make it harder for journalists to argue against existing narratives on the country. Furthermore, some journalists feel under pressure to get clicks to drive advertising revenue, and alter their stories to be as provocative or extreme as possible.

In other measures to save money, work has been outsourced to local Venezuelan journalists who now provide a significant portion of the West's news on the country. These journalists come from cultures antagonistic to the government and newspapers aligned with the opposition. Furthermore, time-pressed journalists unfamiliar with the country sometimes simply copy what is in the Venezuelan press, leading to a situation where it is difficult to distinguish between the Venezuelan opposition's press and the international press.

Thus, there is an array of practical constraints that colour and shape the coverage of Venezuela. The next part deals with geopolitical explanations for the nature of the reporting.

Chapter Eleven, Geopolitics, the Propaganda Model and Hegemony

As has been stressed previously⁴⁰, the spectrum of opinions about Venezuela is extremely wide. There are numerous politicians and academics that consider the Venezuelan experience an inspiring example to follow and a tonic to the twenty-first century neoliberal malaise (Brouwer, 2011, Azzelini, 2013). On the other hand, there are others that call Venezuela a terrorist state and *chavismo* an ideology that espouses “Marxist-Leninist” dogma and “compulsive anti-Americanism” Walser (2012). In March 2015, the Obama administration declared Venezuela’s internal situation to pose an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” (The White House, 2015) and therefore declared a national emergency. With such a wide spectrum of views on offer from serious, quotable sources, a great range of debate is possible.

However, this study found that, for the most part, the spectrum of opinions offered across the media was decidedly narrow, with all media largely expressing views from the critical half of the debate only. While some newspapers, notably *The Guardian* and *The Independent* did include some opinions from the positive end of the spectrum, these were exceptions and their overall stance was decidedly negative and similar to that of the conservative American newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *Miami Herald*. The difference between the newspapers was largely in tone and emphasis, rather than facts or political perspectives. Furthermore, as shown throughout this study, empirical data from unimpeachable sources easily available in English online very often contradicted the assertions made by the newspapers. In general, the British newspapers were very critical of the Venezuelan government. However, the American newspapers were emphatically so. Buxton

⁴⁰ See chapters 3-7.

predicted these findings, stating that the UK did not have the anti-Cuba anger underpinning much of the US coverage.

Most of the interviewees agreed that there is not great contrast in styles or opinions between outlets from different countries.

For example, Keane Bhatt said,

Keane Bhatt: “I think that when it comes to the US and UK media, I don't really see much of a difference in tone. For example, Rory Carroll [of *The Guardian*] was the most shamelessly partisan reporter when it came to Venezuela and made so many factually inaccurate statements and really deceitful comments about the country, over and over again. So I don't think there is much of a difference between the two sides. I think a lot of it has to do with the UK accepting its role as a junior partner in US geopolitical hegemony on the planet, and so that is the main dynamic in why there is such a big overlap between the US and UK media.”

Most of those interviewed who expressed an opinion on the subject agreed with this study that a seriously limited range of views was offered by the media. Steve Ellner offered an explanation to what he saw as the limited range of debate on offer in the media,

Steve Ellner: “You don't have to believe in conspiracy theory, which I largely question. It is not about these close personal links of control. It is about convergence. Convergence of interests, convergence of ideas. It doesn't have to be that the government and the media are all sitting down at the same table and deciding on what to say about Venezuela and what to do about Venezuela. There is a convergence there. And I think that explains the convergence in reporting on and what is being said about Venezuela. It doesn't necessarily mean that anyone is getting orders from anyone else.”

Here Bhatt and Ellner bring up the influence of Western governments on the media's output, in other words, the geopolitics of the coverage. What they mean merits a detailed discussion.

Geopolitics

The geopolitical positions of the United States, United Kingdom and Venezuela and the wider geopolitical background, explained in chapter one, are important in understanding the issue of how the country is presented today.

In general a country's particular media coverage of Venezuela tends to closely correlate to whatever their government's official position was on the matter. While the newspapers of the United States and United Kingdom have taken antagonistic stances towards the Venezuelan government, Russian state-funded media network *RT* has maintained a sympathetic position towards it (as we saw in chapter seven). This was put forth by Steve Ellner,

Steve Ellner: "That is what the media is reflecting: the US official position. And it has been that way all along...when it comes to foreign policy there is a line. And that line is decided upon from above and passed on to the reporter. So when it comes to hotspots like Venezuela, where there is so much at stake from an ideological viewpoint, even more so. It is as monolithic as you can get."

Therefore, the media do not focus upon the positive societal changes impacting on Venezuela and concentrate on negative stories that place the country in a bad light. Furthermore, there is a constant stream of criticism of the country from Western governments' officials that the media are obliged to cover. This leads to a situation where negative stories about the country and positive stories are systematically rejected. This tells us a great deal about our media but not about Venezuela, as Kevin Young explained,

Kevin Young: Most of the coverage of Venezuela tells us far more about the deeply ingrained biased of the US and UK media themselves than about Venezuela. Pretty much everything that does not fit with the official US government narrative is excluded from coverage. So we hear virtually nothing about the positive improvements in social policy in Venezuela over the past 15 years, reductions in poverty, substantial reductions in inequality as well,

different programs that exist like the promotion of communal councils, the missions, the efforts to expand healthcare and education. All of those things are systematically omitted from coverage.”

As dealt with in chapter one, the United States’, and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain’s has historically been one of great opposition to progressive or left-wing movements in Latin America, with the United States helping to overthrow a number of Latin American governments opposed to their interests, such as in the countries of the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay), Guatemala in 1953 and aiding Britain remove the Jagan administration in Guyana in 1953 (Blum, 2003). Since then it has also propped up reactionary dictatorships across the region such as Bolivia’s General Banzer’s and Paraguay’s General Stroessner’s. Academics were quick to point out the saliency of the United States and British governments’ record,

Lee Salter: “The US and UK government have a very long history of this. We know that since the 1890s, every single independent, nationalist movement, every single socialist movement prompts a response from the CIA... We can look at Galtieri in Argentina, Pinochet in Chile, we can look at Brazil, almost every single country in Latin America throughout the 20th and 21st century there is not a single case of any left-wing movement being left alone by the US or UK government.”

However, the US government’s record with the current record is also crucial in understanding the coverage. As discussed in chapter four, the Bush administration supported the 2002 coup against Chavez, funded the coup’s leaders and increased its funding to them after the coup (Golinger, 2007: 44-49). Chapter four also showed the actions of the US government were mirrored in the media, with many of the newspapers publishing editorials in April 2002 supporting the coup and attacking Chavez.

As discussed in chapters one and seven, Wikileaks cables show that the US government is following a plan to “divide” and “penetrate” the *chavistas* by funding, training and supporting oppositional movements (Main and Beeton, 2015a, 2015b). Weisbrot (2014) claims that the US government has spent

hundreds of millions of dollars on attempting to remove the *chavistas* from power. Due to the close relationship between the media and government, this has had its effect on the output of newspapers and general opinion on Venezuela. This was a common cause brought up in explanation for the decidedly negative coverage, as the following quotes highlight,

Michael Derham: “Venezuela is under attack from the United States, and has been since 1999. It has never let up. It is a media and press attack, an economic attack.”

Keane Bhatt: “The documentary record is so rich in terms of constant efforts at destabilization and overthrow through the coup in 2002, through the NED, through USAID, through groups that were the recipients in massive amounts of US aid and training who were involved in the coup and were receiving US money afterwards and then who went on to encourage all kinds of destabilizing campaigns against the Venezuelan government including this most recent violence [the *guarimbas*]. All that stuff is, to an outside observer, so plain and so easy to discover and the fact that the US media is so committed to omitting almost every single report, framing it as an allegation Venezuela makes of meddling, without ever providing more than a he said she said allegation and denial. They portray it as a kind of lunatic fringe using this as a pretext for avoiding their own internal problems.”

Western governments, most notably the United States, are actively trying to destabilize and overthrow the Venezuelan government. The British government has a close relationship with the US government although it has not been as directly involved in Venezuela, hence the similar editorial lines from its newspapers but also the increased range of discussion and permissible opinion. However, the question remains why the US government is carrying out these actions in the first place.

As discussed in chapter one, Venezuela was the first of a new wave of Latin American countries to elect progressive parties that openly questioned the logic of the “Washington Consensus”- the belief that neoliberalism was the best way to organize society- and to champion the idea of “21st century socialism.” Thanks in large part to Chavez’s leadership, South America as a whole has

experienced a profound geopolitical shift, moving away from being firmly under the influence of the US and creating a new, independent domestic and foreign policy while creating a raft of new international institutions designed to replace the old, US-dominated ones such as the OAS. According to Bhatt, this made the country the “epicentre” of a new Latin American “independence movement” extricating itself from US control.

The logic of allowing foreign (usually Western) corporations to enjoy near unlimited power in and reap huge profits from South America has been strongly challenged in many places, with some Western companies having been nationalized. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter one, Venezuela also resurrected the power of OPEC in 1999, with the first OPEC summit in 25 years taking place in Caracas in 2000. Oil prices rose from \$9 per barrel in 1999 (Raby, 2006: 161) to \$140 per barrel in 2008 (BBC, 2008). This meant oil-consuming nations (like the US) were paying hundreds of billions of dollars more per year for their oil.

The *chavistas'* new ideas in democracy have also inspired political movements around the world, including in Europe, where Syriza (Greece) and PODEMOS (Spain) have close links with the *chavistas*. In the UK, many of the key figures of the Labour Party, such as John McDonnell, have close links with the Venezuelan government, and Jeremy Corbyn outlined a plan to bring 21st century socialism to the country. Thus, the “virus” which began in Venezuela is threatening to spread around the world.

The next section deals with Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model and how it relates to the coverage of Venezuela.

The Propaganda Model And Venezuela

As discussed in the literature review, Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model posits that the media’s prime function is to manipulate public opinion, to “manufacture consent” for elite opinions through five systematic biases, or “filters” the for-profit, private media possess. These are,

- 1) Elite ownership of the media, whether through single media barons or through a large group of wealthy shareholders;
- 2) Reliance on advertising from big businesses as the primary means of income;
- 3) Reliance on official sources, credible 'experts' and government officials;
- 4) Flak, negative responses to media that have the effect of chiding journalists into compliance with the 'official' line;
- 5) Anti-communism, how any organization or government Western governments label as 'Communist' will be attacked (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 2)

As Communist states have largely disappeared, Chomsky (2016) has stated that this fifth filter should be updated to whatever pretext the US invents to justify further global interventions. Boyd-Barrett (2004), however, suggested that the fifth filter today is an agreement in the supposed superiority of neoliberal globalization over any other system. How relevant is the propaganda model to Venezuela? In order to gauge this, it makes sense to deal with these filters one by one, starting with ownership.

Ownership

As discussed in the literature review, ownership is powerful force shaping the news and its increasing concentration poses questions about the range of views the public is exposed to.

Many of the interviewees highlighted that the ownership of media negatively affected the reporting of Venezuela. Indeed, Salter argued that this filter alone would prove a barrier to any positive coverage of Venezuela at all,

Lee Salter: *"It is incontestable. There is no evidence at all to the contrary to the fact that all of the commercial newspapers in this country are owned by neoliberal businessmen- Richard Desmond, Rupert Murdoch, the Barclay brothers, Alexander Lebedev. They cannot allow an alternative to the system that they both benefit from and ideologically believe to be best, to*

survive. They can't allow it... Murdoch and all of the British newspaper proprietors are neoliberals and they will give no positive coverage of any left-wing movement anywhere in the world that looks like it is going to succeed (emphasis added)...So those ownership structures tell us a hell of a lot about the paradigms within which facts about the world exist and the selection of those case studies to look at. Hence not one article that says anything positive about the Bolivarian Missions or ALBA or anything but lots that ridicule and disparage it.”

This is further reinforced by the second filter: that of reliance on other corporations for funding through advertising.

Advertising

The interviewees were similarly concerned about advertising, claiming it shaped the coverage of Venezuela as well. Advertising by large corporations makes up the majority or all of many media's incomes, and media are hesitant to publish material contrary to the interests of their backers.

Kevin Young: “Media reliance on corporate advertising is another layer of influence. There is also a set of shared ideologies and a culture of deference to power that operates within a lot of these outlets. I have to believe that there are many journalists who are more critical and independent-minded. Presuming that they spend a lot of time in the places they cover like Venezuela, they have to develop a more critical analysis of what is going on but for various reasons, the way they write their reports is still going to be constrained by various institutional factors.”

Linked to advertising is the filter of sourcing.

Sourcing

As discussed in the literature review, journalists are reliant on reputable and official sources that effectively subsidize their outlets with free content. It

is therefore important not to lose this vital resource by reporting in a manner that would seriously upset the sources. The consequence of this is that it leads to a top-down organization in the manufacturing of news, which deeply concerned Derham,

Michael Derham: “Another worry is the press conference from the government. We see this in the US and in the UK. Journalists are gathered together every morning and they are spoken down to for an hour and that is where they get the day's news from and hence every outlet has the same news...That is where the news comes from, it is top down, dictated by governments around the world.”

This culture of deference to officials and reliance on official sources is so great that when alternative sources are used, it creates consternation and confusion. The US government position is so frequently repeated that any competing explanations are regarded as wacky or offbeat, even if they are easy-verifiable facts. This study found that much of the news printed about Venezuela, particularly from the American newspapers was effectively “this is what a government official said about Venezuela today.” Beeton explained the consequences for those trying to argue against their government’s position,

Dan Beeton: “Then you have a big part of what the media is concerned about is access. *The way things are framed is the US government view, the State Department view of things is the framework in which everything is reported. Anything that goes against that is the outlier and so that is what has to be fact-checked, that is what has to be challenged [not the US government position].* Even when you are writing op-eds you can just make things up! If you are *Associated Press*, certainly if you are *Fox News*, any number of commentators on television and people writing op-eds against Venezuela can basically say whatever they want and won’t get fact checked. But if you are saying something that challenges that narrative like we have had experience of again and again talking about the decline in poverty and other positive economic factors after the Chavez government gained control of the oil sector then you get challenged: ‘What is your source for this?’ ‘Where does this come from?’

Even though these are basic facts that are accepted by the World Bank, the IMF, the UN and so on. So that is the framework” (emphasis added).

Therefore, under this framework, anything deviating from the government’s view may not be considered objective.

The Media: “Objectively” Reporting Lies

As discussed in chapters 3-7, the US government’s position is often at one far end of the worldwide view on Venezuela. For example, chapter six showed how the US was isolated among nations by refusing to recognize Nicolas Maduro as the winner of the 2013 election. The UK government has less at stake in Venezuela, but has taken a not dissimilar stance to the United States. The press has largely taken the same stance as its government in the reporting.

This has partially come about through the practice of using official sources. Journalists are encouraged to be neutral and objective- not to give their own opinions but simply to repeat what the sources say. However, on the subject of Venezuela, government officials, especially American ones, have consistently taken stances firmly against the Venezuelan government. As of 2016, the USA has been in a continued state of emergency due to the social conflicts in Venezuela, which pose an “extraordinary threat” to the United States according to the White House (2015). Reliance on these public officials skews the debate and effectively allows government officials to set the agenda for public debate.

An example of uncritical regurgitation of official propaganda is former Florida Congressman Connie Mack IV. Representing the right wing of the Republican Party, and with links to the infamous Cuban ex-pat community, Mack took an extremely hostile position to Venezuela, frequently making claims of dubious validity. However, his status as an official source and his habit for providing extremely quotable opinions meant newspapers frequently quoted his outbursts uncritically. A May 16th 2008 *Guardian* piece used Mack’s assertion that Hugo Chavez was helping the Colombian group FARC to discuss whether this link was grounds for US sanctions. This in itself displayed an assumption of Chavez’s

guilt and US benevolence. *The Guardian* (Attewell, 2007) also used Mack's outburst that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "recognizes that is he can get a foothold in Latin America, he can continue to spread his hatred for the United States" to construct a news story that portrayed Venezuela in a negative light. The alternative notion that Iran was not trying to conquer South America was not considered.

Thus, there exists a lack of balance within the stories emanating from Venezuela, where the rather extreme positions of the US government are rarely strongly challenged by the journalists themselves, due, in part to journalistic convention. Davies (2009: 113-114) has argued that this principle leads to "a political and moral consensus which tends to reflect the values only of the most powerful groups in the surrounding society" while Bennett (2001: 182) remarks that "the most important biases in the news occur not when journalists abandon their professional standards but when they cling most responsibly to them." Some of the interviewees felt the range of opinions expressed in reporting correlated with the range on offer in higher government and business circles. Journalist Matt Kennard argued that journalists challenging their own government's position risk not appearing neutral or objective,

Matt Kennard: "Neutrality within the corporate media means default support for US/UK foreign policy and corporate power. But it is so embedded in the system that you don't even think it exists. But if you start pushing the boundaries, you'll find out. I started pushing the boundaries."

This is a phenomenon that is not restricted to Venezuela. When quoting official sources, it is common for the officials to not even be named, allowing them to give dubious assertions without fear of public scrutiny. Veteran journalist Robert Fisk explained the problem:

"I'm just looking at a copy of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, February 1st, 2013. It's a story about al-Qaeda in Algeria. And what is the sourcing? 'US intelligence officials said,' 'a senior US intelligence official said,' 'US officials said,' 'the intelligence official said,' 'Algerian officials say,' 'national security sources considered,' 'European security sources said,' 'the US official said,' 'the

officials acknowledged.’... We might as well name our newspapers ‘Officials Say.’ This is the cancer at the bottom of modern journalism, that we do not challenge power anymore. Why are Americans tolerating these garbage stories with no real sourcing except for very dodgy characters indeed, who won’t give their names?” (Fisk, 2013).

Some journalists agreed that reliance on official sources was a problem and meant that they ended up rehashing government lies,

Journalist 2: “You need to understand that when you are a journalist you have a lot of information but even though you do not agree with that, even though you think they are lying, I am talking about a government, that is the official version, so you cannot get rid of that, and it is going to waste a part of your space, but you have to put the official version. There is no way to get rid of that and it would not be fair. So that is your job and sometimes it is very difficult if you know they are lying. You have to have enough arguments to contradict them because they the official part of the information. So it is difficult, with Venezuela it is very challenging.”

However, Journalist 2 is actually referencing the *Venezuelan* government, not the American government, which they did not indicate they had any problems with. Therefore, without the official sources protocol, some coverage would be *more* critical of Venezuela, not less so.

The Bubble and Sourcing

As discussed extensively in chapter nine, journalists covering Venezuela largely live in socially constructed bubbles- in the most prosperous municipality of the country. In these bubbles, journalists are unlikely to come across many people who openly hold views sympathetic to the government, a majority view in the country during the period. The result is an echo chamber effect where the large majority of people journalists meet and talk to hold very negative opinions about the state of the country, which translates into overly negative coverage in the media. Many of the non-government sources of authority, such as judges, the civil service, business leaders, journalists and academics came from the

sectors of wealth and privilege in Venezuela identified with the *ancien regime*, the *Punto Fijo* elite. George Ciccariello-Maher explained the effect of the bubble,

George Ciccariello-Maher: “What happens, not just with journalists but also with Fullbright scholars and many other business representatives, they go and live in armed fortresses in the wealthiest part of town. And so they never actually interact with anyone except with the people whose political line they are going to express in their stories and writing...If you never venture out of the segregated bounds of the wealthy parts of the city, you will never come across the poor or many *chavistas*. And so it can easily seem to the opposition that around election time in Venezuela that they are definitely going to win because all of their neighbours are voting for the opposition. And perhaps that is why they believe all the elections are fraudulent. It is a historic myopia of wealthy Venezuelans that they cannot possibly think beyond the bounds of their surroundings.”

Furthermore, the pool of experts on Venezuela in the West is partially populated by ex-pats who are critical of the government. The cost of a flight to Europe or the USA (\$700) equated to more than a year’s salary for most of the population in 1998 (CEPALSTAT, 2016a), effectively means only rich Venezuelans have the opportunity to emigrate to the West. Before 1998 it would be unlikely that a working-class Venezuelan would have been able to study at university and go to the West to take up a good job. Moreover, academics and intellectuals with progressive outlooks who did live in the West are more likely to have gone back to Venezuela to take up positions inside the country to fill the dearth of qualified intellectuals sympathetic to the government. Going the other way are a large group of wealthy Venezuelans who have decided to leave the country due to the political and economic changes. Many have ended up in Miami and other US cities, others in Spain, but some have also come to Great Britain. The result is that an unusually large majority of Venezuelan ex-pats are against the changes that have taken place and stand against everything that the government claims to stand for. *The Miami Herald* (March 5th, 2013) noted that more than 95 percent of ex-pats voted for the opposition. This provides a similar echo chamber effect for journalists in the West. As Bart Jones said, “one point I think

is really problematic for the perception of Venezuela in the West is that every Venezuelan we meet is going to be middle-class.”

The other journalists interviewed confirmed Jones’ theory.

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “There are very few people that know what is going on and are prepared to talk so it is key to cultivate those sources. And it is a small circle as well. So you end up going to the same people pretty often...You talk to hundreds of people but you end up going back to 20 or 30 people who you build up a relationship with and share information.”

Jim Wyss: “I am always on the hunt for new sources. That being said, there are certain people that when you are on a deadline, you know they will answer their phone.”

Interviewer: “Like whom?”

Jim Wyss: “Mainly university academics, pollsters are always big. Those are the two when you want someone to give you a non-partisan big picture view.”

In Venezuela the sources filter is doubly important as, as we have seen, the Venezuelan government does not bother to cultivate good relations with the foreign media. Their policy is effectively to shun the foreign media, making it clear they do not wish to speak to them very often. Therefore journalists do not have to worry about the repercussions of criticizing the government or reporting something in a way contrary to the wishes of Venezuelan officials. They will not lose their access to Venezuelan officials because they never had any. Therefore, the sourcing filter is doubly important when it comes to Venezuela, as journalists turn almost exclusively to sources critical of the government for quotes.

Girish Gupta: “In Venezuela it is near impossible to talk to government officials. *But there are sources in other sectors, people in opposition, it is not just people in government who know things*” (emphasis added).

It should also be noted that the opposition has been very adept at courting foreign media through connections and shaping their discourse around Western concepts such as human rights (Wilpert, 2011). The role that the US establishment plays in creating and propping up anti-government civil society groups is also important. Journalists would also have to deal with flak if they assumed a contradictory line to the majority of reporting.

Flak

Flak is an important factor in the coverage of Venezuela because of the extremes of opinion. As Brian Ellsworth said, “Venezuela became this hysterical obsession for people of all different political orientations.” Flak was a subject that both academics and journalists have experience of after publishing.

Journalists claimed not to feel a great deal of pressure from their governments. Yet what they produce is generally in line with the US and British governments’ position on the country. On the other hand, those who publish content that runs against their government’s position in newspapers and journals are constantly challenged on their findings, leading to considerable pressure from a variety of places. Thus, journalists who share the hegemonic, “common sense” opinion on Venezuela do not push against the edges of expressible content and therefore do not feel the pressure. Dan Beeton, a progressive economist who has published many op-eds explained the system,

Dan Beeton: “That is the framework. If you are a reporter and you write something that is not considered negative enough against the Venezuelan government then you will get flak. There is push back, maybe from the US government, but there are any number of right-wing think tanks, Venezuelan exiles have their own organizations and lobbies and their champions in the US Congress...We have been challenged repeatedly and questioned any time we say something about it- whether we get funding from the Venezuelan government. There is this assumption that if anyone is saying anything that goes against the conventional wisdom that they must be in the pockets of the Venezuelan government.”

Some journalists agreed that the ex-pat community did steer coverage towards the critical end of the spectrum. For instance, Jim Wyss said,

Jim Wyss: “I hear from grumpy readers when they feel I am not being hard enough on Venezuela. I never get any pressure from anybody except from some radical readers who see everything through the prism of Cuba so *if you are not hammering Maduro hard enough you tend to get emails*. But they are pretty easy to ignore because they are in all caps with lots of misspellings” (emphasis added).

Emersberger explained how journalists rationalize their writing,

Joe Emersberger: “The most honest journalists basically rationalize hiding under their desks: ‘not my job to correct other people’s mistakes’. Even those who don’t engage in vulgar dishonesty, still avoid stories (like the garroted victims of the *guarimba* protestors) that would bring them out from under their desks. The balance they *do* provide in articles tends to be inconspicuous (almost never in headlines) and tends to be positioned in the middle or near the end of their articles. The net result is that even the honest reporters spread lies by doing very little to expose the worst coverage. Still, these reporters will get flak in Venezuela from the opposition who expect nothing less than 100% support. I’ve been shown examples of the flak. Unfortunately, that helps these reporters feel better about hiding under their desks. It makes them that feel that any timid and inadequate deviation from the opposition’s line is courageous- and strong evidence that their reporting must be balanced.”

Whether it comes from governments, organizations or individuals, flak may, in fact, be a stronger filter than before as contacting journalists is easier than ever as readers are encouraged to leave comments and journalists are encouraged to have an active presence on Twitter. In the social media age, there is an immediacy with which anyone can contact journalists. As Jim Wyss said,

Jim Wyss: “I get it from all sides...it just comes with the territory these days. People can say all sorts of things from behind the shield of a username and a laptop.”

However, the final filter of the five, the filter of anti-communism may have had its day.

Anti-Communism and Neoliberalism

As stated above, this filter is outdated and should be updated to anti-terrorism, anti-whomever the government does not like or pro-neoliberal globalization.

Many of those interviewed agreed that the coverage loosely paralleled the debate in high political circles in their respective countries. No newspaper or major media organization consistently took a contrary position to that of their government. As we saw with *RT*'s coverage, the overall tone was positive, in stark contrast with that of British and American publications. Is it really a coincidence that Russia has enjoyed good relations with Venezuela while the United States and United Kingdom have had fractious ones with the country? Or does the government's position set the tone for the reporting through its pronouncements and through the connections between principle media outlets and their governments?

In Western media, the prevailing economic paradigm of neoliberal capitalism is so dominant that its central themes, once controversial, have become normalized. Studies have shown (GUMG, 1982: 130, Berry, 2012, Kay and Salter, 2013) that news media do not question the logic of neoliberalism, rather, accepting its tenets as laws of nature. In 2006 there were more references to “crap” than “capitalism” in British newspapers (Davies, 2009: 128). Decisions made by the Venezuelan government that did not coincide with the tenets of the Washington Consensus were pilloried in the press as misguided at best and ruinous and an assault on freedom at worst. This bias is so apparent that it was one of the major themes of coverage that interviewees brought up.

Ian Hudson: “Certain things are unchallenged. So for example that private corporate ownership of the assets of a nation is the most desirable form of organizing your economy is unquestioned. So if you are challenging that it is, by default, seen as a bad thing. The idea for example that people should have the right to remove their capital from a nation is seen as acceptable, so if Venezuela has \$8 billion in capital flight the solution is not that we need capital controls but rather this is bad policy and capital is understandably fleeing and this is a problem with the policy itself. So there is a default assumption that the current economic structure is the most desirable economic structure.”

This phenomenon was consistently found in articles. For instance, Tegel (2012), writing in the left-of-centre *Independent* asked whether “Venezuela can bring efficiency and economic sustainability to oil production without relinquishing the country’s greatest asset back to foreign oil companies?” The assumption is that private companies are more efficient and nationalized ones are inherently unsustainable. A 2006 *Daily Telegraph* article criticized President Chavez for “lavishing state funds” on “handouts” for poor Venezuelans (Sherwell, 2006). The two examples that the journalist himself picked to illustrate the “lavish” expenses were free eye operations for the blind to see again and soup kitchens for the destitute. The embedded ideology of neoliberalism allows the author to see soup kitchens and eye operations not as the most basic functions of the state but as transgressions against the iron laws of good economic policy.

Looking at the propaganda model with regards to Venezuela, it is clear that it still holds. American and British outlets displayed a dismissiveness and hostility towards the South American nation that was lacking in the Russian sample. Russian official sources have praised Venezuela and its businesses have gained from increased trade with the country. In contrast, political and business relations with the West are strained.

Yet it is also clear that these five filters on their own do not fully explain the coverage. They do not specifically touch on the journalists’ socio-economic backgrounds, the interconnectedness of the Venezuelan and Western media, the reliance on newswires and local stringers for news, the bubble that journalists

themselves live in when reporting from poor countries, and many more factors detailed in this thesis. From afar, the broad structure of the propaganda model can be laid neatly on top of the coverage. However, when examined up close it is often very difficult to see how some of the filters apply to specific journalists' decisions on what to cover, what not to cover and how to write about a topic. In other words, it is not particularly useful at studying the "nuts and bolts" of the coverage. Furthermore, it tells us little about the journalists themselves or the audience's reception. Some of the filters do not apply to some news outlets. For instance, both the *BBC* and *The Guardian* are not owned as for-profit businesses by shareholders or media barons. And yet they reproduce much of the same content due to various internal and external pressures. In explaining how, in a 'free' market with 'free' press, the media "act like lemmings" and reproduce similar stories, Herman (1998: 195) states that it results from "a widespread gullible acceptance of official handouts" and from "common internalized beliefs." However, these explanations are not explored in depth, and, therefore, a complimentary explanatory theory for the coverage of Venezuela is necessary; one that focuses on the cultural dynamic of the coverage: that of hegemony.

Ideology and Hegemony

The Guardian does not share the same ownership structure as the majority of the news organizations in our sample. Its coverage was less critical of the government and had a wider range of opinions expressed. However, it still reproduced similar content. To explain this we have to remember the intellectual climate that news is produced under. Dumenil and Levy (2004, 2011) and Harvey (2005, 2011) argue that neoliberalism is the dominant, hegemonic ideology of the global elite. So widespread has its central tenets been accepted, it is now treated as common sense by many. The radical Italian academic Antonio Gramsci defined hegemony as,

"An order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant; in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations" (cited in Williams, 1960).

Put simply, hegemony is when the position, beliefs and practices of society's elites gain legitimacy with the rest of the country. Their beliefs, values, morals, customs and way of viewing the world is accepted as common sense, indeed, the only sensible way of seeing the world. As a consequence, any alternative frames or opinions are marginalized.

Therefore, while *The Guardian* is not a for-profit shareholder-owned corporation, it exists in a climate where the views of the top one percent of society are dominant. Their managers come from backgrounds in private media and their board is comprised of telecommunications, marketing and finance executives while their structure is largely identical to other media. They are instructed at the same prestigious universities and instilled with a common set of assumptions and a worldview and dropped into the top-down culture of the newsroom. The structure of newsrooms today is highly rigid. Independently minded journalists may find their creativity stymied and their career paths blocked. Those that rock the boat may not be rehired. In explaining the negative coverage of Venezuela, some felt that there was not overt censorship, but rather a convergence of ideas between journalists, editors and ownership. Journalists 'make it' at newspapers like *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* because they 'know the ropes' - they understand the structural forces at play.

Julia Buxton: "I think it is very much down to the predisposition of the journalist. But most of them are operating in a context where the standard position of the larger media house is going to be antagonistic to what is happening in Venezuela."

Lupien explained this phenomenon, why journalists do not challenge the consensus by suggesting that many are not even aware that they are under any pressure as their views coincide with the dominant ideology.

Pascal Lupien: "I am not even sure that most journalists would be aware that they are under any kind of pressure, it would just be natural for them...Ultimately they are a product of society and the culture that they have grown up in and been exposed to, and you see that reflected as well. But the

cultural bias comes out not only in reporting of Venezuela. It comes out in any kind of reporting of the so-called global South...I would want to know if journalists think maybe there is more going on here or are they really so completely caught up in this discourse that that doesn't even occur to them? I suspect they cannot even see past their own ideological constraints.”

This study found that the majority of journalists felt no pressure from their editors in terms of editorial lines. However, dissenting journalists such as Kennard and Jones felt pressured into conforming. As noted previously,⁴¹ Kennard fought his editors and found out where the limits to free expression were. And yet his colleagues who reproduced the dominant line on Venezuela truly believed they were free to write whatever they liked. Kennard described this as a form of “mind control” where everybody believes they are free as they do not realize they are self-censoring.

However, the majority of journalists shared the same mindset as their editors, governments and owners of media. Dissenting journalists confirmed that *there was no need for an overt, imposed line as journalists willingly reproduced content critical of the changes in Venezuelan society* and dissenting journalists felt they had to temper their own opinions in order to get on. The majority of journalists simply had the same mindset as their editors and a differing one to the majority of academics interviewed.

An example of the completely differing mindsets that the journalists had to the academics is opinions of *The Guardian*. This study has shown that the newspaper showed a strong tendency to portray the Venezuelan government negatively and to take positions critical of the government. Of the newspapers in the study, it was the most sympathetic to it, yet it maintained a strongly critical editorial position and consistently allied itself with the critical end of the spectrum of understanding the Bolivarian Revolution. Many of the academics felt the newspaper was unduly critical of the government. Buxton stated, “there simply was not fair coverage” in the newspaper, while Ciccariello-Maher stated that it published “some of the worst and most embarrassing writing about Venezuela that you could possibly come across.”

⁴¹ See page 249.

However, journalists saw *The Guardian* as a neutral or even pro-Chavez newspaper. For example, Sibylla Brodzhinsky said (emphasis added),

Sibylla Brodzhinsky: “I think in general *The Guardian* has been pretty balanced in the Chavez years. Rory Carroll, who did Chavez more than anyone else, and wrote a book which was wonderful, if you haven’t read it, you should. A lot of the Twitter comments that I got last week were interesting. A lot of it was saying ‘oh, *The Guardian* finally caught on to what is really happening in Venezuela,’ that things aren’t going very well. *And I think there was a general sense that The Guardian, (which was false), was sort of a Chavez supporter, or had more tolerance for him. I don’t think that was really fair.*

From this statement, it is clear that her understanding of the range of debate on Venezuela is markedly different to those critical of the coverage. For some the newspaper was embarrassingly anti-Chavez. Yet the journalist felt there was a general sense that *The Guardian* was too pro-Chavez.

Brodzhinsky also mentioned Rory Carroll, one of the most controversial figures in the debate around Venezuela. Carroll was *The Guardian’s* Latin America correspondent from 2006 to 2012. He was frequently criticized by academics. Noam Chomsky accused him of “extreme dishonesty” and “complete deception” for misquoting him on Venezuela (MediaLens, 2011). Carroll wrote a biography of Chavez, published in 2013, where he was extremely critical of the President. He depicted Chavez as an autocrat who demanded absolute submission from his followers (2013: 92-93, 120). He compared him unfavourably to North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Il (2013: 231-237) and diagnosed Chavez with “manic depressive disorder” and “cyclothymia” (2013: 92). He explained Chavez’s support as being down to mass amnesia of the population and state-sponsored childhood brainwashing (2013: 187). Many of the academics felt the book was filled with inaccuracies. Ciccariello-Maher stated that it was “a piece of garbage” and “really one of the worst and most shocking misrepresentations that you could come across” while Emersberger called him “a dishonest and unabashed propagandist” against Chavez and Bhatt “the most shamelessly

partisan reporter” who “made so many factually inaccurate statements and really deceitful comments about the country, over and over again.”

Here we see the gulf in frames of understanding about Venezuela. A book many academics judged to be “garbage” and “one of the worst and most shocking misrepresentations that you could come across,” is judged “wonderful” by a fellow journalist. The journalist felt that there was a general sense that *The Guardian* was pro-Chavez. For the journalists, the debate around Carroll’s work is whether he is balanced or too pro-Chavez.

A second illustration of the hegemonic viewpoint of journalists is the role of the international media in Venezuela. As shown above, the Venezuelan media played a key role in the overthrow of the government in 2002 and the strike/lockout in 2002-3. Many of those journalists now work for the international media, much of which welcomed the event. Numerous studies (Young, 2009, 2010, 2013, Delacour, 2005, Chernomas and Hudson, 2012) have shown the international media has since displayed a profound hostility to the Venezuelan government. Many academics (Ali, 2006, Bhatt, 2013b, Young, 2009, 2010) have argued that the media are part of an ongoing campaign to demonize the Venezuelan government. Yet, journalists themselves appear to be unaware of this role they are allegedly playing. Anatoly Kurmanaev described the Venezuelan government as “paranoid” to believe the media could be trying to overthrow the government, and that the President will “rant” and,

Anatoly Kurmanaev: “Go on television and accuse them [the media] of trying to foment a coup and trying to sabotage the country and being in the pay of the CIA *etc. etc.* But that is just words, smoke and mirrors...It is pretty much a one-party state or close to it... And as a reporter for a Western outlet you are seen as an enemy by a significant chunk of the population, you are seen as part of a system that is trying to overthrow this government.”

He said that the government say to him they “have to blame things on someone so don’t get upset if once in a while we go on television and rave against you for a bit” and that “it is just part of a game.” Thus, the idea the media have any ulterior motives is considered absurd. This, benevolent

Westerner theme extends even to the US government, whose record in overthrowing Latin American governments has been detailed above. In his book about contemporary Brazil, Larry Rohter, who wrote many articles on Venezuela for *The New York Times*, noted that some Brazilian intellectuals actually believe that the United States government has held Brazilian development back by using its resources for itself. He goes on to state “this is not a fringe school of thought but one expressed by respected historians...and taught in universities” (2010: 229). The wording seems to suggest Rohter does not think his audience would believe such a concept could be a widespread belief -“this is *not* a fringe school of thought” or a credible one- “but one expressed by respected historians.” In other words, Rohter is telling his audience “seriously, people *actually* believe this.”

Thus, many journalists consider much of the criticism of their profession and the American government to be ludicrous and virtually beneath consideration. This came out in the reporting, where, as we saw in chapter 3-7, points of view critiquing the US government or those differing from neoliberalism were ignored or treated as “absurd” (*The Miami Herald*, February 28th, 2014) “outlandish” (*The New York Times*, February 25th, 2014) conspiracy theories, no matter how much evidence backed them up.

It appeared that all journalists that reproduced the dominant, hegemonic narrative on Venezuela subscribed to the opinions themselves. It was not a case of these journalists personally having an alternative critique of the country but suppressing their own opinions to conform to an editorial line.

One method tried to get the journalists to critically evaluate the coverage was to present them with the example of *RT*, which portrayed the country and the government greatly more positively than any newspaper in the study. It was explained that it might be partly down to the geopolitical positions of Russia, Great Britain and the USA. One journalist was asked how they would explain this conspicuous contrast in style. They responded,

Journalist 1: “It is an interesting question. It is an interesting pattern and I would probably agree with you that that is the way it works to a certain

extent. Now, I would caution you that *RT* is a state media and make sure you emphasize the difference [between state and private media] because I have never myself nor none of my journalist friends that I am aware of have ever been instructed to cover a story a certain way or even felt pressured to cover a story a certain way because while we may have opinion sides of our publications which are heavily politically bent one way or the other it does not really trickle down in my experience to a news floor. So I have never been told by an editor or definitely some other person how to cover it. I would say that you are on to something but I would not venture as far to say that in US publications everyone is a much better journalist or much more impartial or something like that but certainly when I see *RT*'s coverage, I get the sense that it is guided by a political objective.”

The journalist understood the question to be “why is *RT* so biased? The journalist concludes that the reason *RT*'s coverage is different to the West's is that *RT* is state-owned and politically motivated, unlike Western media. The idea that the Western media may be biased was not even considered. One idea that sprang to mind was that journalists for American and British organizations were simply better and more impartial. The coverage that presented Venezuela favourably was “guided by a political objective” while the coverage, that as noted above, portrays Venezuela in a negative light is objective and balanced.

The same journalist was asked whether big businesses could be swaying the coverage or political biases could be intruding. Clearly skeptical of this but trying to be convivial, they responded:

Journalist 1: “Yeah, sure, it could be, I guess. As somebody who is involved in making the sausage, I will be honest with you; I don't know where that would come from. So if you were to do a revision of my stories I would say probably more often than not they do not paint a very glowing picture of what is happening here. But that is just what I see happening.”

The journalist agreed that Western coverage was negative and Russian coverage positive but explicitly denied that there was an imposed editorial line or government or corporate interference. So there must be another explanation.

Journalists are clearly aware of alternative explanations of events, but they dismiss them as illogical or politically motivated. Essentially, the reason offered for remarkable similarity of reporting is that this is the objective reality, or close to it. That may be a cohesive argument until one sees that common media narratives about Venezuela are contradicted by empirical and statistical data from the United Nations and World Bank, as shown in previous chapters 3-7 of this study.

When pushed it is clear that, contrary to what Young expected, most journalists wholeheartedly buy into the official narrative. Unlike Philo and Berry's (2004) study of the media's pro-Israel coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which found that many journalists were sympathetic to the Palestinians but felt under a great deal of pressure from their editors and from flak from Israeli government sources, most journalists covering Venezuela were not at all sympathetic to the *chavistas*. Their similar stance to the US government is a reflection of the power of the hegemonic narrative that dominates the public sphere on Venezuela. Journalists were aware that inside of Venezuela the government and significant portions of the population had opposing views on major issues and treated them with mistrust. However, they considered these views to be illogical, at best. We saw this in the reporting as well. For example, *The Telegraph* treated the idea of US support for the 2002, since proven accurate, as absurd, noting, "the last thing the Americans need is a new set of myths about Yanqui coup-mongering" (April 13th, 2002). The continued re-election of the government was not due to its successes in reducing poverty and inequality but due to the gullibility of ordinary voters and their willingness to be paid off with handouts. The question could certainly be asked whether journalists invested in a controversial topic such as Venezuela would admit their misgivings to a researcher. However, it appeared that some, if not most, of the journalists did not even consider their work controversial, having never come across serious criticism of it. Furthermore, Bart Jones was openly critical of the coverage and sympathetic to some of the goals of the *chavistas* while still employed by *Newsweek*.

Justin Delacour argued that the absence of journalists who take an opposing stance to their governments' positions is proof of "pressure to toe a

certain line.” No doubt there is much truth to this. If a journalist begins to constantly challenge the government line it is unlikely they will be rehired, let alone promoted. Bart Jones confirmed he sometimes moderated what he wrote to toe a line while Matt Kennard admitted that he did not even bother to submit ideas contrary to the editorial line of his newspaper. Journalists who consistently produce content critical of the Venezuelan government have not had significant problems with their editors because their opinions largely coincide with their editors’. Thus, they are correct in stating that they are free to write how they want, because what they want to write pleases their superiors. They are free to say what they want. But if they had alternative opinions they would not be where they are.

Journalists have been preselected from a pool of privileged candidates who share largely the same worldview as the government and the owners of major media. On the topic of Venezuela, they often arrive without a great deal of knowledge about the country but with preconceptions already shaped by the media. The journalists interviewed are far more knowledgeable about the country than those stationed in London or New York who are instructed to piece together a story. These journalists have often lived in the country for years and do not seriously deviate from Western governments’ lines. Knowledge of Venezuela in Britain and the United States, even among educated people, is limited. Journalists who write stories about Venezuela are often simply foreign affairs correspondents or simply staff journalists, writing about Vladimir Putin on Monday, television programmes on Tuesday, and Nicolas Maduro on Wednesday. These time-starved employees do not have time to do background reading to construct an opposing narrative and likely read only the last three or four reports their newspaper did on the country. In that sense, the coverage might be self-perpetuating. As Julia Buxton said “I think a lot of journalists just do not have the intellectual framework to understand what is going on in Venezuela.” Journalists would be sticking their head above the parapet writing something that contradicts the hegemonic framing of the country. If they wished to do so they would need a rock-solid intellectual framework and to be sure of the facts and figures. It would take a considerable amount of reading to be confident in taking a stand. Making mistakes while countering the dominant narrative is a sure fire way to court criticism, mockery, or worse. Making a mistake in an

article that regurgitates the prevailing tone is certainly not a career-ending mistake. Journalists simply do not have the time to do so.

Nevertheless, some journalists, using alternative media and other avenues of knowledge, do build up an alternative understanding. There is certainly a common feeling that the media cannot be trusted on the subject, leading to the creation of organizations such as The Venezuelan Information Centre and Hands Off Venezuela which challenge the dominant narratives of the media. On rare occasions writers adopt a contrarian position. However, in a sea of negative information their articles seem odd, at best.

Without conducting a major research project, it seems difficult for a journalist to break with the dominant narrative. It is simply easier for time-pressed journalists to cut and paste together something from *Reuters* and the last three articles the newspaper ran than to build up something from scratch. Indeed, some might say this is exactly what journalism has become. Journalists who live in Venezuela have the time to build up a detailed knowledge of the country. But as we have seen, there are other factors that influence how they view the country. Therefore, the hegemonic ideas of the elite stay largely uncontested.

While from afar it is easy to observe the output of media on Venezuela and see a deterministic, top-down editorial line structure. However, close contact with the journalists seems to suggest otherwise. While most stories about Venezuela that take longer than an hour or so for a journalist to write must be cleared with an editor or a team of higher-ups in Sao Paulo, New York or London, most journalists insisted that they felt little pressure from editors to toe a line. Why they feel no pressure is not because there is none, but rather because they share a set of assumptions about the government, the role of Western countries in Venezuela, and the way an economy should be run. For most journalists, there is no noticeable editorial line. Only dissenting journalists feel pressure to produce output contrary to their own views, but there are few of these because new journalists come from a pre-selected pool of applicants and because of their social surroundings when living in Venezuela. The hegemony of thought created is crucial to understanding the Venezuelan case. If

these journalists were left to their own devices on what to write, they would write largely the same content as they do currently. Their views are in alignment with their newspapers' owners and their governments. Some journalists, such as Kennard and Jones did build up alternative analyses of the situation thanks to their unconventional backgrounds. Kennard from his theoretical background and Jones because he spent time living in the slums as a Maryknoll lay worker. Yet, the majority of journalists covering Venezuela, coming from similar backgrounds and immersed in a culture antithetical to the Venezuelan government, produce similarly negative content.

Conclusion

Below is a summary of the key findings discussed in the previous chapters.

Key Findings

- There was, for the most part, a markedly limited range of opinions offered across the Western press, with differences between newspapers more on style and tone rather than substance. There was considerable uniformity on how a wide range of newspapers covered one of the most contentious areas in world politics.
- Going against the best empirical evidence available, the Western press overwhelmingly presented Venezuela as a former democracy slipping into dictatorship.
- There was a widespread contempt or even hatred of everything the *chavistas* stood for, expressed in articles, especially editorials.
- Pro-Venezuelan government arguments and sources were largely absent. When included they were usually misrepresented or ridiculed.
- “The death of the foreign correspondent”: only one full-time correspondent for the English-language Western press in Venezuela.
- Massive cuts to newsroom budgets, leading to reliance on local stringers. Local journalists recruited from highly adversarial Venezuelan opposition-aligned press, leading to a situation where Venezuelan opposition ideas and talking points have their amplitude magnified. Anti-government activists producing supposedly objective news content for Western media.
- Newsroom culture strongly opposed to *chavistas*. Journalists unsympathetic to *chavistas* felt free to write as they wished while journalists with government sympathies had to temper what they wrote and practice self-censorship.
- Experts sympathetic to the *chavistas* “really commonly” blacklisted by Western media.

As emphasized throughout this thesis, key political and social issues within Venezuela are highly contested, with an extremely wide range of opinions

being put forward by academics, intellectuals and politicians. And yet there was a markedly limited range of opinions offered across the Western press, with differences between liberal and conservative, American and British newspapers being more about tone and style, rather than substance and political stances. Mirroring the stances taken by Western governments, most prominently the American one, every newspaper studied took an aggressive, adversarial position towards the Venezuelan government on a wide range of issues studied. The result was an overwhelmingly negative picture built up of the *chavistas'* radical experiment with democracy, with articles that put the country in a bad light prevalent and positive news stories unpublished. *As such, the media effectively only published bad news from Venezuela.*

There were some exceptions to this rule, for example Seumas Milne's articles in *The Guardian* and Owen Jones in *The Independent*. However, even these left-wing newspapers largely followed the dominant line. When there were splits in how things were covered between newspapers, they mirrored splits within the Venezuelan opposition or Western governments. One example of this was how newspapers covered Leopoldo Lopez. Liberal newspapers like *The Guardian* and *New York Times* portrayed him as a hardliner and backed Henrique Capriles' more moderate stance while more conservative newspapers like *The Daily Telegraph*, *Washington Post* and *Miami Herald* presented him more favourably, as a dashing campaigner for democracy. In general, the US and conservative press displayed more hostility to the Venezuelan government than the British or liberal press, with the conservative American *Miami Herald* displaying the most outright hatred of everything the *chavistas* stood for. However, the distance between the liberal British *Guardian* and *The Miami Herald* was sufficiently narrow to allow some journalists to write for both newspapers.

There were considerably fewer pro-government arguments and sources, with none whatsoever appearing in many articles. When included, they were often misrepresented and ridiculed. For example, in chapter seven, we saw that much of the press treated the allegation of the *guarimbas* being an attempt to overthrow the government with US support as an absurd suggestion. The newspapers in the study consistently repeated the opposition's talking points,

such as crime, insecurity and the country being a dictatorship and ignored the government's, such as improvements in healthcare, education and democracy. There was also an emphasis on the government's wrongdoings and a de-emphasis on the opposition's misdeeds, such as during the 2013 election.⁴²

The press also consistently presented allegations as facts and facts as mere allegations when it suited their position. They presented arguments by critics of the Venezuelan government and opposition talking points as facts and the opposite side of the argument, if at all, as ludicrous and risible, believed only by conspiracy theorists. In chapter four we saw how many newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Miami Herald* and *The Independent* repeated the highly dubious opposition *allegation* that Chavez personally ordered snipers to mow down his own supporters during the 2002 coup as an established, uncontested *fact* which therefore "justified" (*The Times*, April 13th) every criticism of him, and, presumably, his overthrow. Meanwhile, in chapter seven, we saw that the *fact* of Chavez's opponents Henrique Capriles' and Leopoldo Lopez's involvement in this coup was presented merely as an *allegation*; an allegation made by officials the newspapers had spent years demonizing. Thus, Lopez's unquestioned involvement (TV broadcast his arrest of a senior *chavista* politician live to millions), became unclear, probably untrue,

"He has long been a serial irritant for the Socialist Government, which accused him of participating in a failed 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez, a claim that Mr Lopez denies" (*The Times*, February 21st, 2014).

The opposing side of the debate was very often marginalized or absent altogether. Highly contested opposition arguments were presented largely as uncontroversial facts, giving the reader the impression there was no debate whatsoever. This is a problem in itself. Yet it is made worse when looking at the basic empirical data from well-known and respected polls, surveys and statistics from highly credible sources such as the United Nations, which very often suggest a completely different conclusion to those the media present. For example, the press continually described Presidents Chavez and Maduro as dictators or authoritarian strongmen, despite the fact that when polled,

⁴² See chapter six.

Venezuelans themselves felt the country had become greatly more democratic under the *chavistas*, as seen in chapter three. The media are well aware of the data, as they often cherry-pick parts of the surveys to present a different picture of the country. Thus, the press can be said to have produced bad news from Venezuela in another sense: biased, without balance and an absence of a facts-based approach.

The second part of the thesis attempted to explain the question of why the country was covered in this way; what factors influenced its output.

As discussed in chapter eight, the Western journalists who write about Venezuela come from an increasingly narrow background. Journalism is becoming the domain of middle-class university-educated professionals. It has become common to be expected to work for free as an intern in order to get an opportunity at a paid job- a path that discourages those from a lower socio-economic background. High tuition fees, job insecurity, low pay and the high cost of moving to and living in big cities such as London and New York dissuade many others from modest backgrounds. Men continue to dominate newsrooms. Thus, those who share their opinions in the media inordinately come from a small section at the top of society, with consequences on the range of opinions the public is exposed to.

As the interviewees said in chapter eight and nine, journalists sent to Venezuela are parachuted in without expertise or great understanding of the country, and often without the ability to speak Spanish- in other words to communicate properly with the bottom 90-95 percent of the population. Journalists are overwhelmingly housed in the wealthy Chacao district of Eastern Caracas. This is important as Caracas, like many cities in the developing world, is highly segregated along class lines, with millions of poor, darker-skinned Venezuelans living in *barrrios*, shantytowns on the hills surrounding the city, while much of Eastern Caracas is a walled off island of luxury. Class is the fundamental fault line along which Venezuelan society is split, with lower-class Venezuelans strongly supporting the government and the higher-classes strongly opposing it (Cannon, 2008). Chacao is home to the wealthy and to the headquarters of international corporations. It is also a stronghold of opposition

support. As the ability to speak English is correlated with socio-economic status around the developing world, journalists who cannot speak Spanish tend to stay in Chacao, as they can only be confident of being able to speak to locals in the municipality.

Furthermore, Caracas is a very violent city, and journalists are highly wary of leaving the relative safety of the rich municipality. This creates a situation where journalists inordinately spend their work and leisure time in an opposition bastion. Thus, it can appear to a journalist that “everyone” has a negative opinion about the government. This is because they are meeting a pre-selected subset of the population that coincides closely with opposition supporters. Therefore journalists are inadvertently cutting themselves off from the lower parts of society. And this shows in the sampled articles.

We are living through a sustained and possibly terminal collapse in newspaper sales. Coupled with that is the reduction in advertising revenues received due to increased online competition. Due to this, newspapers have furiously cut staffing costs, downsizing their total staff and their budget. This has led to “the death of the foreign correspondent”, according to Michael Derham. This study found that there is only one full-time correspondent in Venezuela for any Western English-language newspaper. Work has instead been outsourced to freelancers, and news agencies like *Reuters* and *Bloomberg*. However, they are under the same financial squeeze as the newspapers. They also employ cheaper, local Venezuelan journalists as opposed to flying Westerners out. The result is that both newspapers and agencies have outsourced much of their work to local journalists.

These journalists largely come from backgrounds working in established local news organizations in Caracas. As discussed in chapters nine and ten, these organizations were usually radically anti-*chavista* and strongly aligned with the *ancien regime* and the opposition and took a lead role in the coup against Chavez in 2002 and the strike/lockout of 2002-3. Thus, Venezuelan journalists tend to hold strongly anti-government views. While providing valuable local expertise, the presence of local journalist led to a newsroom atmosphere that was *highly* adversarial to the government. Bart Jones revealed that some of his

colleagues considered themselves the “resistance” and the “dissidents” opposing the government and felt it was their duty to “get rid of Chavez.” Thus, some journalists writing for the Western press are effectively anti-government activists. Their role as journalists for major Venezuelan newspapers gave them credibility in the eyes of international news organizations and led to a situation where the opposition’s narrative was repeated and amplified across the world. However, this is not purely by accident. There are a great number of Venezuelan journalists sympathetic to the government. Any of them could have been hired to work for international organizations as well. But this has, according to interviewees, not happened. The effect of this is that “unbiased”, “objective” Western news is not dissimilar to opposition propaganda.

There is, therefore, a discreet but coercive hegemony of thought in the newsroom. Western journalists arriving without knowledge of the country are immersed into this culture. The opposition, made up substantially of English-speaking, light-skinned, well-spoken professionals are careful to cultivate good relations with foreign journalists. Journalists are often shown round by local Venezuelan fixers, polite, well-spoken Venezuelans who insist the dictatorial government is destroying the country. This computes with their preconceptions of the place. Why would they question it? In contrast, the dark-skinned poor *chavistas* treat them with suspicion or outright hostility. Consequently, journalists unsurprisingly fall into the anti-government world. Journalists who share the set of implicit assumptions about the country report they feel very little pressure to write a certain way. Journalists today are not selected for their independence, but rather their ability to conform. Those who do not share those assumptions report having to temper what they wrote, practice self-censorship and to hold their tongues in the office in order to conform. Matt Kennard stated that no journalist thinks,

Matt Kennard: “‘I want to support neoliberal economics to further my career.’ It doesn’t work like that. But if everyone else is thinking it around you, it is very hard to go into work every day and be at odds with everyone. You’d seem like a weirdo...It is a form of mind control, of mind training...there’s a complete lack of self-criticism. And there’s a reason for that: people like to

think they are independent journalists that do their trade without fear or favour- all this bullshit you're taught at journalism school.”

There are also structural constraints that all journalists agreed affected their work. For more substantial pieces requiring more resources, journalists must have their pitch approved by bosses who are often in London or New York and these bosses sometimes send down ideas for stories for them. Therefore, bosses on different continents with limited knowledge about the country are shaping what becomes news in Venezuela. Journalists are also under severe time pressure to produce increasingly larger amounts of content for print and online publication, leading to a lack of depth to many stories. This lack of depth is exacerbated by tight word limits imposed, meaning there is no time or space for in-depth coverage or to challenge running narratives. Furthermore, the need to generate interest and draw an audience leads to the press running inflammatory or exaggerated stories.

However, much of the news on Venezuela is not even written by those living there. Western journalists with little knowledge of the country are often parachuted into Caracas for a day or two, where they meet English-speaking sources in exclusive parts of the city and then leave. The idea they could report accurately is certainly questionable, but they are at least near the action. Yet, due to cost-cutting measures, much of the coverage of Venezuela is not even written from the country, rather by Latin America correspondents in Rio or Bogota or even by ordinary, highly time-pressed journalists in the UK or US. The result is a lack of originality and conformity with the dominant narrative as these journalists do not have the time or background knowledge to challenge it.

Of course, the coverage of Venezuela is not happening in a political vacuum; there is a wider geopolitical context to it. After Chavez was elected, the government managed to revive the OPEC cartel and radically raise oil prices, meaning the US and much of Europe were paying hundreds of billions of dollars extra for oil.⁴³ Venezuela is also at the epicentre of a Latin American challenge to neoliberal politics and economics. Chavez labeled neoliberalism “the path to

⁴³ 2008 marked the high point of oil prices and in recent years they have fallen greatly. Much of this is due to North American fracking, which was sold as promoting American “energy independence” from countries like Venezuela.

hell” (Comas, 2002) and the *chavistas* used their oil revenues to set up new social programmes to combat suffering inside the country and to create alternative, expressly anti-neoliberal international organizations to succeed American dominated ones like the OAS (see chapter one). Thus, Venezuela is a notable opponent of the system many have argued (Herman and McChesney, 1997, Read, 1999, Sainath, 2011) the media espouses and is a key component of.

And thus we arrive at the propaganda model, which states that news is systematically distorted to reflect the dominant [neoliberal] elites and that enemies of the powerful will be attacked. From this study, it is clear that the propaganda model holds with regards to Venezuela and can be seen as a key explanatory factor in understanding the coverage. Owners and advertisers are not in favour of challenges to their dominance. With regard to sourcing, the opposition has been very accommodating to foreign journalists and has set up many think tanks and NGOs that sway the debate. In contrast, the Venezuelan government and its supporters have treated foreign media with suspicion or hostility, leading to a situation where the sourcing filter is doubly important. Therefore, if a journalist did wish to write about social programmes it could prove difficult to establish the necessary contacts, especially from abroad. Journalists confirmed they also received flak via email and other methods.

There is something of a split in those who have written about the media and Venezuela as to whether the reason for the coverage is structural or hegemonic. Steve Ellner felt that when it comes to Venezuela “there is a line and that line is decided upon from above and passed on to the reporter” while George Ciccariello-Maher felt the phenomenon was an effect “not so much of coercion as it is of hegemony.” What this study has found is that there is no need to dichotomize these possibilities. Coercion in the newsroom does exist: Matt Kennard confirmed phrases and sentences that did not fit the established narrative were removed by editors and Bart Jones felt he definitely had to temper what he was writing. Furthermore, academics who held sympathetic views to the *chavistas* were “really commonly” blacklisted from the media, and not just from an individual newspaper. However, most journalists interviewed claimed they felt no significant pressure and did not know of any colleague who said they did. Not coincidentally, all these journalists reproduced the

conventional narrative on Venezuela. They are right to say they do not feel pressure, not because there is none but because they share the dominant, hegemonic, neoliberal worldview of owners and advertisers. As Chomsky (1989, 7) stated in “Necessary Illusions”,

“The major media-particularly the elite media that set the agenda that others generally follow-are corporations “selling” privileged audiences to other businesses. It would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product. Concentration of ownership of the media is high and increasing. Furthermore, those who occupy managerial positions in the media, or gain status within them as commentators, belong to the same privileged elites, and might be expected to share the perceptions, aspirations, and attitudes of their associates, reflecting their own class interests as well. Journalists entering the system are unlikely to make their way unless they conform to these ideological pressures, generally by internalizing the values; it is not easy to say one thing and believe another, and those who fail to conform will tend to be weeded out by familiar mechanisms.”

Thus, most journalists are free to write what they believe about Venezuela. However, if they believed something different, they would not be where they are today. This led Matt Kennard to state that,

Matt Kennard: “Venezuela has been absolutely brutally abused in the media since Chavez came in...It’s not just the negative stuff, but the absolute censorship of any positive news... So you get a completely warped perception.”

And for Dan Beeton to sum up,

Dan Beeton: “The media coverage of Venezuela is about as terrible as for any country in the world, except possibly for Palestine. It is utterly biased, misleading and distorted.”

The introduction and chapter one of this thesis briefly detailed the pain, suffering and resentment that neoliberalism has inflicted on both Latin America

and the West. Latin America was a region of the world with more advanced neoliberal policies, where economists had a free rein to create their ideal societies, with little interference from the population. The same policies that were trialed in Latin America in the 1980s and had such a devastating effect on society are being implemented in the West, by the same organizations using the same justifications. The public should, therefore, be aware of its effects elsewhere. However, as seen in chapter three, the media often portrayed the era before Chavez's election as a golden age, with neoliberal policies treated as common sense and Chavez's populist policies as harmful aberrations distorting the free market. Therefore, even the fact that these policies are not new is unknown by much of the public.

Although this thesis is ostensibly about Venezuela, it actually tells us more about the structure of Western media and how it functions. Our media is severely hindered by the neoliberal ownership and advertising models that dominate it. This is incredibly important as the media have a profound power in reflecting and constructing the world that the public is exposed to, to manipulate and control what we understand to be possible. It is the authority for what is true and what is false, what is possible and what is impossible. There is perhaps no greater power in today's society. That is why it is crucial to understand and critique how they function. How the media treat and portray alternatives to neoliberalism such as Venezuela is crucial in influencing what the public perceives as alternatives to the current status quo. It follows that holding them to account is equally necessary.

For these reasons the media is charged with producing bad news from Venezuela.

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