The Role of the Media in an Extremely Polarized Society: The Case of Venezuelan Populism

Chapter proposal

Book project: “Discourses of Populism since 2015”

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Introduction

In 2020, Venezuela’s standing in freedom of expression statistics was gloomy. According to the *World Press Freedom Index* of ‘Reporters without Borders’, Venezuela held a position of number 147 out of 180 countries (rsf.org), and according to Freedom House’s *Press and Net Freedom Status*, the country was classified as “Not free” (freedomhouse.org). However, this is not a sudden development but rather a trend that already began during the Presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), when he implemented his policy of “socialism in the 21st century”. For this reason, a long-term perspective is applied in the present chapter in order to contextualize the current media situation in Venezuela.

In this essay, the central theme is the idea of populism as a process. Populism is not static but evolves and takes on different forms. It furthermore forms a political logic (Laclau, 2005), thus it cannot be discussed as a phenomenon in terms of either existing or not existing, but rather in terms of how (Palonen, 2018), to what degree (Gürhanli, 2018), and when (Moffit, 2016) it comes into existence. One of the most extreme examples of current (populist) polarization and its consequences is Venezuela under the rule of Nicolás Maduro (2013-present).

Due to the country’s tradition of clientelism (cf. Guerrero, 2014), private media companies were powerful economic and political actors before President Hugo Chávez’s era. Chávez questioned the neoliberal measures taken by previous governments and started to apply his 21st century socialism in a manner that shaped his government’s media policies. Several media outlets disagreed with his drastic measures and viewed them as an attack on the private media. Consequently, a confrontation developed between the private and the government-backed media, leading to Chávez´s demonizing of the private media as an enemy of *Chavismo* (Salojärvi, 2016).

According to Laclau’s (2005) theory, populism may be defined as constructing the very unity of the in-group, the “us” or “the people”. The media may be seen as an essential factor in this process, since it contributes to building a collective identity among a part of a population (cf. Sonwalkar, 2005). Populism may also be described as a rhetorical-performative phenomenon (Palonen & Saresma, 2017; Palonen, 2018) that is produced visually, verbally and spatially. To transport its ideas, the media in its many forms (audio-visual, but also participative) is most effective.

When discussing the role of the media in politics, we need to distinguish between the media as a political and strategic tool for societal power holders, i.e. a form of instrumentalization (Mancini, 2012); the media outlets that play an active role in the political conflict and may even take the form of political parallelism (Mancini, 2012); and individual journalists. In what follows, I will first look at these different levels during the presidency of Chávez and then during the presidency of Maduro, to be able to compare the dynamics of populist politics and how these different systems of operation have both affected and utilized the media.

President Maduro has aimed at continuing Chávez's movement, trying to mimic his predecessor. However, this has not been an easy task, since while Chávez was able to convey the image of a charismatic leader that had a strong vision, Maduro may lack the ability to create the same impression (at least through the media), which is one of the preconditions of a successful populist movement (Palonen & Saresma, 2017: 16). Little by little, the government of Venezuela became authoritarian, labeling its political competitors and many alternative actors in society, including the private media and some journalists, as its enemies – to the point where society at large is divided between "the good" and "the bad" (cf. Bisbal, 2009).

Chávez and the plan of a democratization of the media

When studying Chávez's politics, the media's role is crucial. Chávez's administration has even been called a media-based government, where policy-making and decision-making were performed in the media, namely, on live television (Cañizález, 2012: 62).

The private media in Venezuela before the era of Chávez were criticized (e.g. by distinguished communication scholar Antonio Pasquali) for being too powerful and for being clustered in the hands of a few influential men. This was a prominent trend throughout the entire region, and it enabled a clientelistic relationship between the media groups and politicians (Guerrero, 2014). Public antipathy toward the mainstream media was at its height when Chávez began his term in 1999, because the latter had lowered its quality and even partly abandoned its sense of social responsibility (Mayobre, 2002). The first presidential term of Chávez started with good relations between the president and the mainstream media. The private media mostly supported the candidacy of Chávez in the election of 1998, but later the majority of the key media outlets criticized his politics (Samet, 2013: 531).

One of the most important turning points in recent Venezuelan history is the coup of April 2002 and the way it affected the government's attitude toward the private media, especially when combined with the oil industry's strike in 2002-2003. Even though the media had already criticized Chávez before April 2002, the coup changed the relationship between the government and media companies, and Chávez began to blame especially the four main private television channels – Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), Globovisión, Televen and Venevisión – for taking part in the coup.

One of the first actions after the above mentioned events of 2002-2003 that the state took to enforce its power over the media sector was the forming of a new Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MinCI) in 2004. Moreover, a new law addressing the social responsibility of television and radio was drafted. The image of the government channel, Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), was changed, and new self-produced programs were broadcast, while the coverage of the channel was expanded to include 90 percent of the country, and broadcasting was extended to 24 hours per day. New television channels were launched. The government's communication strategy was based on maximizing the use of the state media, spreading news and information about the government's agendas, and representing Chávez and the revolution internationally (Botía, 2005: 30-33).

In 2007, the Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology, Jesse Chacón, introduced a policy of democratization of communication in Venezuela. The Venezuelan state had been developing a new communication model in accordance with this general view, which included among other principles the participation of citizens and the development of television as a public service (MPPTI, 2007; see also Salojärvi, 2008: 44-50). The democratization project, however, seemed to have a slow start, because by 2010 the state television channels still reached only about five percent of the total audience (Weisbrot & Ruttenberg, 2010), and other government media projects – i.e., citizen projects, including community media – were not widely frequented by citizens but by more specific groups only (Salojärvi, 2016: 52).

One part of this democratization of communication was revoking the broadcasting license of RCTV in 2007 (cf. Salojärvi, 2008). As a result, then 53-years old RCTV, economically one of the most significant television channels, stopped broadcasting on national television and switched to cable TV. This left Globovisión the only one out of the four television channels that Chávez blamed for taking part in the coup of 2002, as Televen and Venevisión had already changed their editorial lines (Ellner, 2008: 171). Moreover, many radio stations also suffered during the second half of the Chávez era, as dozens of them lost their licenses and many suffered from a lack of advertising revenues (Salojärvi, 2016).

Many print media outlets also struggled; for example, due to a lack of printing paper, because newspaper publishers were short of U.S. currency to buy paper from abroad. This particular method of regulating the media caused them to reduce their page counts, and sometimes, especially in the local press, they were not able to publish some issues or sections of a paper at all (Salojärvi, 2016). The underlying reason was the government's currency control system, which regulated the amount of U.S. dollars circulating in the country in order to protect the Venezuelan economy. However, this also enabled the government to grant more dollars to certain favored companies. Whereas a lack of advertisers was another severe problem for the newspapers (Salojärvi, 2016), some print media, radio, and television outlets received valuable advertising payments from the government.

Government spending on propaganda is an example of the clientelistic relationship between the media and politicians (Guerrero, 2014; Waisbord, 2014: 31). In many Latin American countries, governmental propaganda is an important source of income for many media firms, especially those close to power (Waisbord, 2014). In Venezuela, the MinCI spent up to 64 percent of its 2012 budget on government propaganda. Of all the money handed out, VTV received the most (32 % in 2013). Even though community and alternative media were one of the key targets on the government's agenda, they did not receive large amounts of money. For example, in 2013 they received only two percent of the Ministry's budget (Vásquez, 2014).

Yet the status of citizens' media changed drastically under Chávez. Prior to 1999, there were only a few community media outlets operating legally, although there were some illegal radio stations operating alongside them (Madriz, 2011). By the end of Chávez's presidency, the number of legal community media outlets had risen immensely, and according to the National Commission of Telecommunications (CONATEL), there were 244 community radio stations and 36 television

channels in the entire country in 2013 (www.conatel.gob.ve). In addition to these, there were many community newspapers and Internet sites.

The instrumentalization of the media, political parallelism, and the consequences

In Latin America, political parallelism and clientelism have strongly affected the media culture (Guerrero, 2014; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Mancini, 2012; Salojärvi, 2016). In Venezuela, both political parallelism – with the media openly biased toward certain political parties – and instrumentalization – with outside actors seeking to control the media in order to intervene in domestic politics (Mancini, 2012) – can be identified (Salojärvi, 2016). In a system of political parallelism, the media do not serve as mediators of information for citizens, but are instead more likely to function as intermediaries between the different elites of society, which have identical or similar levels of knowledge and information (Mancini, 2012: 267–268). In this kind of public sphere, different elite groups use the media as a forum for discussing matters from within the decision-making process (Curran, 1993: 31). In political parallelism, the journalists and media outlets are not neutral, but instead aim to influence the general political and cultural debate (Mancini, 2012: 269, 276). Media instrumentalization, on the other hand, implies the phenomenon of outside actors from politics and/or business seeking to control the media in order to intervene in politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 37). By instrumentalization, "the mass media becomes part of the political struggle and the decision-making process because they reflect the often-contingent interests" of groups or individuals. These different groups may use the media "to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances" (Mancini, 2012: 271). Instrumentalization does not aim to encourage a socialization process from which a well-informed and active citizenry would be produced. Rather, it focuses on pushing specific goals and interests (Mancini, 2012: 277).

In Chávez's Venezuela, the state media was seen purely as *State* media by the pro-Chávez, anti-Chávez, and neutral media actors. The principal state media outlets, especially VTV, represented the state, but were not communicating toward the citizens; they mostly focused on accusing private media of various alleged wrongs, defending the state, or broadcasting government propaganda, thus fulfilling some of the traits of instrumentalization. Opinions on the private media varied among Venezuelan media actors. Partly depending on the media actors' mnemonic base, the private media was associated with the "old" regime of governments before Chávez, with neoliberal changes, as representing economic power and values, or even, to some, as standing for democracy. Some media actors described the private media as a weak actor, existing merely as a puppet of the markets or the opposition, as in the case of instrumentalization. For others, they seemed fragmented, and some saw them as powerful middling actors that received their validation either from civil society or private market actors. (Salojärvi, 2016.) Chávez has been described as skillful media-wise (Cañizález 2012), which is typical of populist leaders (Mazzoleni, 2008), and he is said to have realized the power of the media early on in his political career (Gott, 2005: 23). The public support of Chávez's media use, however, derived from a lack of affection towards the mainstream media (Mayobre, 2002), which derived from the above discussed era before Chávez's presidency when private media had lowered the quality.

In addition to the government's media policy and systemic changes, it may be said that Chávez also had a personal media strategy, since he often appeared in the media in person, talking about the government's actions and plans, or just simply singing or telling stories. His numerous media appearances were mainly enabled in two different ways. First, he had his own weekly television show, *Aló Presidente,* and second, his government used a large quantity of *cadenas,* which are important governmental announcements broadcast simultaneously on terrestrial television and radio stations. *Cadenas* have been criticized since they can be used as free advertisements on behalf of the government; moreover, the frequent airing of *cadenas* limits the options of citizens, since those who cannot afford cable television do not have the option to watch any other programs. *Cadenas* may also be interpreted as indirect censorship, as they bar the national audio-visual media from transmitting their own programming (Correa, 2006: 18-21). In addition to these two types of media activity, Chávez was also active in the social media, including a blog, Twitter, and Facebook.

Media appearances can function as a way to encourage unity amongst the people. Chávez spoke directly to the people – and with the people – in his weekly television program *Aló Presidente*. The media were a way to transmit his charisma and the idea of Chávez as an outsider to the elite. This also served as a way to construct Chávez performatively as head of the movement, an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005), which includes his physical appearance and personal life.

Undoubtedly, the media itself was also one of the central actors in this political process, not just a passive medium to deliver messages. But here we need to specify which medium we are talking about, and more specifically, which time period. The private media was not a bystander either, since they, for example, published manipulated images replacing a flower in Chávez's hand with a gun (Gallino & Niemeyer, 2003), and they repeatedly called Chávez a dictator, a tyrant, etc. (Salojärvi, 2016).

Many individual journalists suffered during this populist conflict; they had problems accessing information, they were ridiculed in press conferences if they managed to be admitted at all, and physical as well as verbal attacks against individual journalists and news organizations caused a climate of self-censorship. Yet, during the Chávez era the majority of journalists still felt that they were able to practice their profession (Garcia Santamaria & Salojärvi, 2020; Salojärvi, 2016).

Government control during Maduro's presidency

Before his death, Chávez named Nicolás Maduro his successor. Thus, Maduro inherited Chávez's votes in the presidential election of 2013 after Chávez had died of cancer in March. Maduro also started to apply many of Chávez's media strategies, including his own radio/television program, *En contacto con Maduro*, and the extensive usage of *cadenas*. However, many changes took place as well. Especially during the years 2012-2014, several established media outlets, including Globovisión, Cadena Capriles (publisher of *Últimas Noticias*, for example) and *El Universal*, went through ownership changes, which according to many Venezuelan journalists often led to changes in editorial stances and/or professional practices (Garcia Santamaria & Salojärvi, 2020). In addition, according to Venezuelan diasporic community members, the years 2013-2014 saw more open censorship, government control, and threats, which originated either directly or indirectly with the government and affected the sense of personal security (Garcia Santamaria & Salojärvi, 2020). These

testimonies are confirmed by the findings of national and international freedom of expression organizations (e.g. Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, Espacio Publico).

Some internet control mechanisms had already been in place in Venezuela since 2009, but their use has increased during the Maduro presidency. It has been noted that first generation internet controls, which are usually seen in more autocratic regimes, such as censoring content and blocking access to the internet, were often put in place (especially after 2014) side by side with second generation controls, such as obstacles to access without totally blocking the service, and criminalizing users and providers in order to prevent political use without conventional censorship. The government of Venezuela does allow internet access, even to some sites critical of the government, but they block selected sites, in particular sites that deal with politically sensitive issues; they intercept emails from journalists and opposition activists; and they have been installing massive automated surveillance mechanisms for the internet since 2010 (Puyosa & Chaguaceda, 2017).

During Maduro's presidency, the government has also practiced different strategies in the social media. On Twitter, they have (1) coordinated official and automated accounts to make sure to address the daily trending topics, (2) promoted distracting hashtags accompanied by emotional, scandalous, misleading, offensive, and/or false messages through cyborg and bot accounts, and (3) hijacked opposition hashtags to distort their messages and interfere in the conversations of various opposition communities (obserlatinf.org; see also Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Thus, it is safe to say that traditional media (Salojärvi, 2016) and social media (obserlatinf.org) play strategic roles in how the Venezuelan government attempts to dominate and distract in order to maintain hegemonic power. In addition, there are more than 320 radio stations without concession to operate (including over 40 new stations just in 2017) (ipysvenezuela.org). Many international channels, such as CNN en Español (Almasy 2017), have been off the air in Venezuela; a hate speech law that prohibits anyone from sharing content that "'promotes fascism, intolerance or hate ... on social media or digital platforms', under penalty of up to 20 years in prison" (www.aljazeera.com) was established in 2017; and CONATEL fined Televen in 2018 for not broadcasting the Constitutional National Assembly elections in July 2017, which presumably listed only pro-Chávez candidates (www.caracaschronicles.com).

Hence, the government of Maduro has in a way continued the media policies of Chávez, but at the same time has increased its level of control. From the point of view of populism, the important question is why Maduro's government has needed to do this. The role of the private media outlets as actors in this political conflict has been weakened dramatically during the presidency of Maduro, especially due to deterioration of prerequisites to operate and media ownership changes that led to changes in editorial stances being less critical of the government. That is why the role of individual journalists has become crucial in the Venezuelan media sphere, as it is often about individuals' acts of resistance, showing peer support and professional ethics. (Garcia Santamaria & Salojärvi, 2020.)

Many journalists have decided to leave established media companies due to changes in their work ethics or conditions (Garcia Santamaria & Salojärvi, 2020). This has created an increase in the number of digital news sites as these experienced journalists established new outlets, such as *Efecto Cocuyo*, or sites that mainly circulate news, such as *Runrun.es* and *La Patilla*, just to name a few. Moreover, the growing demand for more balanced information also supported this move toward establishing new sites.

The changing dynamics of populism and the media

Not all populist movement share the same circumstances, but they may be broadly categorized into three different dynamics: mainstream, fringe, and competing (Palonen, 2009). In the case of Chavismo, the first two are relevant. In a sense, almost all populist movements have been fringe movements that challenge the existing hegemony, having risen from the margins of their societies and representing something outside the established political parties. Chavismo experienced this phase in the 1990s, when Chávez challenged the existing political actors and won the presidential election of 1998. During this era Chávez enjoyed good relations with the mainstream media, which gave him access to media appearances and thus the desired publicity for his persona and message. In this way, he was also able to distinguish himself as a political outsider using his rhetorical and performative approach, which appealed to the large segment of people that did not identify with most of the country's political and economic elite.

Having established power, Chavismo turned mainstream. The idea of constructing a sense of "us" became less important, especially after the coup of 2002, and the focus of Chavismo turned toward antagonism, fighting the oligarchic elite that included the private media. That is why it was important for the government to strengthen the state media in the name of popular sovereignty. In addition, between the years 2001 and 2004 the logos, slogans, colors, and messages of the government grew more unified (Delgado-Flores, 2006), which indicates that "the people" per se did not need to be specifically identified anymore, as "the people" were now seen as representing the whole population of the country in a unified manner (cf. Laclau 2005). Furthermore, the people's participation via the community media and the independent national producer system tied them to the construction of the "Bolivarian revolution."

To bring about these changes in the national media system was made possible by Chávez's increasingly centralized power position, especially after 2006 (Delgado-Flores, 2006). In general, Chávez's administration may be described as transforming the Venezuelan media sphere from an unregulated environment to a unified and juridically controlled system, in which the state media became more professional and dominant (Delgado-Flores, 2006). According to Ellner (2014), one of the keys to Chávez's political success was that he took advantage of each electoral and non-electoral victory, and immediately after each victory he deepened the process of change and initiated new stages in the transformation of the country – thus weakening adversaries. This also applied to many of the media changes that took place.

What Chávez did during his presidential term was to expand the concept of the media in order to include not only the private media, but also the state and community media. Before his presidency, the media in Venezuela were perceived mostly as private media, connected to the "old" power holders from previous governments. This, in the bipolar logic of populism, identified them as the enemies of Chavismo. Typically for populist discourse (Laclau, 2005), Chávez emphasized the role of "the

people" in his movement, and similarly he emphasized the role of "the people" in the media system as producers of media content and as active participants in the community media. Moreover, Chávez wanted to create strong state media that reproduced the discourse of Chavismo, the "us". Yet in this context, state media should be distinguished from public broadcasting. State media are not able to function independently from governmental direction, but Chavismo did not see any problem in this, as is typical of other populist governments in the region (Waisbord, 2011). Chávez's media policy served his overall politics. For example, Minister Andrés Izarra stated that "our socialism needs communicational hegemony" (Bisbal, 2009: 43).[1] Thus, it is possible to see the seeds of the tightening media control during Maduro's presidency early on in Chavismo. Chávez strengthened the state media and the community media. Thus, not only was the general perception of the media expanded to include these forms of outlets, but the overall nature of the media system was transformed from being market-driven (oligopolic) to state-controlled.

As a consequence of the extreme populist conflict they have experienced, Venezuelan citizens have withdrawn into their bubbles and avoid communicating about politics with the opposing side, both in traditional media (Salojärvi, 2016) and in social media (Salojärvi, 2017), and many Venezuelans simply do not trust the mainstream media, with everyone except radical Chavistas believing that there is censorship in the country (Quiñones, 2012). In addition, five million Venezuelans have left the country since 2015 (www.iom.int) in order to look for a better life (Paez, 2015), among them many journalists.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the role of the media as an essential part of enacting populism during the two decades of Chavismo. The media has been used as a political and strategic tool by the political power holders throughout the era but the media outlets have also been able to take a stance in the political conflict. Yet, this latter function has become increasingly difficult – especially during Maduro's regime – for the private media.

In a polarized environment of hegemonic battles, the media can function as a constructor of unity; e.g., the movement of Chavismo was far from a unified political ideology. Yet the different factions of the movement (Ellner, 2008) did not have their own media; they rather all shared the same outlets, which sometimes resulted in conflicting messaging in the media (Salojärvi, 2016: 142-143). As a result of the media's role in unifying their respective audiences, they became especially significant in the power struggle. Yet while Chávez – as a charismatic leader able to create a perception of authenticity (Salojärvi 2019) and a political vision – was able to successfully perform in the audio-visual media, and in this way was also able to connect with the people to an arousing effect, the current unpopular Maduro[2] is not as skillful at playing a media persona, and also lacks his own vision (cf. Hall, 2005); instead, he is trying to perform a version of Chávez's vision. In the absence of this vital media effect (Palonen & Saresma, 2017), Maduro has not been able to carry out his populist politics, and has also had to resort to different measures of control in his media

[1] "Nuestro socialismo necesita una hegemonía comunicacional" (2007).

[2] The support for Maduro was around 13 per cent in 2020 (e.g. https://apnews.com/bce938e43c3e61839dcefbde30ea8282).

policies. Once the affective side is lost in populism, what remains is a sheer dichotomy of us/them (cf. Palonen, 2009) sustained by other means, such as domination.

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