

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chávez's *Aló Presidente* and its Impact on Venezuela's Journalistic Practice

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As Venezuela's leader, Hugo Chávez utilized the media intensively and innovatively to boost his radical political project. The broadcast talk-show *Aló Presidente* became the most important component of his communication strategy, followed by his use of blanket broadcast messages. Chávez's flagship program subverted liberal tenets, and has to this day served as a template in Latin America for populist communication. This study examined the ways Venezuelan journalists and media professionals have understood Chávez's hyper-mediatic leadership –with special emphasis on *Aló Presidente*– and the impact the program and the official blanket messages had on their practice. A wide array of journalists, media practitioners, and commentators were interviewed about their views regarding Chávez's media strategies and *Aló Presidente*, and tensions arising between different ideals of normative journalistic practice. Opinions among local journalists about the above-mentioned issues, this study found, are divided within a highly-polarized frame. And normative media ideals of liberal trends were challenged by pro-Chávez journalists, while an important faction of media professionals maintained that such practices are non-democratic.

Keywords: journalism studies; journalism and media practice; media regulations; populism; Venezuela; Hugo Chavez; Hello President

En calidad de líder de Venezuela, Hugo Chávez utilizó los medios comunicacionales de manera intensa e innovadora, para así promover su radical proyecto político. El programa televisivo *Aló Presidente* llegó a convertirse en el componente más importante de su estrategia comunicacional, seguido del uso de sus 'cadenas' audiovisuales. Este programa insignia de Chávez subvertía ideales liberales, y hasta el día de hoy funciona como un modelo de comunicación populista en América Latina. El presente estudio examina las formas en las que periodistas y profesionales de medios venezolanos entienden el liderazgo hiper-mediático de Chávez –con especial énfasis en *Aló Presidente*– y el impacto que dicho programa y los mensajes 'en cadena' han ejercido en su oficio. Una amplia gama de periodistas, profesionales y comentaristas de medios fueron entrevistados sobre sus opiniones en relación a las estrategias mediáticas de Chávez, *Aló Presidente*, y las tensiones que surgen entre variados ideales sobre la práctica de periodismo normativo. El estudio revela que las opiniones de los periodistas locales sobre los asuntos arriba mencionados se dividen dentro de un marco de alta polarización. Igualmente, los ideales mediáticos normativos de tendencias liberales son desafiados por periodistas pro-Chávez, al tiempo que una facción importante de profesionales de medios sostiene que tales prácticas son anti-democráticas.

Palabras clave: estudios de periodismo; periodismo y práctica de los medios; normativa mediática; populismo; Venezuela; Hugo Chávez; *Aló Presidente*

This paper is guided by an empirical exploration of how Venezuelan late president Hugo Chávez's presence in the media –essentially through the talk-show *Aló Presidente* and his official broadcast messages known as *cadenas* ('chains')– were interpreted by Venezuela's journalists, media professionals and expert commentators; the impact

they had on their journalistic practice; and the ways in which Chávez's speeches defined the national information agenda, according to opinions of journalists, media practitioners and commentators.

Few countries have witnessed in the twenty-first century a surge of its local media as a political battleground as intensely as Venezuela did under Chávez's government or under his hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro –with the broadcast program *Aló Presidente* as its centerpiece (McCoy and Myers 2004; Cañizalez 2016; Lozada 2016).

There exists literature characterizing Chávez's political project or his populist model. There are also some studies that analyze the profile and content of *Aló Presidente*—its discourse, rhetorical style, dominant themes, audiences (García 2006; Reyes-Rodríguez 2008; Frajman 2014). Yet, there are no reliable studies that address the opinions and perceptions of journalists and media practitioners about how they characterize Chávez's media products, specifically *Aló Presidente* and the official blanket broadcasts; or how they 'negotiated' the content of these audiovisual programs and understood their communicative purpose, journalistic values, and news agenda-setting.

Assessing *Aló Presidente*, Chávez's communication style and, more specifically, the impact these have had on journalism and media practice in Venezuela contributes to understanding the tensions between populist and liberal tenets in the context of mediated communications and journalism in Venezuela, and beyond. Under the global rise of populism, it seems pressing to review and analyze how a radical and pioneering media strategy—as constructed by one of the twenty-first century's most personalistic and charismatic leaders—affected journalistic ideals and media practices within a national context.

The original contribution of this study is the empirical examination of media professionals' views and attitudes in Venezuela vis-à-vis the media strategies of Chávez while he was in power—with emphasis on his centerpiece *Aló Presidente* and its impact on news and media production in the nation. This research's findings and discussions are relevant to the field of sociology of journalism, political communications, and democracy studies in both liberal and non-liberal contexts. It is a study that, by empirically evaluating the clash of different ideals in media practice, can help identify study areas in which to further explore the complex relationship between journalism and the rising trend of anti-liberal populism.

In view of some arguments formulated by media practitioners and commentators on political and media changes in Venezuela under Chávez, the research's leading hypothesis is that the populist traits of Chávez's media strategy and programs, the radical politicization of both pro-government and oppositional news media, and the highly polarized political climate in Venezuela, have deeply affected the practice of certain core concepts and notions of professional journalism, particularly in accordance with normative liberal models.

During the Chávez era—from his rise to power as elected President in February 1999 to his death while still holding office in March 2013—political bias in Venezuelan news media gained terrain significantly, mirroring like few other phenomena the way the country became highly polarized (Parra 2010; Kitzberger 2012; Waisbord 2012). This political environment profoundly transformed that of the media, and journalists became agents of specific ideological advocacy and rivalling political militancy (Bisbal 2008 and 2009; Lozada 2016). Such scenario in the media is argued to conflict with basic notions of balanced, accurate, transparent journalistic and media output—as upheld by liberal principles of media practice (Schudson 1995 and 2003; Keane 1991). As a consequence, the opposed views—those that are pro-Chávez and those of

the opposition—by which the media represent reality have affected the nature of plural and constructive discussion within Venezuela's society (Bisbal 2009; Cañizalez 2009 and 2016; Caballero 2010).

The program *Aló Presidente* was first transmitted in May 1999 and it continued its live transmissions in the majority of government-owned television and radio stations almost every Sunday while Chávez was alive and in good health. Its format was that of a talk-show in which the President conversed for an average of four hours (sometimes for over eight hours) about his ideas and political plans, his Presidential agenda, and selectively answered questions from the public, while often resorting to personal anecdotes (MPPCI 2007; Cañizalez 2009 and 2016; Frajman 2014).

Another important communication tool employed by Chávez—and still used by his successor Maduro—were the official blanket broadcasted messages or *cadena*s. With the exception of cable or satellite television stations, all broadcasting outlets in the country are under legal obligation—even before Chávez's arrival to power—to transmit the *cadena*s. It is estimated that between September 1999 and July 2009, Chávez broadcast 1,992 national blanket messages; which added to over 1,250 hours or 52 days per year (Ipys 2010; Cañizalez 2016). Such an estimate is exceptional in Venezuela's history—previous Presidents accumulated a maximum of a two-hundred hours yearly (Ibid).

Chávez's followers viewed these Presidential messages and his communicational style in a positive light, and as a necessary component of a radical political project of emancipation (McCoy and Myers 2004; Ellner 2007; Parra 2010; Artz 2017). However, the nation's political opposition, and many organizations that monitor freedom of expression and human rights, accused Chávez's government of attempting to impose a mediatic hegemony, silence his critics, and weaken democratic practice—allegations the late President and his followers denied (Ellner 2007; Amnesty International 2010; Provea 2010 and 2014; Cañizalez 2011).

Some observers have characterized Chávez as authoritarian, militarist, and *caudillista*; while others contend that he is anti-liberal, revolutionary, anti-oligarchic, and messianic (Lander 2008; Zúquete 2008; Caballero 2010). However, there is consensus among rivalling views that the President employed *Aló Presidente* and the media as a strategic means to enhance popular participation and mobilization. *Aló Presidente* and *cadena*s are prime examples of the use of media in a populist manner; and were emulated to varying degrees by other political leaders—most notably Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina (Zúquete 2008; Bisbal 2009; Frajman 2014). This media strategy redefined a tension—not too visible in Venezuela before Chávez's rule—between different tenets of journalistic practices as held by liberal and populist perspectives.

Normative journalistic practice: Colliding views in Chávez's Venezuela

When discussing normative journalism it must be stressed that its dominant model stems from the Western liberal tradition. Yet, the latter's set of ideals about journal-

istic and media practice have been refuted by various counter-hegemonic formulations, most notably by those underpinned by Marxist and political economy positions (Curran 2002; Nerone 2012). In order to broaden theoretical discussion and to problematize the case studied, two contrasting frameworks of normative journalism are reviewed –the liberal and its Marxist-inspired critique.

Within a liberal framework, normative and professional ideals in the media include providing the public with a systematic means to check on state authorities, institutions, and power groups (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Curran 2002; Waisbord 2013). Importantly, these tenets stress that journalism should be a source of balanced, diverse and transparent information; while providing plural access for all citizens to the media and serving as a platform for rational deliberation and discussion of political views (Ibid).

These normative ideals –emanating from liberal traditions– have been drawn mainly within the context of the Anglo-American orbit (McQuail 2005; Waisbord 2013). Yet, within this current there seems to exist disparity and tension between the seemingly democratic principles that the media 'are supposed to serve and the communications structures and practices that actually prevail' (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990: 270). These normative ideals in media and journalism should be driven by a 'public-oriented logic that is not subsumed under particular interests of the markets, politics, and bureaucracies' (Waisbord 2013: 126). Under this view, only 'journalism informed by higher values that transcend social differences and personal interests, and probes the logic of markets and politics, deserves to be called professional' (Ibid: 127).

Accordingly, Mancini (cited by McQuail 2005) argues that, under this liberal media framework, there exists a twofold 'gap' between the normative/professional theories and the practice in various countries. One, he observes, refers to the manner in which the investigative role of journalism hardly receives any normative recognition. The other alludes to the journalistic principles of supposed balance, neutrality and independence, when in practice most journalists tend to work 'in close symbiosis' with powerful economic and political groups, government officials, and authorities (Ibid: 175). This formulation derives, not from Hallin's and Mancini's elaboration of their much-cited three models of media and politics – which has been criticized due to its alleged reductionist characterizations of media systems (Humphreys 2011)– but from a shared view of other authors that affirm there is common ground regarding norms of professional journalism in many nations with distinct journalistic cultures (Siebert et al 1956; Schudson 1978; Schiller 1979 cited in Nerone 2012).

As a way to legitimize the professionalism of journalism and its civic purpose, some authors of the liberal tradition claim that news media can effectively serve not only as a key instrument for disseminating information but as a platform through which the public can engage in constructive discussion (Hallin 2000; McQuail 2005). Schudson observes that although 'journalistic deference to democratic political institutions may be weakening,' the press offers an important space to 'civic' voices over

'official' or 'statist' pronouncements, and journalistic or media practice tend to stand 'in support of the importance of public life and the common good' (2003: 210–211).

The liberal approach of defining normative journalism has systematically been challenged by non-liberal scholars of Marxist and critical political economy leanings (Bolaño 1999; McQuail 2005; Mosco 2006). A central aspect of this critique is, as Mosco argues, the social and power relations that define 'production, distribution, and consumption of communication resources' (2006: 88). In other words, this non-liberal strand emphasizes the need to assess how media outlets function and how their products, from news content to paid publicity, move from producers to the audience, and what effects –in terms of control, negotiation, hegemonic tension– they are likely to have.

A media system that does not cultivate social inclusion, nor balanced representation of the subordinated or minority classes, cannot be considered democratic (Keane 1991; Artz et al 2006). Authors of non-liberal and participatory strands have been critical towards the logic of liberal market-led societies in the sense that these are argued not to be committed to the promotion of plural access and representation in the media (Sparks 2007; Artz 2017). Thus, a different set of normative journalistic ideals –compared to traditional liberal views– which emphasize inclusiveness, egalitarianism, popular participation, and plural access have been developed. Importantly, this normative ideal of popular participation in the media is underpinned by the notion, as explained by McQuail, that the dominant elite tend to marginalise 'opposition and alternative voices', while the 'public interest in communication is subordinated to private interest' (2005: 100).

In the case of Latin America, it has been argued that the liberal narrative in relation to media's normative ideals have accelerated in the region with 'the expansion of information technologies, deregulation and privatization of systems of telecommunications and the Internet' (Bolaño 1999: 22). Others contend that this trend has clashed in Latin America with some national cases of substantial state regulation –in some instances characterized by authoritarian traits (Bisbal 2009). Venezuela under Chávez, some argue, is a case of the latter (Ibid, Caballero 2010).

Yet, even though the implementation of a set of national media policies failed during the late-twentieth century, the debate they have generated arguably led to the reformulation of normative aspects of national and regional media since (Beltrán 2007). It can be argued that the so-called 'Pink tide' or left-leaning governments in Latin America between 2000 and 2015 –nominally Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, led by Venezuela under Chávez– favored the redevelopment of communication policies in order to broaden popular participation and political agency (Ibid; Matos 2011; Artz 2017).

Authors such as Laclau (2005) find that populism, particularly in the context of Latin America, is an adequate mechanism –albeit highly complex– by which the state can lead an increasingly egalitarian, participative and communitarian form of democracy while undermining the social and political tradition of domination as led by the elites. Under this perspective, populist media politics

–statist, centralized, nationalist and anti-oligarchic– are argued to be a key tool for social transformation, by which liberal or capitalist paradigms can be challenged and even repudiated in the name of notions of ‘egalitarianism’, ‘national sovereignty’, ‘popular emancipation’, among others. Yet, as argues Ardití, populism of this bent tends to be guided by leaders who act as ‘political brokers that bypass formal mechanisms of representation wherever it suits them,’ while aiming to intensify political polarization (2007: 55).

An examination of the existing views of populism highlights a tendency in these types of regimes to adverse liberal media models. As argued by various critics, in Latin America during the twenty-first century –and particularly in Venezuela– it seems that populist regimes have not promoted in the media core values and concepts underpinned by liberal theories, such as freedom of expression, right of information, watchdog function, among others, within a national context (Cañizalez 2009; Keane 2009; Waisbord 2011). Instead, such governments have clashed variably with both traditional liberal and neo-liberal principles of the press and challenged their normative tenets (Bisbal 2009). The lack of ‘social and political consensus’ sought by populist governments as part of their strategies imposes various challenges ‘to firm up professionalism’ in the media and to prize normative ideals among journalists, as promoted by liberal views (Waisbord 2013: 39).

In this sense, and according to most studies, Chávez represented a quintessential example of a personalist and populist leader, spearheading a process of nominally participatory, anti-liberal and radical democracy; which was often evaluated as authoritarian and relatively *caudillista* –as in a long tradition of the military men that ruled many Latin American nations during the nineteenth century (Zúquete 2008; Frajman 2014; Cañizalez 2016).

The mechanisms in Latin American populism –as has been visible in Venezuela under Chávez (and his successor Maduro)– by which liberal-leaning outlets are restrained or attacked while media reforms and statization are implemented leads, as observe Bisbal (2009) and Waisbord (2012), to intensifying confrontation between the ‘pro-government’ and the ‘oppositional’ forces, and to general political polarization.

Scope, empirical approach, and data

Drawing from various explanatory works about research methodology, the nature of this study demanded an empirical approach based on a qualitative investigation of the opinions and attitudes of journalists, media workers and media commentators in Venezuela. Qualitative interviewing was an adequate technique for gathering and analyzing this type of data (Kvale 1996; Wengraf 2002).

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were carried out with seventy-one individuals. The significant majority of these were Venezuelan journalists and editors; and eighteen news media owners or managers, media scholars and commentators, media-related NGOs’ spokespersons, politicians and public functionaries. The journalists, editors and media practitioners interviewed worked in various mediums –the majority of these were in broadcasting

and/or print news outlets. At the time, Venezuelan broadcast and print media employed, as a collective, the largest amount of professional journalists compared to other industries (Castellanos 2009).

To achieve breadth of scope and to obtain a coherent qualitative sample, the empirical study relied on interviewees that displayed significant variation in the opinions and general data they were able to provide (Gobo 2004). The nature of the study required that the sample of interviewees was heterogeneous –particularly in their political and ideological viewpoints (Ibid; Weiss 1995). The media professionals interviewed were chosen primarily on the basis of their own political and political alignment and that of the news media outlet they worked for, across a variety of media organizations. Due to the highly polarized political environment in Venezuela, it was feasible to define the sample of the interviews in terms of the politico-ideological positioning of the news organizations these worked for during the 2000s –such was the visibility of political polarization in Venezuelan media (Bisbal 2008; Cañizalez 2009).

Most interviews were carried out face-to-face in Venezuela, while twenty-two were conducted via Skype or over the telephone; each lasting a minimum of forty-five minutes. All were carried out during three different spells: March 2012-June 2012; December 2013-January 2014; May 2015-July 2015. The study had the full cooperation of all interviewees. All were adults and consented to participate in the interviewing process, without raising any ethical concerns or specific considerations. However, six of the interviewees –out of a total of 71– requested anonymity due to varying reasons. Hence their names were not reproduced in the study’s text and details of their posts and workplace are not mentioned.

During the interviewing process the vast majority of participants –if not all– reflected an almost binary divide in terms of their understanding of democracy, populism, Chávez’s leadership, the role of the media, and journalistic values. It also became clear that Chávez had, according to every interviewee, attempted to shift the country’s political path, and in doing so became a very divisive figure. Hence, the results of the interviews are presented in this study following a predominantly binary pattern –opinions of pro-Chávez media practitioners and commentators on the one hand, and those of the opposition on the other.

Importantly, in order to interpret the substantial data emerging from the qualitative interviews, while being consistent with the aim of this study, four different themes of discussion were developed in order to organize, present, and assess the empirical findings in a coherent manner. These thematic strands, informed by the theories reviewed and by a preliminary empirical exploration mainly relying on six ‘pilot’ interviews, relate to how Venezuelan journalists, media practitioners and commentators understand and assess the following: 1) Chávez’s style of leadership, 2) Chávez’s general media strategy, 3) *Aló Presidente* and its impact on Venezuelan media/journalistic practice, and 4) official blanket broadcasts and their impact on Venezuelan media/journalistic practice.

Professionals' assessment of Chávez's type of leadership

This study's first thematic strand of analysis addresses the opinions gathered from journalists and media practitioners about how they understand Hugo Chávez's style of leadership and communication. In order to assess the views of these professionals towards the character and impact of *Aló Presidente* and to *cadenas*, it is essential to review the varying –and mostly polarized– manners in which Venezuelan media practitioners understand his type of governance and political persona. As a starting point, all interviewees expressed that Chávez's leadership represented a substantial shift in Venezuelan politics and an unprecedented form of government. Yet, there prevails a binary interpretation of the type of socio-political project he promoted.

Chávez's sympathizers interviewed described him as a 'revolutionary' or 'anti-imperialist' or 'anti-oligarchic' democrat. Very few of this group defined him as a populist. As interviewee Ernesto Villegas, Minister of Information and Communication explained: 'if being a populist means representing and being popular among the disenfranchised, then Chávez was certainly a populist; if it means being manipulative with the people then he certainly was not'. Workers of government-owned media outlets coincided that Chávez was undeniably popular, and was a much needed figure in leading a political process which upended an old two-party 'corrupt' political system of neo-liberal policies.

Marco Hernández, Director at state-run Conatel (National Telecommunications Commission), found that a key aspect of the radical and anti-liberal character of Chávez's political process was the way his government broke down an entrenched capitalist tradition with the nation, and that "the President found an effective way to convey this message through his popular discourse and media strategies". A significant majority of interviewees working in pro-Chávez outlets also found that prior to his arrival to the Presidency, the political and media model that dominated Venezuela was distinctively elitist.

When Chávez's political project was defined by some interviewees as anti-imperialist, they also articulated a need to challenge the 'dominant' and political role that the U.S. played in Venezuela and Latin America during the twentieth century. Importantly, many considered that the Chávez administration represented a non-conventional type of democracy, one that is not only anti-imperialist but also inclusive and participatory.

This radical process of popular empowerment and social transformation, according to the views of most of the pro-government professionals interviewed, needed the leadership of Chávez –and that of his successor Maduro. They argued that Chávez spearheaded a movement of social inclusion and alleviation of poverty, and that he possessed a unique capacity to express 'the will of the people'. A majority of pro-government interviewees approved of Chávez's heterodox, popular, and personalist way to lead and communicate with Venezuelans in order to attain political and social transformation.

Indeed, very few interviewees belonging to the opposition or of a dissident character challenged the notion that Chávez established a deep connection with the disenfranchised sectors of Venezuelan society. Yet, the vast majority of this group of media practitioners esteemed that Chávez increasingly violated democratic values and independent institutionalism in Venezuela. His political persona was described as that of a 'populist', or 'demagogue', or '*caudillo*'. Here, the concept of populism, according to most of these interviewees, has pejorative connotations.

Teodoro Petkoff, former Editor of daily *TalCual*, sustained that Chávez's leadership gradually turned into an autocracy of sorts. After 2007, according to him, it became clear that Chávez's political project relied entirely on his personal leadership. Many liberal media practitioners agreed with this statement. Moreover, and according to Taisa Medina, former Information Editor at daily *El Universal*, the President imposed 'an autocracy, curbing human rights and limiting basic freedoms, including the freedom of the press as we knew it during previous administrations'. Some interviewees concurred with this view, yet some said that although Chávez established a highly-personalist Presidency there were spaces in the media for dissent –albeit these were few and selective, and gradually decreased.

Importantly, a large group of journalists and editors interviewed disagreed with the definition of Chávez's government as authentically modelled in participatory democracy. Moreover, many considered that although the Chávez's administration introduced political changes in Venezuela, these did not hold a revolutionary nature; but were more aligned with the populist *caudillo* tradition of some nineteenth-century military men in Latin America.

Interviewee Marcelino Bisbal, media scholar at Universidad Andrés Bello, defined Chávez's political project as hybrid in nature; as one that 'mixed strong populist and militarist elements, riding on a wave of pseudo-leftist rhetoric'. Ewald Scharfenberg, founder of Armando. Info website, like other media professionals working in private outlets, argued that in Venezuela as of 2002, there existed a pseudo-institutional structure but there was no real separation of powers. 'The estate, the legislative power, the judiciary power and so on were all dominated by Chávez,' he said. This, he sustained, became more entrenched as time went by. The majority of pro-opposition voices agreed with Scharfenberg's perception; and in sum highlighted that Chávez's government weakened institutional and multi-party democracy.

Professionals' assessment of Chávez's media strategy

This thematic strand of the study sought to describe and discuss the opinions of journalists, media practitioners and commentators of different politico-ideological standings in relation to how they understand and 'negotiate' with Chávez's communication strategies and mediated messages. Indeed, all interviewees expressed that Chávez was a very mediatic President and was clearly aware of the strategic power of the media. Arguably, all could concur with Bisbal's idea that Chávez's form of governing was

'hyper-Presidentialist' in the sense that his persona was central in defining the political debate and that his mediated presence was almost ubiquitous.

Every interviewee working in pro-Chávez media expressed that no Venezuelan head of government had utilized the media for politico-ideological purposes so intensely and skilfully as Chávez. This, most of them argued, was evident in his constant presence through *Aló Presidente* and the blanket official messages; but also in the way his government promoted communitarian media, re-launched some print and broadcast outlets such as newspaper *Correo del Orinoco* and 24-hour news international TV network in Telesur, and reformed media policies. Importantly, some of these interviewees argued that, after *Aló Presidente*, the elaboration of a framework for pro-Chávez communitarian media was a salient media project of his. According to Conatel, in 2013 there existed around 400 communitarian media outlets –mostly radio stations– compared to less than 50 before the arrival of Chávez to power. This figure has declined dramatically during the Maduro administration.

The use of state-owned media, the promotion of communitarian media, the concentration of media networks ownership –with *Aló Presidente* as its spearhead– were crucial characteristics of Chávez's media strategy. These, some interviewees argued, belong to a form of democracy modelled in ideals of 'egalitarianism' and of 'rule by the people'. Also, a majority of interviewees working in Chavista media were of the opinion that Chávez's use of the media was a necessary counter-hegemonic mechanism aimed at reducing the influence of U.S. information flow. Moreover, this group argued that *Aló Presidente* played a crucial counter-hegemonic role.

Clodovaldo Hernández, who worked at Aporrea.org, indicated that Chávez government's handling of the media meant a significant shift not only in Venezuela but arguably in the region. Chávez's 'communication model', he said, 'meant going against the grain of a neo-liberalism, oligarchic model that existed in many parts of Latin America'. A vast majority of workers in Chavista media agreed that in order to challenge 'neo-liberal standards' and 'elitist rule', Chávez's mediated presence and his critique of the opposition media were requirements for socio-political change.

Many in the Chavista media workers argued that Chávez's challenge of the status quo led to a strong polarization in society which was mirrored in the media. Such high level of polarization had not existed since the rule of dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, during the early-twentieth century. The discourse imposed by Chávez confronting an 'oligarchic' system was central in deepening political polarization in the country and establishing a binary reading of reality. This, almost every interviewee agreed, was most visible in the media, and was spurred specially by the President's Sunday program.

The pro-government media sought to actively amplify what Chávez said during *Aló Presidente*. Most of the journalists working in pro-government media described their reliance on covering the President's broadcast program as both 'positive' and 'necessary' for elaborating a significant

part of their news content, particularly until 2012 –year in which Chávez's health became very frail.

On the other side of the political spectrum, many oppositional voices expressed that Chávez governed 'from the media' in a 'non-democratic' manner, particularly by using *Aló Presidente* and *cadena*s. Some added that although he could be considered a 'natural' communicator, he could also be characterized as a 'media showman'. Various critics of the President argued that he imposed statism on the media and regulation in an authoritarian way, while also using as many media spaces as possible to promote his ideals and policies. Many also sustained that his communication strategy relied strongly on state propaganda, and was influenced by Fidel Castro's model in Cuba.

Moreover, a majority of interviewees that work in opposition media argued that a key component of Chávez's media strategy was to restrict public debate, and that the role of the media was negatively affected in part because of Chávez's 'non-democratic' stance. Although there was some level of freedom of expression in the media until Chávez's death, the quality of discussion and information 'diminished dramatically', particularly because of the 'intimidation and bullying' critics of Chávez suffered from the government and its followers, according to Hernán Lugo-Galicia, reporter at *El Nacional* daily. Almost everyone on the opposition camp agreed with this opinion. Many of them highlighted that soon after Chávez's death, and during Maduro's government, intimidation and harassment towards journalists became more entrenched.

When assessing the country's high level of political polarization and the media, the majority of oppositional journalists interviewed coincided that Chávez's mediated discourse was a crucial component in the configuration of a much divided political landscape. Significantly, Chávez also brought forth the novelty of hyper-politicization among the poorer sectors, according to the majority of interviewees. And what seemed apparent, argued Hugo Prieto, former reporter at *El Nacional*, is that hyper-politicization was deliberately promoted by Chávez and then by Maduro in order to impose a specific political model. It could be argued that such hyper-politicization contributed to the configuration of a highly polarized social scenario while also providing part of the poorer and disenfranchised sectors a sense of political empowerment.

Professionals' assessment of *Aló Presidente* and its impact on media practice

The third thematic strand seeks to discuss the opinions of journalists, media practitioners and commentators specifically in relation to the characteristics of *Aló Presidente* and how the broadcast program shaped in different ways journalistic practice vis-à-vis liberal normative or non-liberal media ideals.

Even though the valuation of Chávez's media persona and strategy seem predominantly constructed within a binary scheme, the bulk of interviewees concur that Venezuela's President was an effective strategist particularly in using *Aló Presidente* to mobilize his political supporters, convey political messages to the public, influence the news and opinion agenda, and portray himself

as a popular leader. Most of his supporters interviewed claimed that Chávez's mediated personality and charisma was best displayed in *Aló Presidente*.

Carlos Revette, reporter at National Assembly TV station, argued that *Aló Presidente* introduced a new media format by which the leader of a popular process maintained a 'permanent dialogue with the people', particularly with 'those that had been neglected by the previous governing elites'. When asked for a qualitative evaluation of *Aló Presidente* and its pertinence as an instrument for democratic communication, all interviewees working in pro-government media concurred that it was an asset for democratic and popular participation, and for combating oppositional political forces. Importantly, many of these pro-government journalists considered that Chávez should have further used his broadcast program to expose wrongdoings by public officials, opposition leaders, and the pro-opposition media—in short, they argue that the President should have acted more robustly in a watchdog role.

A significant majority of interviewees agreed that through *Aló Presidente* Chávez was able to establish an important portion of the news agenda for the national media, and to some degree for foreign outlets ones. In this sense, Felipe Saldivia, Editor of *Ciudad Caracas* pro-Chávez newspaper, argued that with the broadcast program Chávez not only managed to establish the topics for news media agendas, but also most of the themes to be debated in society. Many Chavista interviewees argued that the traditional news media found an atypical communication product in *Aló Presidente* and that it was necessary to confront with it opposition and liberal views.

Among pro-opposition interviewees the dominant trend of opinions regarding Chávez's *Aló Presidente*, its type of messages and rhetoric, was that it was negative for the country's democracy. The words of Petkoff arguably condensed what many of this group of interviewees expressed: '*Aló Presidente* represents Chávez's wish to be omnipresent in every home and impose his personalist regime, through an incendiary rhetoric much like that of *caudillos* of the past'. Many of these interviewees also said that, with *Aló Presidente*, Chávez bypassed the Constitution by accusing and harassing persons that were critical towards his government, often charging opponents of wrongdoing or even criminal activity without allowing any legal trial for the accused person. Some interviewees who are critical of Chavismo were convinced that these accusations made by Chávez led the way for mobilizing government loyalists against the persons whom the President accused—sometimes resulting in violent attacks on journalists and dissents.

Most non-Chavista interviewees esteemed that *Aló Presidente* established the news agenda to a significant degree for all media; yet, on the other hand, the program for this groups represented 'a kind of apartheid on behalf of the President and the government' towards the dissident media—to use political reporter Cristina Marcano's expression. It is noteworthy that, according to some independent journalists interviewed, many private news outlets fell into a 'comfort zone' when covering and reviewing *Aló Presidente*, as at times the program's

content, in essence, lacked newsworthiness. It also shifted dramatically the news gathering and production routines of many journalists, particularly within the private media—as expressed by some interviewees. 'We had no time to investigate other political stories, as most stories gravitated—specially during the two or three days after the broadcast—around what was said in *Aló Presidente*,' added Medina.

The strong communication linkage between the President and his followers by means of *Aló Presidente* was acknowledged by most private-media journalists, but these emphasized that in their opinion the main aim of the broadcast program was for Chávez to impose his views on the general national news agenda, mobilize his followers, and for him to become as ubiquitous as possible, even if at times the viewing share for his program was below fifteen per cent of the audience, as argued Bisbal.

Professionals' assessment of *cadena*s and their impact on media practice

The fourth thematic strand assesses interviewees' opinions about how Chávez's use of official blanket broadcasts and how these affected regular programming and journalistic practice. It is worth highlighting that by early 2010 Chávez had presented 2,000 editions of official blanket broadcasts. According to Reporters Without Borders (2009) between 1999 and 2008 Chávez addressed Venezuelans through the media during 2,370 hours via *Aló Presidente* and in official blanket broadcasts combined. This phenomenon shaped news production and agenda-setting in Venezuelan media, according to most interviewees.

Pro-Chávez journalists expressed their support for the official blanket broadcasts. They argued that the latter represented an effective way to inform Venezuelans about governmental decisions, actions and policies. 'Because the private media still had a large portion of the audience, *cadena*s were a necessary means to present reality in the view of Chávez and his supporters—who represented the majority of the country,' explained an interviewee. As to how *cadena*s affect normative journalism, the majority of pro-Chávez media professional expressed that the former disseminate information that is in the interest of the people, for the 'greater good'; and hence should be understood as a communicational complement to professional informative journalism.

In official and pro-government media—which, in terms of number of outlets, represented the majority by the end of Chávez's rule—*cadena*s defined the news agenda to an important degree, according to most interviewees. Once these official messages were broadcast, relevant aspects of them were covered as news in all of the official and pro-government outlets.

However, in the opinion of all interviewees working in pro-opposition media, the government transmitted this type of messages abusively. This group of interviewees emitted very critical opinions about what they argued became a systematic interruption of regular programming and curbing of freedom in the media. Scharfenberg expressed that *cadena*s interrupted regular broadcast programming 'almost on a daily basis', and that this 'violates

elemental norms of freedom of expression' as well as 'norms of balance and impartiality' in the media. The majority of interviewees working in the private media concurred with Scharfenberg's comments.

'The authoritarian quality and quantity of *cadenas* have no parallel in the history of Latin America,' argued Isnardo Bravo, reporter at pro-opposition network RCTV. The content of the *cadenas*—in the opinion of many interviewees—responded more to a propaganda strategy than to one of ethical information. Importantly, this group esteemed that the Presidential/official blanket broadcasts also aimed to weaken the sense of independence and the watchdog role of the private media.

It is evident, as gathered from the opinion of most private-media workers interviewed that broadcast media have been significantly more affected by *cadenas* than the press. The telecommunications laws are explicit about the obligation of all national broadcast outlets to carry out the live transmission of every official broadcasts. And, as explained Bisbal, for the Chávez (and for the Maduro) government it seemed 'more feasible to become omnipresent through television and radio than through the press'. Yet, according to the information gathered, for all their systematic and mandatory transmissions *cadenas*, like *Aló Presidente*, had a relatively reduced audience—never exceeding ten percent of the audience share (Castellanos 2009). This, most non-Chavista interviewees argued, led to a 'migration' of part of the audience to cable/satellite television.

It is of note that mandatory blanket broadcasts increased during election periods, as expressed by most interviewees. In the opinion of most pro-opposition interviewees, escalation of *cadenas* during election periods were the result of Chávez's efforts to boost his own candidacy or that of his party members—a practice they found to be 'unethical', 'coercing', 'anti-democratic', and which ultimately reduced civic debate.

As a way of resuming these critical perceptions of *cadenas*, an interviewee formulated that they constituted 'a tribune for the President to insult and intimidate dissidents', and also 'a loss of money for the private media, the impossibility of a plural and balanced transmission of news, the curbing of dissenting contents and loss of press autonomy, and the imposition of government propaganda'. This phenomenon, they argued, contributed to polarization and a gradual collapse of democratic media. However, Chavista professionals, in sum, countered these arguments in their understanding of *cadenas* as an integral part of a radical communication project—'emancipatory', 'participatory', 'popular', which challenged the public interest in the context of a 'revolutionary process.'

Conclusions

Opinions and perceptions of Venezuelan media practitioners and commentators indicate that Chavez's style of leadership and use of the media reflect aspects of the logic of populism as partly defined by Laclau (2005), Ardit (2007), and Keane (2009). Under Chávez's government, Venezuela represented the 'grey area' that is populism in democracy dynamics. Within the nation's media a binary

discourse became prevalent—political standings were defined to an important degree by the symbolic construction of an enemy and through the rhetoric of systematic confrontation.

Albeit many pro-Chávez's interviewees esteemed that defining him as 'populist' alone means focus is lost on his revolutionary, participatory and emancipatory ideas; many interviewees of liberal leanings coincided with the views of authors such as Bisbal (2008), Zúquete (2008), and Ardit (2009) in that Chávez can be identified as a populist leader—within the Latin American tradition—of anti-liberal and authoritarian traits.

As gathered from existing literature and highlighted by this study's interviewees, Chávez's 'hyper-leadership' relied significantly on the use of media—mainly broadcast—and it is evident that he was able to establish a relentless media presence for himself in Venezuela. With such media ubiquity he strategically propagated his political messages, built a platform for popular participation for his followers, set the national news agenda while condemning oppositional and critical figures. The new political and media landscape in Venezuela that Chávez and the opposition co-created divisive opinions and revealed to be problematic, as expressed for this study by journalists and media practitioners. Chávez's media strategy sought to challenge the political establishment, the media elite, and their liberal leanings; and was effective in doing so nationally, while establishing a template of sorts for other Latin American populist leaders.

This empirical study found that hardly any neutral opinions were found in relation to Chávez's use of his talk-show *Aló Presidente* and recurring blanket messages. His followers and sympathizers that work in the media esteemed that the President's intense broadcast presence was and continues to be positive for the deepening of a revolutionary process and for public life. In this sense, it can be argued that Chávez's media strategy was guided by a political ideal that sought to enhance a non-liberal form of governance while also channeling the popular disenchantment towards pre-existing liberal or 'elitist' policies, as have argued Ellner (2007), Lander (2008) and Artz (2017). *Aló Presidente* and some of the blanket broadcasts simulate a direct connection between the people and the President, and some consider they boosted an indispensable relationship between 'leader' and 'revolutionaries'. Importantly, and according to the views of most interviewees, within the political tug-of-war between Chavismo and opposition forces, *Aló Presidente* and *cadenas* proved to be strategically successful in mitigating efforts by the private media to check on or criticize Chávez's governance. This, in the view of some interviewees, is part of a radical emancipatory challenge to the pre-existing (neo) liberal Venezuelan socio-political landscape. This group of journalists—all Chávez sympathizers—proved to have a non-liberal assessment of what 'normative' media practice is: it should be guided mainly by revolutionary ideals of egalitarianism and popular participation, and contrary to private interests. In this sense, their views are varyingly aligned with Marxist and political economy paradigms, as critically formulated by Bolaño (1999), Mosco (2006),

Artz (2017), among other authors of counter-hegemonic stances.

The pervasive manner in which Chávez employed *Aló Presidente* and blanket official messages clashes with liberal values and, according to pro-opposition interviewees, undermines freedom of expression and democratic practice. Their view is that Chávez's mediatic discourse did not stimulate constructive debate within Venezuela's society, which ought to be a key role of the media in democracy, according to liberal views and as explained by Keane (1991), Schudson (2003), and Bisbal (2009).

While in power, Chávez's mediatic ubiquity was perceived as a crucial supportive force for journalists desiring radical social change. For another group of media professionals, it became a dilemma. The news agenda, in the opinion of pro-opposition interviewees, became markedly determined by Chávez's statements in his broadcast programs. This represented a new phenomenon in the nation—in modern times, no Venezuelan President's media presence had been so prevalent and agenda-defining. As a partial result, this study found, critical journalists became agents of polarization and were mostly unable to deliver balanced portrayals of reality—as held by liberal tenets of journalistic practice (Schudson 1995).

Various populist leaders have emerged since Chávez globally, and in most cases they have also brought forth polarization within their respective national context. Similarly, many of them employ the media in a personalist and anti-establishment manner while also challenging liberal normative elements of journalism. Arguably, some of these environments are less opaque than Chávez's or indeed of Maduro's Venezuela, hence populism and the media might be assessed more openly in these other contexts. In the case of Venezuela, this has become increasingly difficult as Maduro has closed down most avenues of democratic practice in what some analysts define as a dictatorship (Provea 2014; Reporters Without Borders 2016; Espacio Público 2018). This, Maduro has carried out while strategically resorting to images and sound-bites of his mentor Hugo Chávez.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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