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**Journalism practice, media and democracy in Venezuela  
(2000-2010)**

**Edmundo E. Bracho-Polanco**

Faculty of Media, Arts and Design

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# **Journalism practice, media and democracy in Venezuela (2000-2010)**

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## **Abstract**

Since first winning elections in 1998, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez became one of the most vocal leaders in the international arena to oppose the U.S. and western neo-liberal policies. His administration arguably represents the most radical socio-political shift in the western hemisphere during the twenty-first century. Its political model has led to a political polarisation previously unknown in Venezuela and Latin America.

In such a highly-polarised environment and ongoing clashes between pro-Chávez forces and the opposition, the news media have played a central role as active political entities. Venezuelan journalists have become agents of specific ideological advocacy and political militancy. Such a scenario in the media collides with most normative liberal notions of balanced, accurate, transparent, and ethical journalistic practice, as well as with certain ideals of the media's democratic role.

Based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Venezuelan journalists, media-related professionals and commentators – designed to represent adequately both sides of the ideological divide – this thesis critically explores how journalistic practices have been carried out in Venezuela under the Chávez administration. As its central and original contribution to knowledge it analyses how news media professionals in Venezuela evaluate the ways they have reflected an acute political and social confrontation in news outlets, and their varying roles as agents that shape a highly-polarised social sphere. Very importantly, it offers answers to the question of politicisation among journalists, and the ways they understand the boundaries of professional and normative practice.

The research draws conclusions in relation to the ways reporters, editors, scholars and commentators perceive journalistic practice as a means to promote democratic values, and whether or not Venezuelan news media have enhanced democratic debate during the 2000s.

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I dedicate this project to my father, Oscar Bracho, who stood by me at every step of this scholarly experience.

## **Declaration**

I, Edmundo E. Bracho-Polanco, declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

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## Introduction

This study examines how journalistic practices have been carried out in Venezuela, between 2000 and 2010, under the leadership of President Hugo Chávez and in a most polarised social and political environment. In doing so, it investigates how news media professionals evaluate the ways they have reflected an acute political and social confrontation in news outlets, their journalistic values and tenets, and their roles as agents that potentially shape a highly-polarised public sphere. The research draws conclusions related to the re-shaping of Venezuelan journalistic culture during the 2000s, the ways reporters and editors perceive themselves – or not – as promoters of democratic values in their work, and whether or not Venezuelan news media have enhanced the democratic debate.

Since the early 2000s, Venezuela has arguably epitomised the radical political shift that a significant part of Latin American nations have been experiencing. Profound social, economic and political changes have been introduced by a wave of anti-neo-liberal governments. These have broadly been characterised as socialist or leftist by most analysts. Also, an important group of scholars have defined most of them as populist.

This set of leftist Latin American leaders claim to aspire to the construction of more inclusive societies and stronger democracies, and have indeed introduced an array of social and communitarian policies as part of such objectives (Ellner and Tinker-Salas 2007, Borón 2008, Lander 2008). However, many of the governments they lead have been accused of pursuing authoritarian and non-democratic forms (Petkoff 2005 and 2010, Schamis 2006, Castañeda and Morales 2008).

In recent years and according to various authors, arguably the most influential case of this strand of authoritarianism has been represented by Hugo Chávez (Ibid, Caballero 2010), democratically-elected President in 1998, and re-elected in 2000 and 2006. A self-declared socialist, his government increasingly employed the media as one of the most important tools to promote its ideology and political agenda, and also identified the privately-owned media as a principle obstacle in its efforts to transform the country – and the region – by way of a revolutionary process (Bisbal 2008a and 2009, Petkoff 2005, Cañizalez 2009b and 2011).

Venezuela's political opposition, and both local and international organisations that

monitor issues such as freedom of expression and human rights, have accused Chávez's government of attempting to silence his critics in the media and to close down the paths of democratic practice – allegations the President and his followers deny (Hawkins 2003, Amnesty International 2010, Provea 2010, Cañizalez 2011). Sympathisers of the government, in what further reflects the country's high political polarisation, claim that the opposition media represent an elitist, bourgeois, anti-revolutionary, and pro-U.S. group that attempts to sabotage a radical political project of social emancipation and egalitarianism (McCoy and Myers 2004, Ellner 2004, Borón 2008, Lander 2008).

Although Chávez attained a firm grip on the local media that antagonised him and managed to impose his policies by the mid-2000s, some private outlets – mainly the opposition press, and possibly due to a strategic allowance by the government – have been able to inform and comment with relative independence. Yet, news production has been predominantly biased and increasingly partisan, according to many observers (Bisbal 2008a and 2009, Quiñonez 2011).

During the Chávez era, ideological bias and political advocacy in Venezuelan news media have increasingly gained terrain, mirroring like few other social phenomena the way the country has become politically divided and highly polarised (Corrales 2005, Bisbal 2009, Parra 2010, Lozada 2011, Kitzberger 2012, Waisbord 2012). This political environment has profoundly transformed that of the media, and journalists seem to have primarily become agents of specific ideological advocacy and rivalling political militancy (Hawkins 2003, Corrales 2005, Bisbal 2008a and 2009, Hidalgo 2009, Lozada 2011). Such a scenario in the media is argued to conflict with basic notions of balanced, accurate, transparent and ethical journalistic practice within Venezuela. As a consequence, the two colliding and opposed views – those that are pro-government and those of the opposition – by which the media represent reality have been affecting the very notion of democracy at the heart of the society (Bisbal 2008b and 2009, Cañizalez 2009b, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010).

Investigating the dynamics of journalistic practice and strategies within the media battleground in Venezuela seems a necessary precondition for understanding the ways in which politics, and the political, are altering traditional notions of journalism and of a media-saturated environment. Indeed, few countries in the world have witnessed in recent years a surge of its local media as a political battleground as intensely as Venezuela has under Chávez's government (McCoy and Myers 2004, Petkoff 2005,

Botía 2007, Lozada 2011). Much has been written about his political project or about the categorisation of such a leftist or populist model. Yet, there are very few studies which explore the way media practices and strategies have been changing, since Chávez gained power, as a prominent characteristic of a highly-polarised political struggle.

### **Research questions and methodology**

The principal outcome of this study will be charting and examining journalistic practices and strategies in the news media, during the Chávez era; to what degree these have become – or not – unbalanced, biased, and politicised; and the way these may intensify or undercut the development of democratic values in the country and elsewhere in the region. Journalistic practice in Venezuela, between 2000 and 2010, may be perceived as a means to exercise democratic agency by people working in the national media, or the contrary.

The research, however, does not aim to elaborate a prognosis, but rather to focus on understanding and accessing recent trends in journalism practices and to what extent a specific national political environment has influenced these.

In view of opinions and arguments formulated by scholars and commentators on recent political, social and media changes in Venezuela under Chávez, the research's leading hypothesis is that the traits of the Chávez administration, the politicisation of both pro-government and oppositional news media, and the highly-polarised political climate in Venezuela, have arguably been the key factors in undermining the practice of certain core concepts and notions of professional journalism, particularly in accordance with liberal models, prevalent in the Anglo-American media cultures. This assumption, however, might be false.

Importantly, this study sets out to make an original contribution in the sense of critically explicating recent shifts in journalistic practices in the case of Venezuela, and in amplifying the debate of democracy and media in the country and, to some degree, in other nations' contexts that have been undergoing similar conditions of colliding models of democracy, political projects, and media dynamics and practice.

This research is organised around the following main questions:

- How do journalists in Venezuela evaluate their practice and the ways in which they represent the nation's political and social reality?
- How do media professionals interpret the implications of journalistic practices in Venezuela for democracy?
- How do journalists and media-related workers characterise Venezuela's socio-political environment and democracy during the Chávez era?
- How do politics, ideology and cultural/historical factors shape news production in Venezuela, and to what degree do journalists consider themselves agents of politicisation and of democratisation?

In answering the main research questions this study relies on a theoretical framework, historical accounts, and an empirical investigation that is based on finding original, first-hand qualitative data through the use of an in-depth interview technique. This was found to be the most suitable methodology for gathering and describing opinions, perceptions and attitudes of journalists, editors, media workers, media owners, public functionaries, media-related scholars, political commentators, and media-related NGOs' spokespersons that were assessed critically. The interviewing process with 42 persons followed a set of technical, ethical, interpretative, and analytical criteria, as formulated by various authors, in order to attain validity, effectiveness and explanatory rigour (Kvale 1996, Berger 1998 and 2000, Wengraf 2002, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

A set of interviewees was identified and chosen so as to obtain a heterogeneous and representative sample (Weiss 1995, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interviewees were chosen primarily on the basis of their own political-ideological alignment and that of the news media outlet they work or have worked for during the 2000s, while also considering the levels of public influence and opinion-making power these outlets are argued to entail, according to existing studies (Bisbal 2008b, Cañizalez 2009a). Another aspect of the selection criteria was that, whenever possible, journalists had some degree of "editorial responsibility" (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986) and that they covered news related to politics, community, legislation and the economy. The sample purposely combined professionals of varying hierarchical levels working within news organisations.

Ten thematic areas were developed – informed by concepts and theories which were reviewed and by opinion-patterns found through the interviewing process – in order to provide an analytical framework for describing and discussing the diverse data obtained by means of in-depth semi-structured interviewing. These were then evaluated critically within four analytical strands, through which the interviews' findings were linked to the diverse theories and historical perspectives explored in the first chapters of this study.

### **Structure of the research's chapters**

This research is broadly concerned with the relation between media and democracy, and they are inextricably linked (Keane 1991 and 2009, McChesney 2000, Curran 2002, McQuail 2003 and 2005, Dahlgren 2009, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010, Street 2011, Waisbord 2012 and 2013). The first chapter of this study provides a selective review of the debate about the nature of democracy, and of the diversity of democratic models and theories, primarily within the radical and liberal traditions. Democracy is hardly a consensual concept, and its normative proposals are varied (Caballero 1983, Callinicos 1991, Held 2006, Sartori 1991 and 2007b, Keane 2009). Hence, in order to understand the role of the media and of journalists within a democracy, it seemed necessary to examine the varying – and often colliding – views and interpretations presented in theories of democracy.

The second chapter offers a review of the literature focused on the relationship between democracy and the media. It charts and explains relevant western theories that underpin the manner in which news production and journalism should contribute to enhancing rational debate in the public sphere and democratic practice. Importantly, it presents competing perspectives apropos the relationship between media, journalistic practice and democratic models, as to provide a conceptual framework by which to help comprehend the tensions that have been emerging in the journalistic occupation in Venezuela during the Chávez era vis-à-vis its potential democratic role.

The discussion of media and democracy is further explored in chapter three, but with an exclusive emphasis on formulations centred on the context of Latin America and Venezuela. In fact, the majority of authors reviewed in this section of the study are Latin American and, although their theoretical formulations do entail relevant connections to the dominant western discourses on journalism, media and culture, and democracy, their conceptual elaborations are essentially based on assessing the

specificities of Latin American societies, cultures, politics and economics, within their 'peripheral', 'hybrid' and ambivalently 'modern' character.

In chapter four, a historical framework is provided – with some sociological explanation, analytical insights, and practical perspectives elaborated mainly by Venezuelan and Latin American scholars – to explicate the trajectory of the media and journalism in Venezuela, while offering a historical context for understanding basic contemporary social, political and economic changes in the country. Linkages between political and socio-economic aspects, successive projects of 'democracy' and 'modernity', and the way the national news media have been an active part of such developments are highlighted in this part of the study.

The research's techniques and methodology are explained in chapter five. Crucially, it delineates the main research questions and addresses the methodological approaches by which to assess and help answer them. Scholarly explanation is provided in order to justify the utilisation of in-depth semi-structured interviewing as the core technique for obtaining reliable qualitative data and examining the findings. Advantages and limitations of the interviewing method are addressed, as well as the sample used – Venezuelan journalists, editors, media owners, communications scholars, public functionaries, media-related NGOs' spokespersons, and political commentators –, and a description of the fieldwork experience as carried out in Venezuela.

Chapter six represents the most extensive and detailed part of this study. It is devoted to a predominantly descriptive presentation of the empirical findings, attained through an intense in-depth interviewing process. In order to interpret the broad and substantial content gathered from the interviewing process, ten different qualitative themes of discussion were developed. These thematic threads were elaborated in part, resorting to central ideas and concepts addressed in theoretical chapters, and encompassing patterns in opinions that emerged during the interview process. Rather than artificially splitting down the ten themes throughout different chapters, because of the nature of the findings and the intricate linkage they hold between themselves, presenting them in one chapter seemed adequate and more appropriate for analysis.

These empirical findings are analysed critically in the seventh chapter, linking them with the theoretical, historical, and practical formulations discussed in the previous chapters. In order to achieve this in a succinct, systematic and rigorous manner, four different analytical strands were elaborated for this section of the study.

Conclusions are presented in the eighth chapter. It offers a condensed summary of the central aspects emerging from the critical connection of theoretical, historical, and methodological aspects reviewed and the qualitative data obtained and analysed. Importantly, it raises pressing questions for further analytical exploration on the topics of Venezuelan media, its shifting journalistic culture, polarisation in news media, challenges for western and normative models of journalism and for the media as an agent for strengthening democracy, and the implications these might have in post-Chávez Venezuela.

## Chapter 1

### The democratic debate: models and perspectives

This study seeks to explore the relationship between media and democracy in order to contextualise how political specificities can shape media practice. To do so in a comprehensive way, it must first provide various viewpoints on the definition and models of democracy.

There has existed wide debate about the nature of democracy and different theories have been drawn in an attempt to define and explain it (Schumpeter 1976, Bobbio 1987, Dahl 1991 and 1999, Sartori 1991 and 2007b, Schmitter and Karl 1991, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Diamond 2002, Held 2006). In western societies, democracy has become since the early nineteenth century a valuable political form, yet “vulnerable in theory and practice and always incomplete in certain respects” (Duncan 1983: 3).

It could be argued that the theory of democracy is vulnerable in the sense that it has been subject, throughout a long history, to changes in the discourses that have aimed to define it. But despite its vulnerabilities, democratic practice proposes ‘the consent of the people’, the most convincing principle of legitimacy, as the fundamental base of a political order (Held 2006). It is by no means an infallible political solution for all the ills a society might have, but it is the political system that has proven historically to have the best capacity to “modify its norms and institutions in a consensual manner and according to the demands of the people” (Schmitter and Karl 1991: 81).

After the fall of the Soviet regime, with the surge of democratic movements in Central and Eastern Europe, and the significant democratic shift in most nations of the Americas, democracy seems to have become the prevailing standard of political legitimacy (Bobbio 1997, Diamond 2002, Sartori 2007b). This has meant an intensification of democratic practice since the early 1990s, as David Held has argued:

In more and more countries citizen-voters are, in principle, able to hold public decision-makers into account, while the decision-makers themselves represent the interests of their constituents – ‘the people’ in a delimited territory (2006: x).



However, the advance of democracy has also meant the expansion of its meaning and the divergence of views about its character.

Held (op. cit) has mapped and explained various models of democracy, seeking to maintain a balance in both the descriptive and normative basis on which some of these models are founded. These outlines are by no means definitive. After all, as David Miller explains, a model is “an ideal representation derived from certain axioms concerning human behaviour, not a depiction of any political system” (1983: 136).

Considering how rich and broad the debate about democracy is and the sheer bulk of existing literature related to it, for this study to be feasible it is necessary to be selective in choosing those models of democracy that seem most relevant for this study. In doing so, some of Held’s formulations of models of democracy (2006) will be used partially and selectively, as well as contesting views from different authors belonging to diverse trends of political thought. This mixture of theoretical perspectives and historical outlines represent an apt framework for understanding the various notions of democracy. Due to the nature of this study, and because of its particular focus, not all of Held’s models will be described and utilised.

Held (Ibid) has elaborated ten different models, drawing from different theories and ranging from ancient Greece to twenty-first century paradigms. However, Paul E. Corcoran (1983) proposes, in what he evaluates as a simplistic yet guiding formulation, that both democratic theories and models during the twentieth century seem to have moved into two main directions of political thought. One is the radical tradition that follows from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The other derives from the Individualistic English liberal current.

Although Corcoran considers this binary view limited and somewhat reductionist when dealing with a concept as complex as democracy, it can offer a starting point to assess modern variants of democratic thought.

### **1.1. Foundations for radicalism and liberalism**

Rousseau’s *Social Contract* offers a view of democracy as a means for the people’s will to be transformed into public policy (Miller 1983). It is through direct participation and open debate, argues Rousseau, that the people should reach decisions that determine what is to be done politically, and thus attain popular sovereignty. In a

radical stance of this strand of political thought, it is the people that enact legislation directly (Ibid).

By contrast, a conception of democracy as a political device in which the people exercise their sovereignty by electing those that represent them politically, follows the tradition of English liberalism, and is well exemplified by James Mill's ideas in his *Essay on Government* (Ibid, Held 2006). Under this political paradigm, democracy becomes a protective device, through which the people can be protected from their political representatives in case these commit excesses, and also from each other. This type of 'protective' democracy is argued to entail the means by which to hold accountable those who exercise as governors for their policies and results (Macpherson 1972).

Such a liberal line of thought was further developed, not without some criticisms, by political thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, among other classical authors. According to Norberto Bobbio, it is J.S. Mill's essay *On Liberty* that has over the years come to represent the "ABC of liberalism" (Bobbio 1987: 101). In a different vein of thought, Miller (1983) argues that the writings of J.S. Mill can serve as a notable example of how aspects of both Rousseau and James Mill's views of democratic theory are used and blended together. Furthermore, he suggests that a significant amount of political authors have mixed both James Mill's and Rousseau's trains of thought during the past two centuries (Ibid).

This, affirms Bobbio (1987), is evident in the way J.S. Mill professed the need for democracy to guarantee individual freedom and as a means to attain moral self-development. He argues that participation in political life was vital for developing an active and informed citizenry within society (Held 2006). His arguments for democracy, Bobbio claims, were very influential in both the political and extra-political establishments:

[Mill's ideas] concerning the need for there to be limits to power, even when this power is the power of the majority, concerning the fruitfulness of conflict, the praise of diversity, the condemnation of conformism, the absolute priority accorded by a well-governed society to the freedom of opinion – became common places in the 19<sup>th</sup> century political journalism of civilised countries (Bobbio 1987: 100-101).

J.S. Mill argues that, through a representative government (regular elections, limits to power, elected rulers, secret ballot, etc.), the citizenry can be protected from all social and political forces, while also being able to hold accountable the leadership for their policies and actions (Held 2006).

Although J.S. Mill's conception for democracy has been regarded as elitist by non-liberal critics, in the sense that it tends to prescribe political leadership to an 'educated' class, its core liberal ideas of elected representatives, as Bobbio (1987) and Held (2006) explain, signified a shift in democratic thought. They argue that since J.S. Mill's time, the liberal legacy has brought forth legitimate political participation for the people. However, J.S. Mill's brand of 'developmental' democracy, according to various critics, does not formulate solutions for a more equal political participation and empowerment for the disenfranchised, nor for the suffrage of women and certain minority groups (Held 2006).

## **1.2. The Marxist paradigm and direct democracy**

In the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels it is argued that, contrary to J.S. Mill's convictions, the liberal conception of democracy could not in practice achieve social equality nor freedom among individuals (Callinicos 1991). Marx and Engels consider that

the reality of liberal democracy appeared systematically to curtail its pretensions; the class state for the neutral arbiter; paper freedom for real political freedoms; and restricted political freedom for general human emancipation (Levin 1983: 83).

Both thinkers value the liberal notion of free choice for the people, but regard the idea of liberal rule as a political platform by which free-market economy is systematically sustained and promoted. In this economic dynamic, they argue, a surplus would always be generated, and with it a consequential emergence of different social classes (Levin 1983). In modern times, these social classes are to be configured as the bourgeoisie and as the proletariat, in permanent clash against each other, with the former exploiting the latter (Marx and Engels 1998).

Marx argues that liberal democracy privileges the exploitation of the proletariat and stimulates the systematic accumulation of private capital (Bottomore 1991, Held 2006).

These aspects tend to perpetuate policies that are only beneficial to the dominant economic class, the bourgeoisie (Levin 1983). Under this framework, as expressed by Held, such economic class “can exert determinate political influence without even having representatives in government” (2006: 108).

Classical Marxists have debated that liberal doctrines promote the rule by the dominant economic class even when it is not formally governing (Bobbio 1987, Bottomore 1991, Callinicos 1991). Furthermore, in Marxist views, liberal democracies tend to sustain freedom only for the capital, rather than for the majority of citizens; and in such a social and economic context those who do not belong to the dominant socio-economic class lack political and social equality (Ibid). Such inequality undermines the liberty of most citizens as political beings, which ultimately is argued to belong to the minority – the elite – of the economically powerful. For there to exist democracy, Marx insists, equality for all citizens must be the core of the idea of general freedom (Levin 1983).

This, however, would require the implementation of political and social mechanisms by which class exploitation and social classes can be abolished altogether (Callinicos 1991). The Marxist doctrine formulates that the state form, as conceived by liberal democratic thought, must be destroyed and replaced, through a revolutionary process, by a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Levin 1983). This type of rule is to be regulated through self-government, in which ‘the people govern themselves by themselves’ (Callinicos 1991, Sartori 2007b). This was viewed by Marx as a process that would lead to a classless or communist society. And, as Callinicos explains, such an emancipatory process of social and political transformation is to be understood through its various stages:

During the lower phases (the dictatorship of the proletariat), the social product will be distributed according to the principle ‘from each according to his capacity, to each according to his works’; the inequalities to which this gives rise... would be remedied in a ‘higher phase of communist society’, where both the greater development of the productive forces and the transformation of personal motivations would make possible the application of a new distributive principle: ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’ (1991: 119).

The Marxist ideals of self-government, communal ownership, and classless society are a partial legacy of Rousseau’s radical defence of self-government and human

emancipation (Ryan 1983, Macridis 1986). Graeme Duncan argues that Marxist critics have been specifically concerned with the “relationship between representative institutions and capitalist society” and the “structural impediments it poses to human emancipation” (1983:19). In this sense, the process of class negotiation and contradictions is well expressed in Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’, and has been of great relevance in Marxist thought (Artz *et al* 2006). Although Gramsci’s theoretical construct has been interpreted in various ways, Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy have defined hegemony as follows:

The process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups... Hegemony addresses how social practices, relationships, and structures are negotiated among diverse social forces (2000: 1-3).

As in the case of Gramsci, the ideals of classical Marxism have been reformulated and amplified significantly since Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 (Bottomore 1991, Callinicos 1991). The rejection of capitalism by critical advocates of direct democracy, and the opposition to the various strands of the liberal tradition, has consistently deepened the nature of the democratic debate. The ramification of Marxist critique has drawn a critical project of political thought and practice that has been significantly vivid (Duncan 1983, Callinicos 1991, Bobbio 1997, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Artz *et al* 2006).

### **1.3. Schumpeter’s competitive elitism and Dahl’s idea of pluralism**

After Marxist ideals were put into practice by the Bolshevik ideologues, a new current of democratic thought emerged which was critical of both Rousseau’s and Marx’s arguments for a direct and highly-participatory democracy (Held 2006). Arguably, the author who most popularised this critique was Joseph Schumpeter. During the first half of the twentieth century, he debated that there exists limited space in political life for collective or individual growth and for democratic participation (Ibid).

According to Giovanni Sartori (2007b), democracy as conceived by Schumpeter is a limited and restrictive political system, in which the people may only reach the possibility to elect its decision-makers and, through democratic institutions, may aspire to restrict excesses from their governors. Schumpeter argues that, in ‘classical’

democratic theory, the selection of representatives of the citizens is of secondary importance to a broader democratic arrangement of electoral vestment in the people (Schumpeter 1976). In reversing the role of these elements he formulates a preliminary definition of his 'other' theory of democracy, which places special emphasis on the aspect of competitive leadership:

The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (Schumpeter 1976: 269).

Although Schumpeter defines a political 'method' of democracy that is essentially procedural, he also outlines a principle that explains that, within a competitive context, elected leaders would always be conditioned by the expectation of how their electorate will respond to the decisions they make as leaders (Sartori 2007b). Therefore, the competitive struggle between rival parties and leaders should produce specific forms of responses which, in turn, make the political apparatus function according to the decisions and preferences of the people (Ibid).

In order for the democratic competitive system to function successfully, Schumpeter outlines various conditions. These are the basis of a model that, according to Sartori (2007b), illustrates the effective dynamics of representative democracy. Such conditions are (Schumpeter 1976, Miller 1983), firstly, that the calibre of political leadership is high in quality and morals. Secondly, competition between political parties and representatives must take place within a range of issues that is delimited and not too extended, as well as bounded by consensus on the general parameters. Thirdly, a professional bureaucracy must exist, directed by a 'decent' government, in order to effectively carry out policy-making and administration. Fourthly, all political agents must act within 'democratic self-control', that is, the political opposition must refrain from excessive attacks towards the government, and the electorate must respect the separation between themselves and the leadership. Lastly, there must exist a significant measure of tolerance and respect for differences of opinion from the government and within the electorate.

Schumpeter (1976) maintains that his model explains the relation that must subsist between democracy and freedom. He claims that, in principle, there exists individual freedom for everyone to compete in elections for political leadership (Held 2006). This

relation can only be successfully achieved within a culture of respect for a plurality of opinion and freedom of discussion 'for all', including both freedom of speech and of the press (Schumpeter 1976, Held 2006).

However, the extent to which everyone has genuine freedom to compete for leadership has been questioned, as Crawford B. Macpherson (1972) argues, by various authors. If Schumpeter's model implies that competitive democracy is a system based on leadership that 'guides' while also being 'guided' by the people, socialists and advocates of direct democracy claim that it offers no meaningful political participation for everyone but only for those that belong to the political and economic elite. It offers an excessive centrality to political parties and to a liberal scheme of electoral leadership, disregarding some of the benefits of more direct political participation (Macpherson 1972, Miller 1983).

Political thinkers referred to as pluralists claim that Schumpeter's 'prescription' of democracy does not pay the required attention to 'intermediary' groups or 'factions' that are argued to play a highly significant role in democracy, even more than that represented by competing parties and leaders (Sartori 1991 and 2007b, Held 2006).

A 'pluralist' such as Robert A. Dahl places special emphasis on the importance of the political mechanisms and consequences of interest groups and factions of different kinds that compete for power (Ibid)<sup>1</sup>. His definition of faction is a group of citizens, which may or may not belong to a majority of the total electorate, who act together driven by a common impulse of interest "adverse to the rights of other citizens, or the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" (Dahl 1956: 25).

Dahl considers that advocates of liberal democracy, contrary to the belief of J.S. Mill, should not fear about the dangers supposedly posed to freedom by majority rule acting against the interests of minorities (Held 2006). Such idea of a 'tyrannical' majority tends to be undermined by the 'polyarchical' character of society<sup>2</sup>. Partially drawing from Schumpeter's ideas of electoral competitiveness and institutional arrangement, Dahl

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<sup>1</sup> Dahl's idea of "pluralism" relies on James Madison's ideas of federalism and democracy, in which power is divided between a central government and federal entities, representing specific constitutions and their people's interests (Crick 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Dahl defines 'polyarchy' as a system in which political competition and electoral processes function in a way that obliges the leaders "to take preferences of a plurality of minorities into account in making policy choices," while also allowing them "a substantial degree of autonomy" (Cammack 2000: 153).

proposes a model “in opposition to ‘populistic’ democracy of unconstrained majority rule” (Cammack 2000: 153).

In a ‘polyarchy’, argues Dahl (1956, Bobbio 1987), the networks of minorities and factions can exercise a stronger political influence than the ‘sovereignty’ of the majority. It is essentially against the threat of tyrannical and autocratic power, and within a liberal vein, that Dahl and pluralist theorists elaborate their democratic models. According to Bobbio, pluralism has “the advantage of making us aware of the basic trait that modern democracy entails: the freedom, even the licence, we enjoy to express dissent” (1987: 60).

Various theorists have emphasised the relevance of the pluralist model in its consideration of democracy as a system that underpins freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and ‘policentrism’ (Bobbio 1987, Sartori 2007b). Yet, critics affirm that pluralists have not adequately weighed the distribution of power within liberal democracies, and that there are inevitable asymmetries in power that ultimately condition the degrees of both participation and freedom (Krouse 1983). For instance, the existence of multiple power centres – as promoted by the pluralists – does not necessarily guarantee that the elite leadership will communicate with them all in an equal way (Held 2006). However, most critics are willing to admit that “the rule by plural elites and multiple social forces... is preferable to the autocratic rule of a single, closed elite” (Krouse 1983: 77).

#### **1.4. Polarised views: the New Right and the New Left**

While Dahl and advocates of ‘pluralism’ have argued that political power is shared and exchanged among different interest groups or factions, Herbert Marcuse (1991) claims that these groups, and the public in general, have become disconnected from active political participation and that a rationale of productivity, imposed by the dominant class, has eroded their sense of empowerment. This effect of ‘depoliticisation’ is the result of western societies’ fixation with production, distribution and efficiency (Ibid). It is the consequence, Marcuse argues, of a social system that venerates the technical apparatus and is characterised by its ‘totalitarian’ tendencies to determine “not only the socially needed occupations... and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations” (1991: xli).

The permeability of technology and the obsession with it, as highlighted by Marcuse,



has been a trait of the liberal societies that emerged in the post-war period. The relative political and social stability experienced after World War II, and an accompanying critique of the nationalistic and statist regimes that had appeared in Europe, prompted the formulation of a strand of democratic thought which called for a 'minimal state' as the most plausible frame in which to achieve individual freedom (Held 2006).

Friedrich August Hayek (1976) has argued that a 'large government' entails the danger of restricting freedom and constraining democracy in the name of the majority, as he maintains was the case with both the experiences of fascism and of Soviet communism.

In a fundamentally liberal view, Hayek elaborates a distinction between 'democracy' and 'liberalism'. The latter is principally concerned "with limiting the coercive powers of all government" (1976: 103), whereas 'dogmatic' democracy recognises only one limit to government, which is "current majority opinion" (Ibid). Hayek understands democracy as a doctrine by which society's laws are determined, and he defends liberalism as a doctrine about what "the law ought to be" (Ibid). Furthermore, he is critical of the dogmatic notion of the *demos* ruling, arguing that the majority does not necessarily know what is a good law, nor is there necessarily a connection between "democracy and any one view about how the powers of the majority ought to be used" (Ibid: 104).

Along with other neo-liberal thinkers, Hayek argues in favour of the elaboration of broad rules which would restrict the choices and actions of both the majority and its representatives in government – "the majority rule ought to be circumscribed by the rule of law" (Held 2006: 207). Only if those rules were exerted, could there exist the possibility for individual freedom and for democracy to be effectively a warrantor of liberty (Hayek 1976). The enemies of freedom, he maintains, tend to base their arguments on the view that social and political activity require "that some should give orders and others obey" (Ibid: 159).

In order to provide the framework for individuals to achieve political and economic activities in 'freedom', Hayek and neo-liberal theorists argue in favour of the market and its dynamics. Thus, the state should be minimal in its social and political intervention and act within the limitations of rule of law in order to protect a free and democratic system (Hayek 1976, Sartori 2007b). Although he is never explicit about a

necessity for a *laissez-faire* market society, he sets various outlines for this neo-liberal type of rationale, further developed by the so-called New Right. This neo-liberal trend, Bobbio affirms, set out to target “less the collectivism of countries where communist parties have taken over, than the Welfare state” (1987: 107), and gained a significant international presence, particularly during the 1980s in the United States and Great Britain.

Macpherson (1972 and 1977) questions the formulation by the New Right that a liberal and free-market society can provide genuine political freedom and participation for all its citizens. He refutes the notion that the ultimate human values of “freedom and equality could be achieved only by the free party system and the capitalist market system” (Macpherson 1972: 184). Along with political thinkers that became known as the New Left, Macpherson argues that it had not been demonstrated that political freedom required capitalism nor did “freedom of the capitalist market equate with individual economic freedom” (1972: 156), as expressed by advocates of neo-liberalism.

The New Left affirms that representative democracy and the capitalist market alone cannot achieve the ultimate democratic values of freedom and equality (Bobbio 1987). Furthermore, they have detected problems within free-market systems: the social costs of economic growth, the limitations of corporate capitalism to reduce inequality while meeting consumer expectations, and the citizens’ political apathy (Macpherson 1977). Such conditions, adds Macpherson (Ibid), present the ideal conditions for implementing participatory democracy.

By combining various ideas from both the liberal and the Marxist traditions, Macpherson elaborates a model of participatory democracy, which seeks to achieve freedom and equality for individuals. To accomplish a successful functioning of such a model, a ‘participatory’ society needs to promote political efficiency and advance “the formation of knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in government process” (Held 2006: 215).

Participatory democracy is, in Macpherson’s (1977) view, an alternative form of liberal democracy. Elements of traditional liberalism (i.e. representative leadership, competitive parties, regular elections, institutional separation of power) are desirable, and must merge dynamically with aspects of both pluralist and direct democracies. Macpherson affirms that for participatory democracy to be efficient “the combination of

a pyramidal direct/indirect democratic machinery with a continuing party system seems essential” (1977: 112).

Along with Macpherson, thinkers of the New Left argue that, for democracy to be participatory, it must nurture various aspects (Macpherson 1977, Held 2006). Firstly, political discussion and deliberation at both local and broad social levels must be nurtured. Secondly, the elected leaders must democratically form a parliament. Thirdly, an elected body or representatives must be accountable to the electorate. Fourthly, the various forms of social struggle groups must strive, as must the state, to actively function within a political frame that ensures accountability (Ibid).

Theorists of participatory democracy have contributed to reinsert the question of whether meaningful liberty – beyond liberty of possessive individualists – can be achieved with greater measure of equality (Macpherson 1972). Their critique of both free-market capitalism and orthodox Marxism, which selectively combines features of both liberal and socialist theories, inserts aspects of participation in the democratic debate.

### **1.5. Democracy after Soviet communism**

It has been argued by a significant number of political scientists that the most notable symbol of the dismantling of the revolutionary state in the twentieth century was the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Soon after, in 1991, the final steps materialised for regime change in the Central and Eastern European countries that had operated under the influence of the Soviet Union. Many theorists and commentators agree that such events represented a success story for liberal democracy, in detriment of communism. Hence, Sartori argues that during the early 1990s “the democracy that triumphed is the only ‘real’ democracy ever to have been materialized, that is, liberal democracy” (2007b: 303-304)<sup>3</sup>.

Others went further, proclaiming that the breakdown of these former communist regimes was not only a triumph for the capitalist economic system and the free-market criteria, but the ‘end of history’, as formulated by Francis Fukuyama:

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<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I have translated direct quotes from authors Ansaldi, Petkoff, and Sartori (2007b) – all belonging to works not published or not available in English– from Spanish.

For a large part of the world, there is now no ideology with pretensions to universality that is in a position to challenge liberal democracy... Even non-democrats will have to speak the language of democracy in order to justify their deviation from a single universal standard” (1992: 45).

This expressed an idea, latent among some advocates of western liberalism, through which they assumed that the collapse of the Soviet communist model, and the end of the Cold War, supposed the demise of ideological conflict between liberalism and communism. However, the alleged end of one ideology, as Sartori (2007b) argues, should not imply the end of all ideologies or the end of ideology itself, even if Marxism had been regarded as the ‘super-ideology’ of the twentieth century.

Fukuyama, reinterpreting the Hegelian idea that history moves through the clashes of ideas, believes that ideological conflict was practically over after the ‘victory’ of liberalism in the early 1990s. Furthermore, he considers (1992) that liberal democracy and free-market principles remained the only system of ideas that is to further expand internationally, and therefore dismisses the possible impact of other ideological forces, such as religious and nationalistic. Even the Marxist notion of addressing equality as its core preoccupation (Bobbio 1997) much more so than in liberal thought, is challenged by Fukuyama:

All truly liberal societies are in principle dedicated to the elimination of conventional sources of inequality...The dynamism of capitalist economies tends to break down many conventional and cultural barriers to equality... A century of Marxist thought has accustomed us to think of capitalist societies as highly inegalitarian, but... they are far more egalitarian in their social effects than the [ones] they replaced (1992: 290).

These arguments aim to consolidate the idea, promoted by the New Right, that minimal state and *laissez-faire* market economics offer the most desirable future. Such an idea, as Sartori (2007b) indicates, represents only one model of liberalism – called by some neo-liberalism – and it would be misleading to assume and utilise this strand of liberalism as the overarching one. For example, J.S. Mill’s is a constitutional and developmental liberalism with no mention of *laissez-faire* economics; neither did the liberal ideas formulated by authors such as Dahl or Macpherson.

The utopian thought and the ideals for revolution brought forth by various brands of Marxism are, according to Fukuyama (1992) and followers, vanished for good. Yet, there abound vigorous critiques to the views formulated by Fukuyama, as expressed predominantly by neo-Marxist theorists and thinkers related to radical traditions.

According to Callinicos (1991) the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of those neighbouring regimes that were under its political influence, cannot be interpreted as a failure of Marxism. Such a claim, he argues, can only be persuasive if one equates Marxism to Stalinism<sup>4</sup>. The latter he defines as a system characterised “by the hierarchically organised control of all aspects of social life, political, economic, and cultural, by a narrow oligarchy” (1991: 15), which ultimately represented an autocratic perversion of the central ideas of Marxism. Contrary to the formulation of Leszek Kolakowski (1978), by which he argues that the ‘logical’ consequence of Marxist praxis was Stalinism, Callinicos defends Marxism as a broad social project of human emancipation through direct democracy, in which total transformation cannot be achieved

on behalf of the working class by some group acting in its name, whether it be a Stalinist ‘vanguard’ or social-democratic parliamentarians. ‘The proletarian movement,’ Marx says, ‘is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority.’ His is a conception... of ‘socialism from below’, springing from the self-activity of the masses themselves (1991: 17-18).

Callinicos (1991) claims that just like Stalinism betrayed the spirit of self-emancipation of the working class and of revolutionary democracy, liberalism, as it has existed, has also been betraying the principles on which it is allegedly built upon. He argues (Ibid) that liberalism has not been able to provide those citizens that do not belong to the dominant classes with a broad participatory political role and with freedoms to dissent and reform.

If, as Held argues, the apparent “‘crisis of socialism’, in theory and practice, goes much further than the ‘crisis of Stalinism’” (2006: 229), so does the consolidation of liberalism in the post-Soviet era, following Fukuyama’s claims, seem to fall short of its claims of

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<sup>4</sup> Stalinism is broadly defined as a form of communism developed by Soviet leader Josef Stalin (1878-1953), and characterised by hyper-statisation, collectivisation, authoritarianism, state terror and personal leadership (Bottomore 1991).

global dominance and delivering qualitative principles – those of liberty, equality, and justice (Callinicos 1991). Even after the collapse of communism in Europe, it seems presumptuous to point out that ideologies have expired and that history has come to an end. The Marxist model of the economy did suffer an immense setback at the hands of the market economy, but the legacy of Marxist thought in its promotion of struggle for equality and emancipation – its utopian project – seems an active force (Callinicos 1991, Bobbio 1997, Held 2006).

### **1.6. The Left-Right debate and the Latin American case**

Sartori, evaluating Bobbio's views on post-Soviet political debate, affirms that even a supposed end of ideologies does not mean the end of a clear distinction and struggle of ideals between the political Left and the Right: "To navigate in the seas of politics one needs a compass in which north and south become, in politics, the Left and the Right" (2007b: 354).

Bobbio (1997) observes that the Left-Right axis has been significantly influential in political debate, even in the 'post-ideological' West. Thus, the world has not moved beyond the terms 'Left' and 'Right' as it might have been expected by thinkers such as Fukuyama. Instead, some interpretations suggest that these terms offer the means to interpret the political reality of any society in a range of dichotomous ways that people still find useful (Ellner 2004).

Although Bobbio (1997) indicates that each concept – the Left and the Right – may vary over time, there are key distinctions in terms of the values that each entail. For instance, the Left has always tended to characterise itself by offering more importance to the value of equality than does the Right; it tends to favour change and not conservatism; its political policies tend to be interventionist (Ibid).

This view is amplified, in a more radical vein, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). They argue that the Right, with its liberal-conservative discourse, has promoted a hegemonic project to defend the market economy and sustain an anti-egalitarian agenda. Contrary to the leftist potential to articulate equality liberalism, the Right strives to

restrict the terrain of democratic struggle, and to preserve the inequalities existing in a number of social relations, demands for the

defence of a hierarchical and anti-egalitarian principle which has been endangered by liberalism itself (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 175).

Various political scientists and commentators have been critical of Bobbio's Left-Right basic characterisation. For instance, Sartori (2007b) maintains that 'Marxist praxis' has misunderstood the concept of equality and that its supposed preference for equality, in detriment of liberty, has led to the curbing or even suppression of freedom in communist and socialist regimes. Teodoro Petkoff (2005) alleges that, to a significant extent, the Left's idealisation of equality, and its unsuccessful conception of egalitarian and direct participation, has not been able to correspond with the political reality of socialist and communist regimes. Corcoran argues that within Marxist thought, most social values exist as a product of ideological control "to cover the class division and moral degradation characteristic of societies that claim to enjoy freedom and equality" (1983: 18).

During the early 1990s the political and economic discourse of the New Right became very influential internationally. However, by the end of that decade, a certain leftist 'reinvigoration' seemed to have taken place with the emergence of various non-liberal democratic and pseudo-democratic regimes and social movements in some parts of the world (Schamis 2006, Castañeda and Morales 2008).

Such re-emergence of left-wing and non-liberal projects was not a global trend. But there is evidence that during the mid and late 1990s some nation states, after going through traumatic economic and political experiences, reacted against neo-liberal orthodoxy. In this context, they began searching for alternatives to canonical capitalism and neo-liberal models. Also, the leaders of these leftist or non-liberal political parties and movements claimed to be seeking a way to achieve egalitarian democratisation, without having to equate it to orthodox capitalism and its formulas (Barret *et al* 2008, Castañeda and Morales 2008).

Arguably the most notable case of the surge of left-wing politics was Latin America (Schamis 2006, Castañeda and Morales 2008). In 1991 only two countries in the Americas could be said to be ruled by leftist governments: Cuba and Nicaragua. Moreover, neither government achieved power through democratic elections, but by way of armed struggle (Ibid). During the 2000s, Colombia has been the only country in Latin America that has been under a clearly right-wing government. The rest of the Latin American nations have elected leftist or left-of-centre leaders, of various

ideological shades, since 1998.

A variety of studies about the relatively recent 'left shift' in Latin America have been carried out (Barret *et al* 2008). Most contend Fukuyama's notion of an 'end of ideology' and the New Right's asseveration of neo-liberal 'superiority'. However, it has been argued that most studies lack a comparative and regional perspective (Ibid), and fail to analyse systematically the democratic peculiarities of political and social participation, the relationship between the leaders and the people, and the way elements of both Right and Left thought have been negotiated. In relation to this last aspect, and following Pierre Bourdieu's idea of Right/Left political mechanisms, Patrick Barret *et al* argue that

the legacy of neo-liberalism in the [Latin American] region is felt... in the tension between a 'right hand' of the state, charged with maintaining economic orthodoxy, and a 'left hand', generally represented by the ministries of education, health, labour and social welfare, seeking to push policy in a post-neo-liberal direction (2008: 21).

Motives for such resurgence of the Left are argued to be popular disaffection with the neo-liberal canon and the setting of a political agenda aimed at deepening and expanding democracy, by way of projects that "combine representative democracy with the radicalisation of participatory democracy" (Barret *et al* 2008: 17). However, the characterisation of such projects and regimes is varied and on occasions very critical.

Roberto Mangabeira-Unger (2006) affirms, with particular focus on Latin American politics, that there are three broad types of Left. He characterised as the 'sell-out Left' the tendency that accepts the primacy of the market and the globalisation process as imposed by a neo-liberal agenda. An altogether different strand is represented by a statist, authoritarian and retrograde Left, directly inspired in Marxist-Leninist ideals and ardently antagonistic to any form of corporativism and advance of globalisation (Ibid). He advocates for a 'third' Left that is socially-responsible, progressive, reformist, and promotes policies that seek to socially assist the disenfranchised, democratise the market economy and strengthen democratic institutions (Ibid).

The assessment and characterisation of the Latin American Left by Jorge Castañeda (2006) and by Petkoff (2005 and 2007) follows a more binary reading. According to Castañeda (2006), there exists a Left that is nationalist, authoritarian, state-centred,



rhetorically anti-liberal, and springing from the tradition of Latin American populism. Its counterpart is allegedly non-dualistic, reformist, inclusive and internationalist (Ibid). Importantly, Castañeda stresses that the anti-liberal, retrograde, rupturist Left is exemplified by certain populist leaders, of marked authoritarian leanings, who are ultimately “much more interested in policy as an instrument for attaining and conserving power than in power as a tool for making policy” (2006: 34).

The progressive Latin American Left, as argued by Petkoff (2005: 32-33), does not seek to impose a re-foundation of the national order nor restrain liberal initiatives, like its “fossilised and primitive” leftist counterpart. Instead, its political initiatives are allegedly anchored in creating “spaces for ample and deep processes by which to stimulate social equity and deepen democratic values – in brief, to create a society of justice and freedom” (Ibid).

### **1.7. ‘Hybrid’ democracies and the populist dilemma**

Various studies suggest that, since the mid-1980s, democracy has shifted to the global forefront as the most expansive political force (Schmitter and Karl 1991, Held 2006, Sartori 2007b). Some authors and theorists – particularly those of western liberal tendencies – have referred to this historical process as ‘democratisation,’ others as ‘transition’ towards democracy or a ‘third wave’ of democracy (Diamond 1999 and 2002, Ansaldi 2007). Freedom House (2001) has reported that, in the twenty-year period before 2000, the proportion and number of what it considered democracies almost doubled in the world.

There has been preoccupation, however, about the quality of participation in some of these democracies and about the procedures of some of its regimes (Diamond 2002). A diversity of western observers have evaluated these emerging types of democracies – occasionally called ‘democracies of transition’ – focusing on various questions (Ibid). These are, among others: to what extent are these democracies deepening the people’s demands of freedom and equality?; in what ways is the people-leadership relationship embedded in plural and participatory democracy?; and to what degree are the governments or representatives nurturing and deepening freedom of speech, freedom to dissent, and freedom of the press? (Ibid).

Such observers claim that the ‘emergent’, ‘transitional’ and newer regimes of democracies need to be measured at least through the ‘minimalist’ standard outlined

by Schumpeter, that is a political system in which leadership and power are attained by way of a competitive struggle for the electorate's vote (Ibid). Alternatively, some have insisted on drawing from Dahl's idea of 'polyarchy' in order to appraise more procedurally the 'democratic character' of a society or a regime. In such a case, it has been argued, democracies new or old should not only hold elections that are fair, free, and competitive, but should also nurture freedom of expression and freedom to dissent, autonomous institutions, alternative ways to produce and obtain information, all of which should guarantee that government policies relate to and satisfy the choice of people (Ibid).

Larry Diamond (2002) argues that, by the end of the twentieth century, there were more regimes than ever adopting a form of democracy; a significant portion of these fell short of meeting basic democratic standards formulated by either Schumpeter or Dahl. Cases such as Russia, Nigeria, Singapore and Venezuela – *circa* 2000 – are, according to Diamond, "very ambiguous" in their democratic traits and character, and should be understood as "competitive authoritarian systems, hegemonic-party systems, or hybrid regimes of some sort" (Ibid: 22)<sup>5</sup>. Such cases arguably illustrate Dahl's logical route towards the consolidation of a 'polyarchy', in which political participation of many 'minorities' is to be preceded by a stage of competition among a small group of the population – gradually, this elite has allegedly incorporated the demands of other groups into electoral politics (Bobbio 1987, Diamond 2002, Held 2006).

These views and characterisation of hybrid democracies have been challenged by studies of non-liberal character. They have claimed that many of these new forms of hybrid democracies have been assessed only politically and not in sufficient sociological breath, focusing almost exclusively on analysing the type of political regime while ignoring the social conditions for democratic realisation (Ansaldi 2007). This 'formulistic' approach is argued to be the product of the hegemonic domination of neo-liberal political thought (Ansaldi 2007, Barret *et al* 2008). A trend of non-western thinkers have indicated that, in evaluating democratic 'quality' and 'degrees' of democracy, it is necessary to observe and assess social peculiarities and historical specificities of communities, nation-states, and geopolitical regions (Ibid).

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<sup>5</sup> Diamond (2002) affirms that 'hybrid' regimes (combining democratic and authoritarian elements) are not new, and that in the past there have been numerous cases in Europe and Latin America of limited elite party competition with a limited franchise. In 19th and early-20th century Latin America these 'oligarchic' democracies 'contributed to the ultimate development of fuller democracies' by establishing political institutions, its principles of limitation, and rotation of power.

Waldo Ansaldi (2007) illustrates – somewhat simplistically – the above-mentioned argument as it applies to the case of Latin America. Historically, the construction of democracy in the region has allegedly been more associated with the search for equality and social justice than of liberties (Ibid). Since attaining independence in the early nineteenth century, Latin American nations have experienced demands for liberty associated with the middle classes, and a demand for equality from the ‘proletariat’ (Ibid). Such emphasis on the social, rather than on the political, is argued to be a key factor in the configuration of populist tradition in the region:

[The populist experiences in Latin America] are characterised more for extending the rights of the people... than for providing these with more density, even though one could argue that the vertical relation leader-people tends to generate submission from the people towards the leader, with a disturbing result: turning citizens into an empty shell and distributive justice into an instrument of domination (Ansaldi 2007: 43).

Margaret Canovan (1981) affirms that a study about the nature of populism is at the same time an investigation about democratic politics. Her broad study on the topic outlined seven forms of populism, from the rural radical – as would be the case of the Russian *narodnischestvo* – to the political *personae* of Argentina’s leader Juan Perón<sup>6</sup>. Arguably the only common theme across all seven categories is “a resort to appeals to the people and a distrust of elites” (Canovan 1981: 264). Yet, from her conclusions it can be inferred that, because populism incorporates such a wide range of elements which lack a common core, it becomes very complex if not impossible to define. Similarly, Laclau asserts that there exists no unique referent to populism, that it is essentially “a way of building the political” (2005: xi). He has stressed that populism does not mean a “type of movement identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation” (Ibid: 117).

The relation between populism and democracy has been amplified by Francisco Weffort in his study of Brazilian politics. He formulates that the populist system can be defined as an

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<sup>6</sup> Juan D. Perón (1895-1974), three-times President of Argentina, is considered by many scholars one of Latin America’s archetypical representatives of nationalist, reformist and authoritarian populism (Barrett *et al* 2008, Williamson 2009).

institutional structure of authoritative or semi-corporatist character; which has an anti-liberal, nationalist, anti-oligarchical political orientation; an economic orientation of industrialist and nationalist traits; a multi-class social composition with a broad support from the popular and working classes (Weffort cited by Ansaldi 2007: 80).

Populism presents itself as a subversive form of challenging, politically and socially, the *status quo* and as “a starting point for a more or less radical *reconstruction* of a new order” (Laclau 2005: 177). This political phenomenon seems to entail a Manichean discourse which tends to be strongly anti-liberal – though not necessarily anti-capitalist – particularly in terms of political ideology, and rather anti-imperialist (Ansaldi 2007). Also, populist regimes tend to emerge from “outside the party system” (Merino 2007: 88).

Through its Manichean dynamics, populism manages to establish a clear-cut dichotomy whose “two poles are necessarily imprecise... such as the people versus the oligarchy, toiling masses versus exploiters, and so on” (Laclau 2005: 18). Its reservation towards liberal representative democracy, however, does not prevent it from employing its ‘formalities’, such as holding elections between competitive parties in order to legitimise itself in power (Ansaldi 2007). Moreover and contrary to the claim of some of its critics, leaders of populist bent tend to regard themselves as agents for deepening democracy and social justice, in the sense that they claim to embody the ‘voice’ of the people (Ibid).

Critics of populism have debated that it is characterised by a tendency to foster a highly affectionate and emotional bond between the leader and the people (Ibid, Seligson 2007). This may lead to a form of democratic practice – or pseudo-democratic practice – in which all political and moral legitimacy falls in the hands of a charismatic leader, a supreme ‘strong man’ – a *caudillo*, to use the expression in Latin America’s political tradition – who “relates directly to ‘the people’” (Merino 2007: 68). This type of leader, according to some authors, frequently presents authoritarian traits, which become evident in the way the leader tends to monopolise the political arena, to “do away with representative and judicial institutions” (Seligson 2007: 82), and restricts democratic freedoms, such as freedom to dissent and freedom of expression (Diamond 2002, Ansaldi 2007).

After evaluating the Latin American democratic experience and its history of populism,

John Keane elaborates a version of democracy that he has defined as *caudillo* democracy, which is

a local variant of representative democracy that was quite unique to Spanish America, a twisted type of republican oligarchy rooted in the people, a hybrid method of governing based on rich and powerful *caudillos*, strongmen who liked looking at themselves in the mirror of the people they dominated (2009: 384).

He indicates that this system is a “mutant” form of representative democracy and that, ultimately, it is “democratic only in appearance” (Ibid). It has had continuous historical presence in Latin America since the early nineteenth century, with the emergence of figures such as Argentina’s *caudillo* Juan Manuel de Rosas, and into the twenty-first century, as is arguably the case of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez (Keane 2009). No other part of the world, argues Keane, has witnessed this phenomenon in intensity and extensiveness as has Latin America (Ibid).

The manner in which both western Marxist and liberal studies have associated populism exclusively with despotic *caudillos* has been contended by authors such as Edgardo Lander (2008). He affirms that these views have failed to assume the transformative democratic role that populist regimes have played in many societies, particularly in Latin America (Ibid). In many cases, Lander argues, populist systems have been able to integrate broad sectors of society that had been “excluded both under oligarchic regimes and in the liberal-democratic experience” (2008: 77).

Laclau also claims that populism has been “denigrated... and linked to a dangerous excess of the masses” (2005: 19), particularly by neo-liberal thinkers. These, as argued by Schamis (2006), have questioned whether such regimes have genuinely attained correcting social inequalities, and especially whether they have done so in a consensual manner and within a framework that promotes democratic freedom and strengthens democratic institutions. A significant conceptual contribution to such debate is that of Benjamín Arditi, when assessing populism as a grey area in democracy, in which “it becomes difficult to distinguish the mass populism from the government of the mob” (2004: 91).

## **1.8. Conclusion**

The various authors so far reviewed in this study and their diverse formulations about, and models of, democracy offer a conceptual basis by which one is able to begin to outline various critical views about the relation between media and democracy. The competing understandings of democracy – its concepts, aims and dynamics – reviewed in this chapter are of theoretical and narrative relevance in charting and understanding the relationship between journalism, media, culture and democracy in the next chapters of this study.

Each type of democratic ideal argues for a different standpoint and critique in terms of the role of the media and of journalists in a democratic system (Street 2011). It could be argued that most affirm that media must be essentially free and enhance democratic debate. Yet, the perspectives on how this should be achieved seem highly diverse, nuanced, and non-consensual.

Such diversity in debates and views about the role that media and journalism play in democracy, and the nexus between them, are outlined and evaluated as part of the next stage of this study.

## Chapter 2

### Media and democracy: competing theories and tenets

With some notable exceptions, theorists of democracy are argued not to have paid sufficient analysis to evaluating the relationship between democracy and the media, nor to the aspects and principles that should guide the media within a democratic system (Keane 1991, Street 2011).

The media operate even where democracies do not, and they do not necessarily promote nor increase the variety or quality of freedom and public debate in a society (Dahlgren 2000, Schudson 2003, McQuail 2005). Yet, there are authors who justify in varying ways the relation between media and democracy. For instance, some insist that a democratic society benefits significantly from the existence and functioning of independent media, as it serves as an effective tool to both stimulate public debate and scrutinise those in power (Keane 1991, McQuail 2005). Others uphold the relevance of a 'democratic media' to empower citizenship and maximise liberty (Ibid). And, as Michael Schudson argues, even though the press "by itself is not democracy and does not (necessarily) create democracy" (2003: 198), journalists in all parts of the world, regardless of their ideological or political standings, seek to work in freedom.

There seems to exist a prominent narrative by which journalists and media practitioners identify their vocation "as one of freedom and fit for democracy" (Ibid: 200). These ideas, affirms Keane (1991), have been mainly led by modern theories that have interlinked freedom of the press with democratic practice. More recently there has been a broad debate that seeks to reassess the relationship between the media (and, more generally, news media) and democracy.

#### 2.1. The public sphere and the idea of normative journalism

A starting point for discussing the relationship between democracy, media and journalistic practice in this part of the study is a brief examination of Jürgen Habermas's (1986 and 1991) concept of the public sphere. Indeed, his elaboration of this category remains one of the most influential in communication and media analysis (Schudson 2003, Cañizalez 2010, Hartley 2011). Moreover, Habermas's formulation of the evolution of a non-institutionalised and non-prescriptive space developed for plural communication and debate has, to a significant degree, defined basic notions by which

to evaluate democratic conditions for the media and society at large (Ibid, Habermas 1986).

Habermas argues that a public sphere of reasoned discourse emerged during the eighteenth century (1986 and 1991). During the following two centuries, he indicates, the social landscape underwent a structural transformation which altered the nature of the public sphere (Schudson 1995 and 2003, Dahlgren 2000, Curran 2002). Whereas citizens – namely those in western societies – had been stimulated to participate in a ‘reasoned’ public debate with the rise of the early press during the eighteenth century, citizens living in societies with industrialised and commercialised media had by the late-nineteenth century become mere consumers with an apathetic leaning towards public debate (Ibid, Street 2011). As these societies intensified in their capitalist orientation the public sphere, what had been “a means of enlightenment, became a marketplace of sensation” (Schudson 2003: 66).

The shift in the infrastructure of the new public sphere brought forth relevance to “advertising, the increasing fusion of entertainment and information, the centralization in all areas” (Habermas 1991: 436). By the late-nineteenth century, newspapers had been transformed into cultural objects of consumption (Habermas 1986 and 1991, Thussu 2000, Schudson 2003). The consequence of the media going through such structural transformation has signified on the one hand, according to Habermas, the elimination of critical argument and the end of rational debate within the public sphere. On the other, it has meant the increasing concentration of the media in the hands of a political and economic elite.

Critics of Habermas seem to accept that his understanding of the media as a potential tool of power and domination by the elites is grounded in veracity. Yet, as Keane (1991) and James Curran (2002) point out, there are various weaknesses in his narrative of the history of media. First, his definition of ‘public sphere’ rests only on the historical study of the middle class of Western Europe, excluding other forms of societal reasoning (Keane 1991, García Canclini 1999). Furthermore, it has been argued that what occurred in western societies during the early-nineteenth century was not a clash between reason, non-reason, or sub-reason, “but a growing working-class refusal to be put down by the... premises of the bourgeois ‘rational’ debate” (Curran 2002: 45). However, Schudson contends that although there is broad disagreement towards Habermas’s historical view, his concept of ‘public sphere’ should be regarded “as a normative model of exemplary civic life” (2003: 67). Craig Calhoun emphasises



the relevance of Habermas's "inquiry into normative ideals and actual history" (1992: 1) as derived from his early work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In it, Calhoun argues, Habermas formulates a key question for democratic practice:

What are the social conditions [asks Habermas] for a rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions? ... It focuses upon the bourgeois political life of the seventeenth through mid-twentieth century, yet it claims to reach beyond the flawed realities of this history to recover something of continuing normative importance. This something is an institutional location for practical reason in public affairs and for accompanying valid, if often deceptive, claims of formal democracy (Ibid).

This aspect of Habermas's work has offered some theorists a framework with which to underpin a set of principles and core values when assessing the media and their role in democracies (Davis 2010). It has helped various authors elaborate a normative character for varying models of media as democratic institutions of the public sphere (Siebert 1963, Keane 1991, Glasser 1999, Schudson 2003, Hallin and Mancini 2004, McQuail 2005, Davis 2010). Normative and professional ideals in the media include providing the public with a systematic means to check on state authorities, institutions, and power groups; a source of balanced, diverse and transparent information; a plural access to the media for all citizens; a platform for rational deliberation and discussion of political views; a set of discourses that are inclusive and representative of the social/interest groups (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, Curran 2002, Davis 2010, Waisbord 2013).

It is presumed that these normative ideals have been drawn mainly within the context of the United States and Great Britain. And arguably most of the existing literature referring to it in the West has been produced within the Anglo-American orbit (Thussu 2000 and 2009, 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). Normative, professional 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, Paolo 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 advocacy and 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 there is a tendency for most journalists to work “in close symbiosis” with powerful economic and political groups, government officials, political parties and other authorities (Ibid: 175). This formulation derives, not from Daniel C. Hallin’s and Mancini’s elaboration of their much-cited three models of media and politics, which has been criticised due to their seemingly reductionist characterisations of media systems (Humphreys 2011), but from a shared view with other authors that affirm that in many nations, of distinct journalistic cultures, there may be common ground regarding the norms of professional journalism, but yet very little attention seems to be paid to those normative standards in everyday practice.

In a similar critical tone, and in reference to the context of the United States’ news media, Herbert J. Gans (2003) argues that journalistic practices weaken democracy rather than enhance it. The codes of practice might claim to strengthen the public sphere by actively providing balanced, accurate and transparent information; but as professionals of media organisations – which seek to make profit as their main goal – journalists ultimately fail to empower the citizens in delivering and exchanging information in a rational ‘bottom-up’ dynamic.

Gans criticises the U.S. political system and its liberal model in that it does not or cannot “make room for an unorganised and unwieldy collectivity like the citizenry” (2003: 20); and that the press, he argues, for all their ostensive normative ideals, develop a kind of proxy system with political and economic power groups which tend to “endanger civic engagement” (Schudson 2003: 208).

By contrast, and in an attempt to legitimise the professionalism of journalism and its civic purpose, Schudson claims that the press can effectively serve not only as a key instrument for disseminating information but, most importantly, as a platform through which the public can be engaged in constructive discussion and debate (Hallin 2000, Schudson 2003, McQuail 2005). He observes that although “journalistic deference to

democratic political institutions may be weakening,” the press – as exemplified in the context of the United States – 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 premises of a press that aims at “promoting and improving, and not merely reporting or complaining about, the quality of public and civic life”, as formulated by Theodore L. Glasser and Stephanie Craft (1998: 204), responds to a model of ‘public journalism’. As Denis McQuail (2005) points out, Schudson’s understanding of the democratic role of the media can be conceptually aligned with the group of U.S. authors who promote the idea of a ‘public journalism’ and that argues in favour of a professional model of the media – news media specifically – within a normative framework. In this sense, they stress that the press and its professionals are arguably, by means of established standards and norms,

the best guarantors of the interest of the public, since their primary concern is serving the public’s need for information and comment and providing the platforms for expressions of diverse views. The institutional and professional autonomy of journalism is also the best guarantee of an adequate watch being kept on those in power (Ibid: 186).

Schudson’s arguments relate directly to Habermas’s idea of how the press became “the public sphere’s preeminent institution” (1986: 183). Even though journalism had by the early-nineteenth century become professionalised almost everywhere in the West, and news were then professionally constructed and commercially distributed in most western nations, Habermas’s view that the press rose as a key player in underpinning the public sphere as a ‘space’ for free and civic discussion, and for nurturing democratic principles, seems very relevant when evaluating the role of media in democracy.

There exists, however, an overarching pessimistic view in Habermas in relation to the possible emergence of diverse and newer forms of public life by which the state and the civil could coexist ‘rationally’ (Keane 1991). Moreover, Keane finds a “fundamental ambivalence” in the way the latter aspect coexisted with Habermas’s apparent nostalgia for the diminished bourgeois public sphere (Ibid: 36). Such a view about the public sphere and the press is further amplified by an absence of attention to “low

politics, clientelist power relations” (Curran 2002: 45), and the author’s idealisation of past forms of public reason.

## 2.2. Freedom of the Press theory and liberal values

It has been argued that the liberal narrative is the longest established tradition in media history and analysis, and is arguably the dominant and most accepted in the West (Keane 1991, Bolaño 1999, Sparks 2000, Curran 2002)<sup>7</sup>.

Most of the principles that govern the liberal view of media and democracy are to be traced to seventeenth and eighteenth century Northern and Western Europe, and specifically to Britain, where the call for ‘freedom of the press’ is said to have been proclaimed first (Siebert 1963, Keane 1991 and 2009). It might seem ironic that the pleas for liberty of the press, a historic “cornerstone of modern power-sharing government and politics” (Keane 2009: 239) were expressed by religious men who had never felt comfortable with the word ‘democracy’.

One of the key texts to spearhead the plea for freedom of expression and of the press was John Milton’s *Areopagitica*<sup>8</sup>, written in 1644 (Siebert 1963, Keane 1991 and 2009, McQuail 2005). Censorship, Milton claimed, debilitates the development of the conscience of each individual (Ibid). It is clear in his argumentation, that Milton believed that it is through the expression and sharing of contrasted opinions that one may become best prepared to promote tolerance and engage in civilian virtue (Ibid).

Apart from Milton and his theological approach, in Keane’s (1991) account of the early history of the freedom of the press, he stresses the ‘libertarian’ role played by various intellectual figures between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, North-Western Europe and the American colonies<sup>9</sup>.

A second key component of this philosophy is that “the conduct of the press should be guided by the rights of individuals” (Ibid: 13), and should have a secular character. In this sense, rational individuals are entitled to utilise the press to freely express their opinions about the government and other institutions. A third defence of the freedom of

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<sup>7</sup> For a review of historical narratives of the media, according to Curran (2002), see Appendix A.

<sup>8</sup> In his tract *Areopagitica*, Milton argues vigorously for individuals to follow their “God-given faculty of reason” free from state censorship (Keane 1991: 11).

<sup>9</sup> Among the liberal thinkers who began to shape the philosophy of press freedom are John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill (Keane 1991 and 2009).

the press is to be found in the ideas developed by utilitarian thought. From observing these, it can be inferred that the press is to be regarded as an important tool for making governments accountable for their actions and policies, while also serving as a watchful platform by which to curb any form of despotism.

A fourth aspect that Keane identifies as most relevant in the conception of this philosophy is the notion of truth gained “through unrestricted public discussion among citizens” (1991: 17). J.S. Mill’s essay *On Liberty* makes a strong case for the necessity for truthful opinion to circulate. An immense portion of the utility of an opinion lies in the element of truth that it presents. The press, argued J.S. Mill (cited by Keane 1991), must not be limited by laws that restrict freedom of opinions, otherwise society becomes dominated by dogmas, prejudices, and absolutisms. In his plea for freedom of the press, Mill expands his arguments for freedom of expression in general (Lichtenberg 1990).

Another milestone in the defence of ‘liberty of the press’ in western tradition has been the First Amendment in the United States Constitution (Kelley and Donway 1990, Schudson 2003). Enacted in 1791, it states that Congress or federal government “shall make no law abridging freedom of speech or of the press” (cited by Keane 1991: xii). Many authors draw on this brief text to argue that government may not intervene with the free print and circulation of information or opinion, and that government shall pose no restriction to individuals or group of individuals to express their ideas in the press (Kelley and Donway 1990). As expressed by McQuail, the First Amendment “has become a shorthand term to cover all matters of freedom of expression and opinion in the United States” (2005: 555).

Moreover, many authors since the eighteenth century, as argued by Judith Lichtenberg (1990), have claimed that the standards for freedom of the press should be the same as those of freedom of speech and of expression. She contends that, contrary to the argument of some authors who claim not to make any distinction between the different ideas of ‘freedom’, the freedom of the press might be curbed by specific postulates of the theory of free speech. In contemporary media

many suppress information and stifle ideas rather than promote them...  
[Also], the modern press consists largely of vast and complex institutions that differ in essential respects both from individuals and from the early press, around which the concept of freedom of the press

grew (Lichtenberg 1990: 105-106).

In a similar line of thought, Onora O'Neill (1990) finds that the theory of freedom of expression relies exclusively on rights-based thinking and pays little attention to obligation-based thinking. It tends to protect the rights of individuals to express or say what they want, but hardly takes into account the individuals who receive such information nor the effects of whatever is expressed on those in the receiving end. The media, as argues O'Neill, have a communicating function – it is not essentially about self-expression – and are important in democracies, because they are tools of a communicative nature, much more than because they can function as organs of self-expression (Ibid).

Freedom of expression and systematic scrutiny of the authorities have been regarded by liberal theorists as the main values that the media must defend and reinforce in order to be actively democratic (Keane 1991, Curran 2002). In this sense, within the liberal tradition the watchdog function of the media has been historically formulated in relation to the newspaper press. Classical liberalism has conferred to the press the role of investigating and exposing the improprieties of authorities, monitoring the activities of the powerful, and defending the free circulation of ideas and opinions (Curran 2002, McQuail 2005). According to this view, the watchdog role is considered the most relevant in a democratic society, and it is set

by the end of government, the protection of rights, and would be required regardless of whether or not such government employed democratic means of operation. The implication of this priority is that even if... the government could use its power effectively to strengthen the democratic function, it would not be justified in doing so at the cost of the watchdog function (Kelley and Donway 1990: 97).

Various authors have defended the watchdog perspective while drawing from the idea that the press functions as a 'fourth estate'. The term is accredited to Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century statesman, who claimed that the press operated as a power at least equal to the three existing powers: "There are three estates in Parliament, but in the reporter's gallery yonder sits a fourth estate more important than they all" (Carlyle 1841 cited by Franklin *et al* 2005: 273). Advocates of the idea that the 'fourth estate power' should exist within the press in order to keep the government in check and benefit the general public assume, as Sanford J. Ungar observes, that the media must

at times operate as “the conscience of a nation”, and that such role may drive them to act as “a lonely adversary of the government in power” (1990: 378).

### **2.3. ‘Four theories of the press’ and the prevalence of media libertarianism**

The pervasiveness of the liberal narratives and theories of the press (and media) are possibly best exemplified by the influence that the ‘four theories of the press’ still have internationally (Sparks 2000, McQuail 2005). These were elaborated by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, and originally published in the context of the Cold War, during 1956. The four theories were conceptualised as ‘authoritarian’, ‘libertarian’, ‘social responsibility’, and ‘Soviet communist’. Though they argue to be evaluating the media broadly, it is the press that is their principal focus because it is the oldest form and has gathered over the years more of the theory of mass media (Siebert 1963).

These theories have been critically assessed and refuted by various authors. Moreover, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the four theories – that of ‘Soviet communism’ – is not seen as pertinent by some critics (McQuail 2005). Others, such as John C. Nerone (1995), contend that Siebert and colleagues only managed to elaborate a single theory with four examples and not a set of different theories in their work. Yet, although critical of them, authors such as Sparks (2000), Hallin and Mancini (2004) claim that the ‘four theories’ hold a significant explanatory power and reflect a normative ideal. Also, the broad framework of the ‘four theories’ seem to operate in an apparent alignment with the basic notions of Hayek’s non-collectivist democracy.

The first theory to be presented by Siebert (1963) is authoritarianism, with scarce theoretical formulations, and in a predominantly descriptive manner. The authoritarian theory, as argued by him, emerged mainly in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain and Western Europe. Monarchical rule or the government was thought to be the most adequate voice for expressing and deciding the collective action, and decisions by the state were always above those of any individual (Ibid). It was this power elite, conformed by few ‘wise men’, which was ‘destined’ to guide the organised society, in part by systematic control and surveillance of what was published and expressed in the press. Under such authoritarian paradigm the press is not permitted to check on the government or to interfere with its decisions. It is the state that determines all communication policies and has the exclusive right to license and to censor when it considers it pertinent (Siebert 1963). Even so, authoritarians are argued to have

permitted some level of political discussion among its citizens, providing this was elaborated only in broad theoretical terms and as long as it did not represent an attack on the form of government and its sovereign (Ibid).

The libertarian theory, as argued by Siebert (1963), took shape during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was strongly influenced by the writings of advocates of 'liberty of the press' such as Milton, Locke and James Mill. They believed that 'liberating' the press from the monopoly of authorities was an "epic, heroic fight of the individual against political power" (Keane 1991: 37). This struggle was fuelled by the conception that individuals were rational beings who wished to make their own judgments and choices regarding the different accounts of reality (Siebert 1963). If truth was ever a 'property' of the state under the authoritarian paradigm, in the libertarian view it is to emerge from the 'free-market place' of ideas. In this context the media become a means to check on government, instead of one of its instruments of power (Ibid, Gurevitch and Blumler 1990).

The basic rationale of the freedom of the press theory is endorsed in Siebert's elaboration of 'libertarianism'. Moreover, the author seems to attempt to formulate an updated and celebratory version of it. But, as Keane (1991) would argue, hardly any questions are made about the nature of freedom and equality of communication in this liberal theory of the media. Siebert does recognise that libertarianism has not been able to produce a criteria by which to differentiate between "liberty and abuse of liberty" (1963: 71) in the media, but he claims that its principles have been pivotal to the development of democracy, "which has resulted in the stupendous advancement of the well-being of humanity..., as the guiding principle of western civilization for more than two hundred years" (1963: 70).

Siebert's ideas of western civilization and democratic paragons are drawn within the context of the United States. The same can be said about his model of media libertarianism. Within the U.S. liberal tradition he finds that the ideals of "objective reporting" (Ibid: 60) and of watchdog function are most entrenched (Schudson 1995, Curran 2002). It is also in that liberal pro-market environment that freedom tends to be defined as the "absence of interference" from government (Street 2011: 307). Under such rationale this can only be achieved in a context where media outlets compete with as little regulation as possible, or none at all. What authors such as Curran, Lichtenberg, Keane, Nerone and O'Neill argue is that not all freedoms are compatible. Furthermore, market-led media tend to be "self-paralysing" (Keane 1991: 68), and



erode free competition while creating monopolies (McChesney 2000).

Curran explains that the watchdog function is a key factor in the “democratic functioning of the media” (2002: 219). Yet, he argues, it seems unrealistic that it should define media policy solely. In traditional liberal or libertarian theory it is common to regard essentially the government as the place power is focalised in – within this framework there is a tendency to forget the economic elites and the way these exercise power through the media. A revision of the libertarian theory seems required so as to comprehend the media as “being a check on *both* public and private authority” (Ibid). This conception has led to the formulation of a social responsibility theory.

In his Anglo-North American-centred account, Peterson (1963) argues that the social responsibility theory emerged in its most integrated version as a product of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, which set up an inquiry in 1942 about an array of criticisms of the United States’ local newspaper press, and was reported in 1947. One of the members of the commission, William Hocking, wrote:

Inseparable from the right of the press to be free has been the right of the people to have a free press. But the public interest has advanced beyond that point; it is now the right of the people to have an *adequate press* (cited by McQuail 2005: 171).

The idea of an ‘adequate’ media, capable of representing and promoting diversity, balance, independence, and responsible information was developed partially as a reaction to the criticisms formulated by the commission, and which Peterson (1963) synthesised as follows: the press was argued to be controlled by a socio-economic elite, tended to exert its power for its own interests while promoting deregulation, was notably contrary to social change, lacked active support of public morals, provided significantly more superficial entertainment content than a formative and informative one, invaded the privacy of citizens without the information disseminated being of authentic public interest, and endangered the “free market of ideas” by allowing the powerful to control it (Ibid: 78).

The commission drew various standards by which the media should operate in a democratic society. This followed that the media should offer a “truthful, comprehensive, intelligent” and accurate account of events which should entail meaning for the collective; serve as a forum for public discussion in which different

viewpoints and interests are present; respect and promote plurality for all interest groups and minorities; present and clarify the values and virtues of the society; and guarantee plural access of information to all citizens (cited by Peterson 1963: 88-91).

This theory stresses that freedom of expression cannot be limited to the powerful, and that citizens are not to be treated exclusively as market-led consumers (Keane 1991, McChesney 2000 and 2008). Yet, and in contrast with libertarianism, such freedom should not be understood as an absolute right (Peterson 1963). Nerone points out that if the press is a “depository of the individual freedoms of its readers, then it certainly must have responsibilities” (1995: 6). Media owners and practitioners must find ways by which to agree on common codes of ethics and of professional practice, and any type of regulation conformed must not stimulate control of the media by the government (Peterson 1963, McQuail 2005).

In the Soviet communist theory the state (or the central communist party) owns and controls the media, and the function of each outlet is instrumentally defined by its leaders. In Siebert’s view the media within the Soviet framework “achieve their own ends by assisting in achieving the ends of the state” (1963: 27).

This theory formulates that its interpretation of Marx’s call for a dictatorship of the proletariat has promoted an absolutist instrumentalisation of the media by the communist state (Ibid). Moreover, Schramm and Siebert argue that the Marxist-Soviet media paradigm varies little from the authoritarian one, and yet in classic authoritarianism the media were “in bondage with the state” whereas under the Soviet model the media are “in and of the state” (Schramm 1963: 140).

The basic difference between these two theories – the Soviet communist and the authoritarian –, according to the authors, is that communism utilises the media to promote and accomplish revolution, and that it leaves no space for any privately-owned media enterprise. It is the state alone that employs the media as an instrumental tool exclusively for propaganda, agitation and collective organisation (Ibid).

Apologists of the Soviet model argue that market-led media, as it exists in the United States, cannot be free from capital and bourgeois individualism (Schramm 1963). On the other hand, freedom within the media in Soviet communism is to be expressed within the limits of the egalitarian ideal that the state has established for society.

Critics of neo-liberalism affirm that the libertarian media tend to privilege the circulation of information that supports the *status quo* and the ideology of the elite including, naturally, those who own the private media (McChesney 2000 and 2008, McQuail 2005). Also, these authors have argued that the basic notions of power relations in libertarian theory tend to overlook issues of private ownership of the media (Lichtenberg 1990, McChesney 2000, Street 2011). They argue that non-regulated private ownership creates non-democratic media in the sense that in pursuing private interests they limit the access to information and the supply of it (Ibid).

In his critique of the four theories of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, the author Sparks (2000) explains that in their study – like in the majority of media theory that has followed – discussion about the media and democracy tends to fluctuate around the dichotomous clash between state and market. The two are obviously different, but in their extreme forms their non-democratic results are not too dissimilar. This is highlighted by Robert W. McChesney when he contends that a market perception of democracy tends to be one in which “rights to buy, sell, and invest for private gain in the market place are the only non-negotiable freedoms”; whereas in the Soviet conception, apparent ‘democratic’ elections are permitted only “as long as the power of the commissars and the dominance of the Communist Party is unchallengeable” (2000: 286).

While McChesney (Ibid) indicates that the media debate should promote aspects of social engagement that seek to reform and change the nature of the structure and control of the media, Sparks argues for a shift in discussion away from the debate about the “relatively empowering virtues of state and the market” and a need to focus on what kind of relations the media have with the “mass of the population” (2000: 47). This implies defining to what extent both media practitioners and the public have a genuine say in how the media are to operate and how their interests are represented in them.

#### **2.4. Ideology and class struggle in the media: the legacy of Marxist theory**

There are a variety of theories that have focused mainly on the relations between how media relate to power and equality. According to McQuail (2005), these are by no means uniform in their views and assumptions, yet they tend to address the same key issues in relation to media and democracy.

The classic Marxist study of the media places exceptional emphasis on class struggle and on the way the media tend to be used as an instrument of control by the dominant social class and to preserve the *status quo* (Garnham 1990, Curran 2002, McQuail 2005). In its evaluation of power in the media and contrary to most affirmative historical narratives, Marxism stresses that the way media are used depends on how the relations between classes is developed and how these are able – or not – to negotiate (Artz *et al* 2006). According to Curran and Michael Gurevitch, in its appraisal of capitalist societies, Marxism asserts that the media

relay interpretative frameworks consonant with the interests of the dominant classes, the media audiences, while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative meaning systems that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favour of oppositional definitions (cited by Curran 2002: 108).

In this view, even media practitioners, though they might be under the impression of possessing a sense of autonomy, can only reproduce the dominant mode of communicating and socialising (Ibid). Ultimately, under the Marxist logic, it is the message of the owner of a specific media outlet that the journalist reproduces. This, in turn, reflects how media owners and some journalists, in producing and disseminating information content, tend to affirm the “legitimacy and the value of a class society” (McQuail 2005: 95). This framework of thought has found arguably one of its most radical western propositions in what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have defined as the ‘propaganda model’ (Sparks 2006). Both authors claim that the very structure and functioning of media seek to reproduce the capitalist model and free-market logic in a systematic way. It is a formulation that tends to explicate the media as “one reactionary mass”, but that overlooks, according to Sparks, that media in capitalist democracies can be characterised “not for their crushing uniformity but their limited diversity” (Ibid: 112).

However, Callinicos (1991), McChesney (2000 and 2008) and Lee Artz (2006) contend that in capitalist societies there exists uniformity, in the way in which a dominant class exploits to varying degrees other classes or productive forces. From this perspective, capitalist owners of media – or of any means of production – through an exploitative relationship and manipulation of the labour forces seek to maximise their own profits

(Garnham 1990, Bolaño 1999, McQuail 2005, McNair 2006). The contradictions that emerge from these relations are, in classical Marxism, not between individuals but between social classes. The power and social influence of each class “depends on the outcome of its interactions” – such as negotiations, alliances, or confrontations – with other classes (Artz 2006: 29).

Drawing from Gramsci’s ideas, for the media owners – as part of the dominant class – to achieve hegemonic success they must incorporate challenges and negotiations from the subordinate classes into the type of “ideology that may modify but reinforce an existing relations of production” (Artz 2006: 33). This ideology, overtly or subtly promoted by the media, tends to alienate those who are not in power and create a false consciousness. Marcuse (1991) argues that such ideology, promoted in the media, paradoxically encourages a representation of social reality that is simultaneously repressive and desirable.

Neo-Marxist authors such as Artz (2006) and Dana L. Cloud (2006) contend that theories of media embedded in liberal and capitalist narratives lack any concern for inclusion and egalitarianism. Both stress that these narratives diminish democratic principles rather than strengthen them. They claim that these tend to advocate for individual freedoms, but that they are ultimately calls for freedom for capitalist entrepreneurs who own the media and who seek to preserve their privilege within the socio-economic structure. Additionally, the authors stress with worry the lack of attention paid in recent studies to what they consider a central factor in the relation between media and democracy – the capitalist system of class and the ways the subordinate classes struggle and negotiate with the dominant one in conditions of disadvantage (Ibid). In a call for a shift of media control, to be brought about through a radical emancipationist or revolutionary process, by and for the working class and disenfranchised, Artz affirms that, historically, social struggles “reveal that transformation of capitalist society cannot occur without knowledge of the social relations that oppress and depress subordinate classes” (2006: 48).

According to McQuail (2005) and Sartori (2007b), in its call for radical democratic transformation Marxism fails to answer various issues regarding the media, such as: How can collective ownership be achieved?; are all media structured in the same way in capitalist societies, even those that are under state ownership?; how would multi-partisan media flourish under the power of proletarian dictatorship? While addressing these issues in both capitalist and Marxist approaches to media, Sparks (2006) points

out that although Marx's asseveration that the ideas that define a historical age are determined by the dominant class was unequivocal, he concedes that communication structures and technologies were very different in Marx's time when compared to contemporary times.

## **2.5. Approaches in critical political economy**

Broad aspects of heterodox Marxist positions provide part of the framework of contemporary critical political economy, as do to a degree some principles embedded in classic liberal traditions (Mosco 1996 and 2006, Bolaño 1999, McQuail 2005), yet the central concern for political economy theorists is arguably the social and power relations that charter the "production, distribution, and consumption of communication resources" (Mosco 2006: 88). In other words, this strand of thought pays particular attention to assessing 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, McChesney 2000, Artz *et al* 2006, Sartori 2007b). Political economic thinkers have been critical towards the logic of market-led societies in the sense that these are argued not to be committed to the promotion of minority voices in the media and to plural access (Sparks 2006, Curran 2010).

Bernard Miège, differently, formulates a critique of media conglomeration and imperialism while establishing a rupture with classical Marxism, and more specifically with Theodor W. Adorno's idea that all forms of media and of cultural expression are embedded within a 'culture industry'<sup>10</sup>, which ultimately obeys the dynamics of the market and the interests of the elite (Adorno 1991, Mosco 1996 and 2006). He argues that the media, as a most significant part of cultural production, is substantially transforming "both the content and form of both works and products" (Miège 2000: 62), with a tendency to intensify English language in developing nations and the primacy of its 'cultural industry' – formulations that concur with the critique of Stuart Hall (1986 and 1997) regarding the worldwide English-language dominance in cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno's notion of "culture industry" belongs to a dialectic, non-affirmative narrative, critical of capitalism, from which it is formulated that cultural products are developed within a profit-centred mentality that ultimately imposes social conformity (Adorno 1991, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

production and the media.

Emphasising the existence of an important divide between conservative and Marxist-oriented currents within political economic thought, Vincent Mosco (2006) argues that the prevalent one within this theory is the 'institutional' approach, and is arguably most wholesomely exposed in the works of economist John Kenneth Galbraith. The latter is based in the appraisal of constraints of a technological and institutional nature that conform "markets to the advantage of those corporations or governments large and powerful enough to control them" (Ibid: 91). Under such conditions, media outlets and networks are able to limit social representation, curb variety of content, and restrict access to production. Ultimately, the media are argued to be portraying the views of the owners and promoting 'depolitisation' – to use Marcuse's expression – within the public thus sustaining the *status quo*. In doing so, as both McChesney (2000) and Curran (2002 and 2011) explain, they impede scrutinising social and economic institutions, not only checking the state.

A variant of theorists regard the audience as the key element in the media structure, and under this theoretical standpoint these are viewed in capitalist societies as 'mediatically' influenced to a significant extent by the commercial content of, for example, televised product advertisements. In the contrasting view of technological determinism, this commercial dynamic in media has led to an increase of consumerist behaviour and a decline in ideological debate (McQuail 2005). Ideological diminution, Mosco (1996) indicates, seems to be a result of the process by which information is turned into a marketable commodity, within a capitalist logic. As this trend of power concentration and cultural transformation prevails and increases in the media of the free-market economies, social inequality and class divisions deepen (Ibid). Not only that: racial, gender, ethnic and other minorities are negatively affected under such patterns of power, cultural dynamics and media ownership (McChesney 2000, Benhabib 2005). Ultimately, these lack both democratic access to information and the representation of their interests and social realities.

McQuail (Ibid) highlights the point made broadly by critical political theorists that the structure and dynamics of the media, as they exist under liberal capitalist frameworks, undermine the existence of social and cultural diversity, as would be argued by democratic theorists such as James S. Fishkin (1991), Seyla Benhabib (1996 and 2005), and Víctor Sampedro (2000). Furthermore, he affirms that the dominant elite tend to marginalise "opposition and alternative voices", while the "public interest in

communication is subordinated to private interest” (2005: 100). If, as noted by authors of varying theoretical standings, the process of internationalisation or globalisation advances, then according to the critical political economy current, so does the global media conglomeration (Thussu 2000, Curran 2002, Mosco 2006, Sparks 2007). As expressed by Mara Einstein, this group of critics

denounce the hegemony of the media and the ever-increasing power of the consolidated media conglomerates. These criticisms stem from the idea that whoever owns the media, sets the agenda for what will be communicated by that medium... Media corporations control the ‘pipeline’ and, therefore, control the messages the medium transmits (2004: 5).

From a different perspective, Mosco adds that, although the media tend to project and promote information and communicational content aiming to perpetuate the *status quo*, the subordinate classes cannot be defined simply by their scarce access to the media, but by their “relationships of harmony, dependency, and conflict to the capitalist class” (2006: 102). In this sense, it is worthwhile adding – as do César Bolaño (1999), and Armand Mattelart and Michele Mattelart (2005) – that, for a political economy of communication to be comprehensive and more inclusive, it cannot rely alone in class structuration as its essential focus.

Dimensions such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sovereignty, social and cultural movements, need to be evaluated, be it as confrontation or complimentary forces to class structure (Mosco 2006). However marginalised, these groups arguably tend to configure resistance, formulate alternatives, or elaborate ways by which to negotiate with the powerful (Miège 2000, Mosco 2006).

## **2.6. The globalisation debate and the case of the state**

Although a broad debate about globalisation emerged mainly within the academic circles during the 1990s, it seems to have been present in one way or another since the emergence of industrialisation (Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al* 2002). Literature related to globalisation is vast and its main themes have criticised – or partially replaced – in western debate earlier approaches in critical political economy and the paradigm of imperialism (Tomlinson 1999, Sreberny-Mohammadi *et al* 2002, Sparks 2007).



There is, however, a broad set of interpretations and theories of globalisation which has been drawn in almost all areas of sociological, political, cultural and media studies (García Canclini 1999, Tomlinson 1999, Held 2006, Sparks 2007). Globalisation, explains John Tomlinson, has become an extremely flexible concept in its “capacity to generate speculations, hypotheses and powerful social images,” that reaches beyond data and social facts (1999: 2).

In a generalising account, formulated by Held, globalisation implies, firstly, that an array of “political, economic and social activity are becoming worldwide in scope”; and secondly, that there is evidence of “intensification of levels of interaction and interconnectedness within and between states and societies” (2006: 293-94). This follows Anthony Giddens’ interpretation of a new stage of modernity characterised by the high level of “time-space distancing” and the corresponding ways in which relations between local and distant social modes intensify and become “stretched” (1990: 64). Such a view is challenged by various authors, including Latin American theorists and scholars that are reviewed in the next chapter.

Globalisation involves not only a new asymmetry of economic, political, and military power between the ‘centre’ (nations of dominant political and economic positions) and the ‘periphery’ (developing nations with weak or relatively dependent economies), but also in terms of cultural flow and recognition (Hannerz 2002, Ferrer 2007). In this asymmetric relationship generally “when the centre speaks, the periphery listens, and on the whole does not talk back” (Hannerz 2002: 11), and this dynamic may arguably lead to a global cultural homogenisation.

Although some authors claim that this view is quite alarmist and that local popular cultures in the periphery are by no means under threat by the increasing flow of transnational cultural products and information contents, others contend that global culture imposes a dynamic of political and ideological submission to the powerful nations (Schiller 1991, Mattelart and Mattelart 2005). Following this argument, it is implied that global media also becomes ‘transnationalised’ thus producing a dynamic of dependency in both the media professionals and the audience/readers belonging to the periphery (Boyd-Barnett 2002, McQuail 2005).

Yet, enthusiasts of globalisation claim that it has increasingly gained a ‘decentred’ and ‘disorganised’ character, reflecting a multidirectional interconnectivity and

enhancing a new sense of international cosmopolitanism, in sharp contrast with the geopolitical view that had been reflected, for example, during the late 1950s in the work of Siebert and colleagues (Curran and Park 2000, Curran 2002, McNair 2006). One significant claim made in relation to this interconnectedness is the key role communication technology has played in it. As argued by McQuail, mass communication has become “by definition global in character” (2005: 251).

Some advocates of the ‘Information Society’ and other media-centric theories find that the expansion of media and communication technologies, emerging as part of the dynamics of capitalism, have become a key source of wealth and have contributed to the configuration of a more plural and democratic civil society (Curran 2002 and 2011, McQuail 2005). Others, as McNair formulates, argue that global media may well be serving as one key basis for a “unifying collective identity, or imagined community, and even some kind of global governance” (2006: 147).

These enthusiasts of the information society paradigm have reinvigorated Marshall McLuhan’s idea that media technology has had a greater social impact globally than the content of media (McLuhan 1994, Thussu 2000, McQuail 2005). This view surpasses Giddens’ notion of a ‘decentred’ modern world and essentially proclaims the existence of a ‘technologically-determined decentred cosmopolitan’ one. It is arguably from within this sense of new cosmopolitanism that various “pan-communicational idealists” and “techno-determinists” (Bolaño 1999: 26)<sup>11</sup> maintain that globalisation promotes increasing diversity and hybridisation within nation-states (Martín-Barbero 1993, Curran 2002).

The idea that globalisation enhances plural connectivity, promoting a sort of ‘trans-national empathy’ among societies – as in McLuhan’s ‘global village’ – is strongly challenged by authors such as McChesney (2008). He argues (Ibid) that the evaluation of globalised media must rest in arguments of an economic and political nature – these essentially relate to the global rise of market-oriented economy. He critically identifies various tendencies within the capitalist framework that have given rise to globalisation. Firstly, he argues (Ibid), the intensification of trans-border capital flow has reduced the capacity of national governments to act free of the constraints and interests set by transnational business. State autonomy has suffered as a result, particularly in developing countries. Secondly, the greater leverage that international

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<sup>11</sup> Direct quote from author Bolaño –belonging to a work not published or not available in English– has been translated by me, from Spanish.

corporations have been gaining over national and local government has led to deregulation “in the hope of luring capital and reducing the power of labour and labour unions” (Ibid: 372). Thirdly, the decreasing economic growth in advanced capitalist nations outlines a tendency towards economic stagnation and a significant reduction of buying power – in contradiction to capitalist rationale.

Lastly, the power that the transnational financial markets have acquired, while harming the political and economic sovereignty of most states by which these should articulate effective policies for its citizens, has caused economic instability worldwide and accentuated class stratification. McChesney concludes that globalisation represents a facet of concentrated corporate ownership and advanced commercial support for the media that has “destroyed the capacity for the press to fulfil a democratic mission” (Ibid: 371).

Critics of market-led globalisation – as is the case of McChesney – also argue that the growth of transnational corporate power significantly undermines the capacity of the state in promoting and executing media regulation in the interest of the public (Beltrán 1999, Thussu 2000, Mattelart 2005). In a similar tone, Curran and Park explain that

in a globally deregulated world, all economies are subject to the pressure of market norms and behaviour. The power to resist, and the power to support values and social arrangements that reflect the will of the people through the democratic system have been diminished (2000: 10).

Yet, national governments, either in the so-called ‘centre’ or in the ‘periphery’, can function as ‘mediators’ between transnational corporations and the public, and also define the framework in which regulations and communication laws are to operate. In sum, and following Curran’s (2002) observations, there seem to exist sufficient arguments for proposing that the nation state can be a starting point for charting and understanding the dynamics of democracy in the media.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

Since one of this study’s main objectives is to assess journalistic practices in a politically-polarised national context, the principal aim of this chapter lies in

understanding the diversity and complexity of theories and narratives related to democracy, media and journalistic practice.

There seems to be agreement among the majority of authors reviewed that liberal press (or media) theories are not only the longest established but arguably the most pervasive in media analysis. An important normative/professionalism dimension is prevalent in the works of liberal and communication and journalistic theorists. Key normative assumptions in the democratic performance of the media from this trend's perspective are varied and tend to emphasise aspects such as public interest, fairness, independence, scrutinising of authorities ('watchdog function'), and plural dialogue across society (Keane 1991, Curran 2002, Bisbal 2009, Waisbord 2013).

Authors of different theoretical currents contend that the media and journalism are driven primarily by the "imperatives of private enterprise capitalism and by the values of a consumer society" (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990: 269), and that liberal-leaning views fail to evaluate the power structures of the media and/or their lack of incentives for promoting egalitarianism and diversity. These critiques emerge from contrasting schools of neo-Marxism, critical political economy, dependency paradigms, cultural studies, among other narratives in media analysis.

Importantly, globalisation also seems to reconfigure the debate about media and democracy. In this regard, there is a clash of contrasting views that, if appreciated in a binary fashion, have been set by a 'technophilic' current – which broadly holds that technological advances are the primordial condition for globalisation – and a diversified radical trend that affirms that the decisive forces behind globalisation are essentially economic, political and market-driven (McQuail 2005). Yet, all theoretical strands discussed seem to agree, in different ways and through varied mechanisms, that "democracy needs an informed citizenry and that the media are the chief vehicle for achieving it" (Dahlgren 2000: 322).

Even under occasional Manichean modes of presenting and contrasting media systems and normative logics (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 14), most approaches discussed in this chapter – albeit having been developed predominantly in a western context – hold worthy explanatory ideas for helping understand the media and journalistic cultures in hybrid or non-western democracies, as are the cases of most Latin American nations.

Paradigms of media, culture and journalism that have emerged from within the region, and especially from Venezuela, are charted and assessed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Latin American theories in media, culture and democracy

In order to assess the democratic role of the news media and journalistic practice in the context of Venezuela, it is necessary to explore existing theories and ideas of communication that relate directly to the social and political realities of Latin America and of the nation. Moreover, the dominant perspectives in media and social studies that have emanated essentially from western authors and that seem to prevail within the theoretical canon, should be complemented – or at times, challenged – by others that have been elaborated within non-western scholarly approaches (Curran and Park 2000, Beltrán 2008, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010) and which tend to keep a closer bearing on the regional and local contexts.

Debates about democratisation and media, power and ideology, popular cultures and institutions, communication policies, journalistic ideals, and related topics are “one thing when conducted in the liberal-democratic climate of Europe or North America,” but something very different “when taking place under the dictatorial cloud that covered eight out of ten countries” in South America by 1977 (Schlesinger 1993: ix).

Various authors have highlighted Latin America’s own analytical richness in media analysis and the ways in which its critical traditions have contributed significantly to amplify the debate in media, journalism, and cultural production (Aguirre and Bisbal 2010), as a general current committed to “progressive politics and the foundational principle of praxis as intrinsic to academic work” (Murphy and Rodríguez 2006: 268).

In more than one way, Latin America represents a pioneering region in the development of media experience, models and theories, which have at various stages either criticised or reinterpreted western views (Beltrán 2008, Barranquero 2011), particularly in their elaboration of democratic and inclusive guidelines by which to link communication and media praxis to plural access, participation, and social change. Jesús María Aguirre and Marcelino Bisbal argue that the study of communication, media and journalism in the region has been characteristically non-linear in its development, but “highly competitive and polemical”, with different authors drawing in an eclectic manner from different currents of thought – which range from Marxism and its derivations to cultural studies – and from various disciplines, such as sociology,

economics and semiotics, among others (2010: 11-12)<sup>12</sup>. Broadly speaking, these studies have been concerned, according to Luis Ramiro Beltrán (2008) and Aguirre and Bisbal (op. cit), with media democratisation, social transformation, definitions of cultural identity within the globalisation process, and tensions with ideas of professionalism.

### **3.1. Globalisation and the media: views from Latin America**

There has been broad debate among regional authors in Latin America about the nature of globalisation and the ways it has been transforming the region's social, cultural and media landscape (Mattelart 1999 and 2010, Martín-Barbero 2002b, Pasquali 2007). Globalisation has been interpreted as a process of social, economic, political and cultural linkage that goes beyond varying forms of integration of nation-states to become "the emergence of a new socio-historical nexus" which defines the world and the way to think about it (Martín-Barbero 2002b). It is a view shared by many Latin American cultural theorists, and tends to represent a celebratory position towards potential communicational interconnectivity, promotion of diversity, plural access in the media, journalistic autonomy, and social resistance (García Canclini 1995 and 1999, Curran and Park 2000).

To a certain degree, the assumption by these authors that globalisation encompasses a potential platform for social and political power transformation, is not too dissimilar from Giddens' assumption that globalisation, as a new stage of modernity, has 'stretched' local modes, 'extended' communicational exchange and 'decentred' previous dominant forms of social integration (Giddens 1990, Curran and Park 2000).

However, the premise of Giddens (1990) that globalisation is the result of an international shift inherent to capitalist modernity and its alleged decentred character, has been challenged by authors such as Mattelart (1999) and McChesney (2000 and 2008), who regard it as a process that maintains key traits of both dependency and imperialism, whereby the governments of post-industrialised powers and transnational corporations dictate 'global' economic and political policies, thus potentially modifying the cultural and media landscape of entire nations.

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<sup>12</sup> In this chapter, I have translated direct quotes from authors Aguirre and Bisbal, Bisbal and Nicodemo, Bolaño, Garretón, Mattelart, Mattelart and Mattelart –all belonging to works not published or not available in English– from Spanish.

In a similar vein, Aldo Ferrer (2007) argues that globalisation is framed within an hegemonic dynamic, which is ultimately functional to the interests of the economically dominant nations and to specific social groups within them, and tends not to lead 'periphery' nations to genuine global integration. He emphasises that a way for these countries to overcome relative political, economic and cultural dependency towards dominant nations is by strengthening national policies of democratic participation and social distribution, while also implementing effective regional integration strategies in media (Ibid).

In her assessment of globalisation, Seyla Benhabib claims that its dominant trajectory is "from the centre to the periphery, rather than vice versa" (2005: 182). Through different elaborations in their respective works, Nestor García Canclini (1999) and John Tomlinson (1999) contend that globalisation is not univocally a discourse of dominance from the 'centre' to the 'periphery', but a set of processes that simultaneously encourage both homogenisation and fragmentation throughout the world. In doing so, argues García Canclini (Ibid) while focusing on the case of Latin America, globalisation reorders social inequality and differences without suppressing them.

He stresses, together with Jesús Martín-Barbero (2002a and 2002b), that most globalisation theorists tend to vindicate integrationism and egalitarianism as inherent traits of globalisation, but fail to observe and analyse inequality, exclusion and segregation as part of its nature. In this sense, both García Canclini and Martín-Barbero evaluate the phenomenon of globalisation as a highly complex one, which can also be defined by the tensions that appear to be evident in the interdependence and interchange of what is 'local' and what is 'global' in societies (García Canclini 1999). Both analysts seem to engage critically – to some degree – with the dynamics of economic power in globalisation as part of their cultural theories of Latin America.

In a less 'culturalist' critique of globalisation that seeks to draw for Latin America a normative framework in media and which maintains some arguments similar to those of Mattelart and Mattelart (2005) and McChesney (2008), the work of Beltrán (2008) has stressed that the dominant discourse of globalisation has stimulated another wave of media deregulation both intra and internationally, thus undermining both state and communitarian policies for journalism and the media, and weakening the backbone of democratic media. In his appraisal of the market-driven ideals that have allegedly underpinned the information society and its technophilia, he argues for



'responsible' national and regional media policies and reforms that enhance democratic participation and social mobilisation in the media, while curbing the power of media transnational corporations (Ibid).

Yet, further critical stances towards the effects of globalisation in the region are to be found in the political economy and neo-Marxist currents. César Bolaño (1999), McChesney (2000 and 2008), Mattelart and Mattelart (2005) and Mattelart (2010) argue that the negative consequences of globalisation of the media go beyond the exacerbation of deregulation – local and national identities are affected negatively and become decentred.

An additional critique, as expressed by Bolaño (1999), is that globalisation has become a "fetish-concept" supported and reinforced by a market-led discourse, reductionist in nature, and lacking any regard for its ideological implications within society. He argues (Ibid) that globalisation has been promoted as part of the neo-liberal ideological order, with the principal aim to stimulate the flow of capital in favour of the centres of financial, economic and political power – mainly the United States – in detriment to the nations on the periphery and their attempts at democratising media.

Critically, Mattelart (1999) claims that there are some cases in Latin America where organised civil society, through democratic deliberation or activism, has achieved important shifts in media regulation since the mid-1990s. Also, there is evidence of use of autocratic forms of regulation imposed by local governments for both national and international media – as has been the case of some 'hybrid' democracies or authoritarian populisms in Latin America – which in more than one way have defied the hegemony of the United States and other western powers (Bisbal 2009). This latter aspect brings to the foreground the argument that, contrary to the views of Giddens (1990 and 1998) and Benhabib (2005) which stress that nation-state systems are waning under the pervasiveness of globalisation, national governments still seem to maintain a key role in society's power structure.

In contradiction with the narratives of both market and technology enthusiasts, nation states seem to prevail as very important "markers of differences" (Curran 2002: 183). These still seem to be able to define, to varying degrees and depending on geopolitical and economic contexts, all sorts of policies – social, economic, political

and communicational<sup>13</sup>.

### **3.2. The dependency model and cultural imperialism**

The question of hegemony has been central to Latin American critical debate since the late 1960s (Mattelart 1999, Murphy and Rodríguez 2006, Lozano 2007). In debating the character of media and cultural hegemony in the region, many Latin American authors have primarily based their critique in the dominance of western models, but more specifically in the way the United States' media and their content flows unidirectionally in the region and the ideological and social consequences of this dynamic (Ibid). This has been one of the key arguments of Latin American analysts and theorists of media such as Beltrán, Armand Mattelart, Antonio Pasquali, Elizabeth Fox, and Carola García Calderón (Beltrán 2005 and 2008, Lozano 2007, Pasquali 2007, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Arguably, the critical approach of Mattelart provides a warning about the media dependency within Latin America, and its supposed ideological domination by the United States. His work pays special attention to class struggle, while moving beyond certain aspects of canonical Marxism (1999 and 2005). Arguably the most notorious of these is his refusal to interpret the media's social function as an exclusive derivation of the way in which ownership and social classes are structured (Bolaño 1999). Mattelart (1999 and 2010) argues that the media can be used as a key instrument for emancipation and resistance. This, he argues, should apply particularly to developing non-western societies in their struggle to "oppose western control and create indigenous news and entertainment media" (Mosco 2006: 94).

Mattelart's research during the 1970s, led primarily in Latin America, has amalgamated the analysis of both national and international power structures, of ideological struggles in everyday life, with a formulation of proposals of "resistance to the dominant classes and to the imperialistic culture" (1999: 9). He observes that, although the paradigm of 'cultural imperialism' – particularly that of the United States – has been caricaturised over the decades within an "uncritical globalized" ideal, it still has relevance when appraising non-western societies, in the sense that it foregrounds

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<sup>13</sup> During the 2000s, the left-wing governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela have implemented national laws and regulations for the media, in contrast to the prevailing deregulation and market-led policies of the 1990s, leading to intense critiques from the private sector (Kitzberger 2012).

the discussion of participative democracy and media of “returning the voice to the people” (Ibid: 9-10) and fostering self-development collectively, as theorists of the New Left have explained.

To illustrate this, Mattelart draws from his experience as a government communication advisor in Chile (Mattelart 1999, Mosco 2006). He argues that the “ideological sanitary cordon” – to use Chilean President Salvador Allende’s<sup>14</sup> expression – that the United States imposed on Latin America during the Cold War era, led to the development of a critical awareness by Latin American theorists and policy-makers of the transnational character of the media, the U.S.-led hegemonic neo-liberal project, and the necessity to formulate changes within such “asymmetric” framework (1999: 10). Aspects of this ideological order and U.S. socio-political influence, some authors would argue, continue to be present in twenty-first century Latin America and its media, to the extent that media discourse and practice can be considerably affected by this alleged one-way dynamic (Mattelart and Mattelart 2005, Pasquali 2007, Barret *et al* 2008).

Examining various Latin American countries, Andre Gunder Frank, finds that however politically independent, these have maintained a relation of cultural and media subordination primarily to the United States, whose condition of “metropolis” imposes monopolistic power over its “satellites”, namely Latin American nations and other developing countries, thus leading to the “underdeveloped development” of the latter (2004: 40). In his elaboration of a ‘dependency’ model, as Sparks explains, Frank argues that developed nations like the United States have maintained

an exploitative relationship to the less developed ones: surpluses that were generated in Latin America were diverted to North America. At the same time, the developed countries constantly interfered... in the economic, political and social life of the developing world in ways that polarized the societies (2007: 82).

Theorists and scholars Beltrán, Pasquali, Fox, Frank, and Mattelart argue that a structure of dominance and dependency has been maintained between a ‘centre’ and a ‘periphery’, the former consisting of the developed neo-liberal economies and the

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<sup>14</sup> Salvador Allende (1908-1973) was the first democratically-elected left-wing President in Latin America. Of nationalist, Marxist, reformist credentials, he met strong opposition from Chile’s conservative sector throughout his mandate. He died during the U.S.-backed coup d’état on September 11, 1973, led by General Augusto Pinochet (Reid 2009, Williamson 2009).

latter of the developing and underdeveloped economies (Beltrán 1999 and 2008, Bolaño 1999, Lozano 2007, Sparks 2007). ‘Centre’ and ‘periphery’ have been structurally connected to each other, and “the condition for the prosperity of the developed was the misery and exploitation” of the developing or underdeveloped (Sparks 2007: 83). This argument has permeated the rationale behind the dependency model elaborated by Latin American authors and, in doing so, has stressed the importance of power structures within the media while also observing the way in which foreign interests and economic dynamics can shape media systems (Waisbord 2000b).

The flow of communication between the peripheral countries tends to be limited, according to this model, and it is in the interest of the dominant developed countries for this to be so in order to force the ‘periphery’ into a market dynamic which is essentially created by the transnational corporations and governments of developed economies (Thussu 2000, Waisbord 2000b, McQuail 2005). The latter are generally understood to be, from the post-war years to the twentieth-first century, the United States and the larger nations of Western Europe, such as France, Great Britain, and Germany<sup>15</sup>.

One constant of the dependency model has been that the ‘centre’ has been permeating the ‘periphery’ with a unidirectional media flow, promoting – mostly in a non-direct way – the values, ideologies and broad cultural traits of the dominant market-led societies. Such dynamics, as explains Silvio Waisbord (2000b), tend to reinforce foreign domination and the weakening of national cultures. Another constant has been the idea that media that are built around the international power structures of capitalism “constitute obstacles rather than conduits for democracy” (Ibid: 52).

The dependency model has been elaborated, in part, as a response to the ‘developmentalist’ thesis of media and communication. The latter is an alleged product of western attempts to integrate an international framework of communication into “an explanatory perspective on development” aligned with the political and economic interests of elite groups and their society characteristics (Mosco 2006: 94). It emerged from a technological determinist narrative, built partially on Schramm’s and Siebert’s works, and has been at core market-oriented. As Jan Servaes and Patchanee Malikhao explain, it interprets development

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<sup>15</sup> Non-western countries such as China, Japan, and Russia also possess their own ‘peripheries’ (McQuail 2005).

as an unilinear, evolutionary process and defines the state of underdevelopment in terms of observable quantitative differences between so-called poor and rich countries on the one hand, and traditional and modern societies on the other hand (2007: 2).

By contrast, under the Latin American developmentalist perspective the media represent – together with levels of education, urbanisation, employment and social forces – an “index of development” for the periphery nations and a resource by which democratic values of neo-liberal models can be enhanced (Mosco 2006: 94). Yet, according to various authors, its principal theoretical challenge emerged from Latin American scholars and researchers who elaborated the dependency model and played an active role in the debates of both the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)<sup>16</sup> and the National Communication Policies debates (Bolaño 1999, Servaes and Malikhao 2007, Beltrán 2008, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Even though various Latin American and western authors recognise the importance of the dependency model and the appraisal of ‘imperialist hegemony’, some have questioned the premises of its critique. The dependency model and the imperialism paradigm have been challenged, as Sparks explains, since the emergence of important shifts in the international media landscape, as studies showed in the mid-1980s, when both economic and technical changes contributed significantly to the transformation of world communications into more complex systems, in which “there were multiple centres of production and exchanges flowing through many different channels” (2007: 119). The *dependentistas*, argues Waisbord (2000b), fail to observe and assess the nuanced relation of power between the state and the local public sphere in developing media systems; and adds conclusively that the dependency school’s main problem has been not conceding

sufficient autonomy to the political, which is fundamental to recognizing and exploring divisions within states and markets, as well as differences across political regimes... Thus media dependency has correctly signalled the importance of the market but has neglected the

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<sup>16</sup> The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) is a term elaborated within the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) during the 1970s as a means to design and operate standard international policies for the media, under the so-called New World Economic Order, adopted in 1974 by the United Nations General Assembly (Thussu 2000, Beltrán 2008, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

persistence and autonomy of politics, which cannot be assumed to perfectly mirror business intentions (Ibid: 54).

Also, regional cultural theorists argue that there is a theoretical displacement of the concept of 'periphery' by the idea of a complex form of cultural and political 'hybridity' in Latin American societies (Martín-Barbero 1993 and 2002b, García Canclini 1995). These critical views stress that, in order to assess the articulation of democratic practices within the media in the region, it seems relevant to observe beyond the binary framework of 'periphery-centre' relation, and evaluate the relation of national or internal politics and the media in Latin America (Ibid, Waisbord 2000b, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011).

### **3.3. The NWICO and media reform theories in Latin America**

The debates within the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) were fuelled by a critique of the unidirectional free flow of information, from centre to periphery, and of the 'cultural imperialism' that such dynamic arguably promoted. These discussions were highly politicised under the Cold War frame and their clashing discourses (McQuail 2005, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Freedom and censorship, autonomy and media plurality, economic dependency, cultural domination, monopolistic ownership, national sovereignty, educational output, and democratic access in the media were the main aspects discussed in what later became known as the MacBride Commission<sup>17</sup> (Thussu 2000, Carlsson 2003, Sparks 2007). The final report of these sessions was approved in 1980. In it, the vast majority of Latin American countries backed the ideas that proposed the creation of a normative framework for journalism as well as the implementation of some control in news content and distribution "on grounds of equity, sovereignty and fairness" (McQuail 2005: 262). Representatives of fifteen countries – mostly non-western – participated in the elaboration of the report<sup>18</sup>.

Although Latin America, as Beltrán (2008) argues, did not play the central role in the

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<sup>17</sup> The Commission was named after the Chairman of the UNESCO sessions, Irish government minister Sean MacBride (1904-1988).

<sup>18</sup> In the Declaration of Talloires, formulated afterwards in 1981, the main western media systems – led by the United States and the United Kingdom – argued for 'free-flow' of information, endorsed deregulation and free-market ideals, and rejected the propositions defined in the McBride report (McQuail 2005).

political definition of the NWICO, it carried out key contributions mainly in the theoretical and technical fields. Elizabeth Fox (1988) suggests that views and propositions emanating from Latin American scholars within these debates did have an important political effect. Moreover, she argues that Latin America

was the first Third World region as a whole to identify certain problems in its national media systems, propose national communications policies and in some cases carry out major structural reforms of broadcasting and the press (Ibid: 6).

Latin American scholars, intellectuals and some reform-minded governments were highly critical of the dynamics by which news information flows from the 'great powers' to developing nations, the way in which non-western cultures are misrepresented in news in developed countries, the dominant form of media ownership in the hands of the elites, and the exclusion of popular and subordinate sectors of society in the media (Pasquali 1980, Fox 1988, Beltrán 2008). These critiques led in a significant manner to the elaboration of new communications and media policies and reforms in various Latin American countries, most of which aimed to achieve a degree of national control over the media and a stronger disassociation with the transnational systems, springing mainly from the United States (Ibid)<sup>19</sup>.

It can therefore be argued that the NWICO discussions had an impact in Latin America, following the formulation of different proposals of national communications policies and reforms during the second half of the 1970s, in various countries of the region. However, very few of these proposals were implemented by national governments, and by the early 1980s had become generally abandoned by almost all of the region's governments mainly due to the pressure of the private media sector, its "usual commercial exploitation and often abuse, and the usual government neglect" (Fox 1988: 8).

Pasquali (2007) contends that, although the debates about the NWICO did have a partial effect in identifying national media problems in Latin American societies and helped shape arguments for new national media policies in the region, the NWICO discussions centred their focus on establishing international agreements and this

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<sup>19</sup> A particularly important event in spurring Latin American proposals for media reforms at the time was the UNESCO-sponsored regional meeting of San José, Costa Rica in 1974 (Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

arguably became an obstacle for national media policies to advance (Ibid).

The different debates that followed in the region, known as National Communication Policies, generally set forward various appeals for the state to regulate the media within a framework of social responsibility and to promote active participation of the civil society in policy-making related to media and journalistic practice. This set of propositions was in some ways similar to those elaborated by Peterson in his social responsibility model of the press. They sought to balance the promotion of freedom in media through government legislation with plural and equal access to the media from the different communities (Pasquali 1980). As Bolaño explains, the principal aim of these concerted policies in the region was to “democratise the media as a basic condition for attaining social equality” (1999: 21).

In their respective analyses, Pasquali (1980 and 2007) and Fernando Reyes Matta (1983) have drawn the basic traits of these sets of national policies, which were the product of intense local and regional elaboration in both theoretical and technical terms. These are: the definition of the media as an information and educational service that is to be regulated by the state according to the public interest – this includes the reorientation of commercial media towards a social responsibility model of operating; the implementation of social and political mechanisms by which the media can function not only as an informative tool but as a key part of the process of free debate; the organisation of media as vehicles of expression and of social participative principles, particularly for the poor and disenfranchised; the instrumentation of media as a means to diagnose local citizen conflicts and to assist in finding solutions; and the redefinition of the media as forums for the development of indigenous cultures of the region (Ibid, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Arguably, during the 1970s and early 1980s, while most of the region was under military rule, the more engaged and progressive calls for policy implementations and reforms emanated from Mexico, Chile (during Salvador Allende’s government), Peru and Venezuela. Although each country presented a different array of reform petitions and shifts in the local media, the above-mentioned aspects were common characteristics in many of the region’s countries. They were all

concerned in one way or another with introducing public-service functions in the media, preserving cultural and creative traditions and formulating policies for the large disadvantaged sectors of society. In



their own way they were also concerned with devising democratic structures and financial and management arrangements that would be representative, participatory and workable (Fox 1988: 23).

The Latin American debates related to the media and how the latter should empower national democratic culture, and their attempts to develop national reforms during the 1970s and 1980s, were met with the opposition of many media owners, transnational corporations, local advertisement establishments, and some sectors of media professionals. According to Fox (1988) and Beltrán (2005), this led to a strong ideological division between the reformists and the neo-liberal trend – the latter mainly represented by both regional and U.S. private media owners and professionals – who considered “state or public intervention in the media the beginning of totalitarianism and the end of freedom of expression” (Fox 1988: 24).

After the representatives of both the United States and Great Britain withdrew from UNESCO between 1984 and 1985 – they would retire again in 1994 and 2003 at the World Summit of Information Society–, the communications and media initiatives debated in NWICO were not continued further (Beltrán 2008, Matos 2011). Similarly, the plan of National Communication Policies in Latin America lost impetus and the media reforms aspired in the region’s countries were not achieved (Ibid). This, according to Fox (1988) and Bolaño (1999), was mainly due to the influence of neo-liberal political and economic trends and the way in which these had gained importance in the sectors of information, communications and culture. In the context of a majority of Latin American countries during the 1970s and part of the 1980s under military rule, their dictatorial regimes had no interest in media regulation for the public interest and tended to pursue economic profit through “an autocratic state employing technocrats in increasingly close association with the transnational corporations”, using these and the local media elites to control information at the will of the government, minimise political awareness and social activism, intensify propaganda, and broadly maintain the *status quo* (Fox 1988: 26).

Bolaño argues that the neo-liberal conception of media structure and operation has accelerated and radicalised significantly in the region with “the expansion of information technologies, deregulation and privatisation of systems of telecommunications and the Internet” (1999: 22). Others contend that this trend has clashed in Latin America with some national cases of substantial state regulation – in some instances characterised by authoritarian traits (Bisbal 2005 and 2009).

Yet, even though the implementation of such a set of national media policies failed during the late-twentieth century, the debate they have generated has led to the reformulation of theoretical and normative aspects of national and regional media since (Beltrán 2005 and 2008). It can be argued that part of the left-wing regimes in Latin America – most notably Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela – that have been in power between 2000 and 2010, have favoured the revision and partial redevelopment of some of NWICO's earlier discussions and National Communication Policies previously elaborated in order to advance media democratisation (Aguirre and Bisbal 2010, Matos 2011).

#### **3.4. Latin American cultural theory: hybridity, mediation and the media**

Latin American media and cultural studies have developed significantly since the late 1980s, and have spurred vigorous debate in the areas of media and cultural phenomena, while underpinning a critique of the dependency model (Bolaño 1999, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011). Cultural theorists Martín-Barbero and García Canclini contend that the dependency model relies too much on a 'structuralist sociological' view, pessimistic in its diagnosis of mass media, that tends to explain cultural and media dynamics essentially in the binary terms of centre-periphery relations (Ibid).

In an analytical tenor that holds parallelisms to the works of Stuart Hall and John Fiske and their ideas of post-Gramscian hegemony and resistance, both Martín-Barbero and García Canclini find that the argument which formulates that the media function as agents of ideological dominance needs to be reassessed, because ultimately 'the masses' possess significant levels of autonomy, and the manner in which these assimilate foreign and commercially-produced media contents derives to a large degree from their particular view of the world and their cultural backgrounds (Martín-Barbero and Silva 1997, Bolaño 1999, Curran 2002).

Both authors question what appears to be a binary reading in neo-Marxist understanding of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. On the one hand, there is the fatalistic view that the dominated social classes are essentially passive and can only attain mobilisation from 'outside' forces. On the other, there is the radical view that the subaltern classes possess an unlimited capacity for defiance and for producing change (Martín-Barbero 1993, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010). Yet, as expressed by

Martín-Barbero in the context of Latin America, “not every assumption of hegemonic power by the underclass is a sign of submission and not every rejection is resistance” (1993: 76).

The approach to cultural and media analysis of both Martín-Barbero and García Canclini has emanated from the way their respective works have evaluated how modernity is produced in Latin America, the nature of the region’s heterodox and diverse paths in modernity, and how Latin America’s particular ‘peripheral modernity’ relates to global capitalism and to dominant western political, social, cultural and media discourses (Martín-Barbero 1993 and 2002a, García Canclini 1995, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011). The western discourse of modernity, argues Martín-Barbero, has always been ‘decentred’ in Latin America, in the sense that it relates much less to European “Enlightenment doctrines and high culture aesthetic” than to the way in which mass education and cultural industries – particularly the media – have expanded in the region (2002a: 42-43).

In his critique of the dependency model and cultural imperialism, Martín-Barbero questions the dichotomous scheme by which cultures are understood and analysed, and insists that ‘centre’ culture and ‘periphery’ culture do not necessarily exist in opposition to one another, but rather relate to each other in a highly fluid and hybrid dynamic (Martín-Barbero 1993). Ideology, class consciousness, identity and media power in Latin America, he (Ibid) and García Canclini (1995 and 1999) formulate separately, need to be interpreted in the context of the hybrid nature of the region’s cultural specificities and dynamics, particularly emphasising not the ‘high culture’ and ‘cultural industries’ that, for example, the School of Frankfurt focus on, but the ‘popular culture’ and the ‘mass culture’ – from folk art and *salsa* music to *soap operas* and community radio – ; in brief, those hybrid and permanent combinations of “cultural expressions that do not fit conventional dualistic categories” (Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011: 15).

The shift of analysis that these cultural theorists represent has placed particular emphasis in observing and rescuing the category of “the people” and “the popular” from both Marxist and conservative theorists who “identify the popular with the masses” (Schlesinger 1993: xii). Their views contend the notion – evident in Marxist class-reductionism – that popular culture is necessarily assimilated within class struggle. In this sense, García Canclini, turning to the Gramscian conception of hegemony, explains that

popular cultures are not a passive or mechanical effect of the reproduction controlled by the dominators; they are also constituted by retaking their own traditions and experiences in the conflict with those who exercise hegemony, more than domination – that is, with the class that, although it directs reproduction politically and ideologically, must allow spaces in which subaltern groups develop practices that are independent and not always functional for their system (1995: 198).

Thus, even though popular cultures have arguably been utilised and exploited within the neo-liberal logic of the market, these have also been capable of subverting the market rationale in the way the people consume, re-process and re-make cultural and media products (Ibid, Martín-Barbero 2002a and 2002b). It is particularly this aspect – the hybrid, contradictory and nuanced subversive ways in which popular cultures receive and consume media and cultural products – where the prevailing brand of Latin American cultural theorists place the centrality of their investigations (Schlesinger 1993, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011). Furthermore, argues García Canclini (1995), it is mainly in the relation of the popular cultures and modernity where the levels of democratisation of a society should be evaluated.

In this sense, argues Martín-Barbero (1993), when assessing the relation between democracy, culture and media, a thorough approach to research would imply moving away from the conception that media operate as an hegemonic tool of control by the powerful and that media consumption and reception tend to be passive. Instead he proposes that the analysis should focus on what he defines as ‘mediations’, that is, the ‘places’ from where day-to-day use of media in a national context or that of a family or community find a means of articulation and transaction with media products (Martín-Barbero 1993, Schlesinger 1993, Orozco 2002 and 2008)<sup>20</sup>.

According to this paradigm, it is through mediations that the narrative discourses of the media, in the context of Latin America, tend to adapt and accommodate the growing urban movements, the region’s specific melodramatic cultural vein, the tradition of popular myth, to the point where audiences or readers or consumers learn

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<sup>20</sup> Martín-Barbero’s idea of ‘mediation’ is also defined as “that cultural instance by which the public or the audience of the media make sense, by means of appropriation, of the communication process” (Ollivier 2008: 127).

to recognise both the way in which they are represented and their collective identity within the media (White 1989, Martín-Barbero 1993).

Within Martín-Barbero's concept of mediation, various forms of cultural and social 'compensations' are highlighted in the relation between the powerful and the subordinate, the elite and the people, when producing and consuming media output (Orozco 2008, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011). Hence, media is no longer comprehended under a dualistic view of 'the dominant versus the dominated' – as sustained by authors of the School of Frankfurt –, but rather as a process by which the 'popular' and the 'mass mediatic' are linked to such a degree that it can offer a potentially subversive character to the people (Orozco 2002 and 2008, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010).

It could be argued that these forms of popular 'subversiveness' and the potential for transforming cultural and media products from within 'the popular' can be extended to other non-western cultures (Straubhaar 2010). Yet, the historical, political, socio-economic and cultural contexts of Latin America differ from those of Africa and Asia when considered as regions – as do their respective colonial and post-colonial experiences. This is stressed in the views of Martín-Barbero (1993 and 2000b), García Canclini (1995 and 2008) and many Latin American cultural theorists. They argue that, in Latin America, the popular cultures have been more concerned than in other developing regions in bringing forth social democratisation of culture and media and have shown a more solvent disposition to relate popular culture with both community and national projects.

Additionally, they argue that, unlike dominant trends in African and Asian societies, Latin America is characterised by a significantly high urban demographic concentration, and it has been particularly in its metropolises where the products of media and modernity have been integrated in a particularly hybrid manner with the popular cultures, their traditions and narratives (Ibid, White 1989, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010). Hence, these authors tend to draw a certain typification of seemingly exclusive forms in which 'mediation' and 'negotiation' are mechanisms of Latin American popular cultures by which to engage socially and politically – and not without certain subversiveness in the contexts of culture and media.

Arguably, under such a view news media can also be understood as a way by which to create and negotiate culture between various interest groups and social factors. In

this sense, Martín-Barbero's idea of mediation can be a useful analytical instrument by which to understand media production and consumption as an alternative way to generate cultural and political positions, and in order to comprehend new "hegemonic tendencies formalized in a determined production" of media within a social, political or cultural tension that is 'mediated' between the market and the people (Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010: 138).

Mónica Szurmuk and Waisbord (2011) argue that too often Latin American cultural studies fail to sufficiently address issues that are pivotal to the relation between media and society such as, for example, the power structure within the media, the connections between news organisations and the political regimes, the use of the media as ideological tools, freedom of expression, social responsibility, plural representation. Furthermore, they contend that in assessing how media institutions operate, the changes "in journalistic practice, as well as production and performance across the media industries" is a critical issue in order to understand "the political and social dimensions of the media" (Ibid: 22).

These aspects, according to scholars outside the cultural studies current, are not comprehensively appraised by Latin American cultural theorists, and need to be researched in order to answer complex questions about the nature of journalistic practice and the role of the media in democracy, both regionally and nationally. They claim that authors such as García Canclini and Martín-Barbero tend to focus on culture as an overarching concept that disregards some central questions of journalism and of the media, and which should not be reduced to the notion of cultural hybridity (Ibid, Orozco 2002, Bisbal and Nicodemo 2010).

Moreover, little can be inferred in the evaluation of Latin American cultural processes and their relation to modernity, as underpinned by the principal regional cultural theorists, about the patterns of media ownership, characterisation of journalistic cultures, changes in journalistic practice, power struggles in media between government and political opposition, and the ways in which professional journalists understand and address their audiences/readers, to name some key issues in the media.

### **3.5. Latin American media and the populist paradigm**

Culturally and politically, Latin America has had an unsteady tradition of democratic

practice (Ansaldi 2007, Castañeda and Morales 2008, Keane 2009). Democratic institutions and constitutional rule have been historically frail whereas authoritarianism and dictatorship have had a strong presence. There has prevailed a

tradition of unchecked government intrusion on media affairs, and the utilization of the government-owned media as political patronage and propaganda... Contemporary party systems, particularly in countries governed by populism, are often described in terms of being in “disarray” and “crisis” given the notorious difficulties of political parties to articulate and represent social interests (Waisbord 2011: 109).

Most authors of the Latin American cultural trend seldom assess the ways in which the interactions and negotiations between the popular and the elite, ruled and rulers, develop under populist authoritarian regimes in the region, and the ways in which the latter may represent an obstacle for the deepening of democratising media.

The notion of the popular in Latin America and the way in which it inserts itself within civic society, according to authors such as Manuel A. Garretón (2006), should not be entirely modelled in the Habermasian or other western conceptions of civic society. In contrast to, for example European Welfare states or former communist nations, the re-emergence in modern times of civil society in Latin America is related to “the unfulfilled expectations and the voids in an incomplete political democracy” (Ibid: 46).

In normative terms, the civil society ought to be able to scrutinise government as an autonomous and equilibrating force (Curran 2002, Garretón 2006, Waisbord 2011). Historically and culturally, this has not been the predominant case in Latin America; principally because civic societies in the region have been mainly structured from above, that is sustained essentially by the state (Ibid). If, as Garretón argues (2006: 47), civil society – and the media as one of its essential components – has been forged in the region by “the people, the classes or social movements which are mainly structured around a state political principle that might be conflictive or integrationist”, then the limited autonomy it entails may be further weakened under a populist regime.

There are, however, varied reactions towards populist media politics from the region's civic societies and analysts, sometimes with contrasting views about what should be a positive or normative relation between society and media democracy (Waisbord

2011). One strand argues that

ownership patterns and runaway commercialization are the main challenges for media democratization, the other is primarily concerned about the role of the media in the improvement of the quality of democratic governance. The former supports populism out of the conviction that its policies effectively regulate the power of business corporations and strengthen public access to the media. The latter... believes that populism aggravates the consuetudinary deficit of government transparency and accountability in Latin American politics (Ibid: 110).

In the context of *caudillista* populism (Keane 2009) – a type of ‘hybrid regime’, to use Diamond’s (2002) liberal definition – where democracy is affected by authoritarian practices, as in some Latin American nations, it seems pertinent to assess the power struggle between the government and the political opposition and how this is reflected in media practice and production, as well as the general political and economic conditions that shape the media system (Waisbord 2000b, Lugo-Ocando 2008, Bisbal 2009). The latter are arguably not a reflection of direct transplants of liberal media systems and models as defined, for example, according to the ideals drawn by the Freedom of the Press theory or other liberal-derived paradigms. Moreover, there is evidence that authoritarian and ‘hybrid’ regimes have exploited the media imperialism discourse and varying nationalistic doctrines as tools for legitimising their “illiberal control against their own people” (Curran and Park 2000: 5).

Authors such as Laclau (2005), however, find that populism, particularly in Latin America, is an adequate mechanism – highly complex in its expressions – 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 powerful elites. Under this perspective, populist media politics – statist, centralised, nationalist and anti-market – 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.

An examination of the existing views of authoritarian populism highlights a tendency in these types of regimes to adverse liberal media models. As argued by various critics, in Latin America it does not seem evident that populist regimes have promoted



in the media core values and concepts underpinned by liberal theories, such as freedom of expression, right of information, watchdog function, polyarchical distribution, among others, within a national context (Cañizalez 2009b, Keane 2009, Waisbord 2011). Instead, such regimes have clashed variably with both traditional liberal and neo-liberal principles of the press and the media (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).

The mechanisms in Latin American populism by which liberal media are restrained or refuted while reforms and statisation of the media are implemented leads, as observe Bisbal (2009) and Waisbord (2011 and 2012), to the intensification of social division – between the ‘pro-regime’ and the ‘oppositional’ segments of the population – and to political and ideological polarisation.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

This chapter charts various tendencies of Latin American theoretical and analytical development that focus on the media and their role in the region’s political, cultural and socio-economic transformation. In doing so, it identifies various contributions to the debate of media and democracy, and discusses different perspectives in relation to the ways in which specific political, cultural and economic factors define and affect media operations, power relations and struggles, professional tensions and journalistic practice within the region – key aspects that, through their observation and assessment, contribute to meeting the objectives and answering the questions of this research.

The media-related analysis that has emerged in Latin America has been crucial to contextualising media systems and practices in the region, and to understanding the nuanced dialogues these have maintained – or not – in relation to western discourses and models (White 1989, Waisbord 2000b, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

The diverse perspectives concerned with the way in which Latin American culture and media have inserted themselves in the process of globalisation are contrasting. A group of scholars have argued in favour of the intensification of media access and plurality brought by globalised market dynamics and technological innovation in the

region, but seemingly a majority of authors contend that globalisation has been characterised by centre-periphery dependency and imperialism (Bolaño 1999, Boyd-Barrett 2002, Ferrer 2007). Importantly, a broad Latin American debate emerged aiming to reinsert proposals of media democratisation by means of national media policies and regulations as first developed in the mid-1970s (Reyes Matta 1983, Beltrán 1999 and 2005).

Another important theoretical contribution, anchored in Latin American cultural studies, has derived from the appraisal of the dynamics by which popular segments of society have found alternative ways to engage with media, and how this can arguably underpin the democratisation of the national systems of media and communication, while shifting the configuration of power relations between the state, media professionals and civic society (Martín-Barbero 1993 and 2002b, Beltrán 2005). These 'culturalist' assumptions have been critically challenged as lacking normative propositions in relation to media ownership, civic and media institutions, journalistic practice and other key political and ideological aspects in the media, particularly when assessing authoritarian populist or 'hybrid' regimes in the region (Mattelart 1999, Szurmuk and Waisbord 2011).

If, as Curran explains, there had been evident "polarisation between liberal and radical traditions" (2002: 107) in the western media-democracy debate during the 1970s and 1980s, this seems to be present to a large extent in twenty-first century Latin America. In nations like Venezuela, which according to some critics has been under an authoritarian populist regime since 1998 (Diamond 2002, Castañeda 2006, Ansaldi 2007), there is evidence of a clash of paradigms between theorists – and within society at large – in relation to how media and democracy should operate (Bisbal 2009).

Political, cultural and historical aspects that are inherent to Venezuelan media, journalism and their relation to democracy are described and reviewed in the following chapter, with the aim to gain a more focused, contextual and detailed understanding on this research's subject-matter.

## Chapter 4

### Venezuelan journalism, media and politics in historical perspective

The previous chapters have focused on outlining specific theories, analysis and scholarly views related to media, journalism, culture and democracy. The various perspectives and currents of thought reviewed bring to the forefront the debate anchored in the role of media and journalism in strengthening democracy and in shaping political thought and action.

In order to comprehend this phenomenon within the specific context of Venezuela, it is necessary to provide – as does this chapter – a historical framework, with some analytical insights and practical explanations, of the trajectory of journalism and the media in Venezuela, their political and socio-economic relevance, their defining actors, and the challenges the press and the news media have faced in developing as a democratic force. This section of the study has been elaborated utilising texts that mainly belong to an eclectic set of Venezuelan historians and analysts. Very importantly, it also refers to studies related to the sociology of media organisations, communications' regulations and journalistic professionalism – though there are very limited works of this nature focused on Venezuela.

There are arguably common historical traits and similar cultural influences between Venezuela and other nation-states of Latin America, and both local and global dynamics have determined to a significant degree the media systems and practices in the region (Fox and Waisbord 2002). Yet, it is worthwhile stressing that most Latin American scholars find that it is the national media systems that offer the most effective explanation for understanding media dynamics nationally (Beltrán 2005, Lugo-Ocando 2008, Bisbal 2009). Additionally, charting the history of Venezuela's intersection of journalism, media – particularly the press and news media – and politics can help characterise, to some degree, the relation of the national media with those dominant – and more studied – journalistic models and ideas developed in Europe and the United States.

#### 4.1. Emergence of the press under *caudillismo* and polarisation

The first steps towards democracy in Venezuela arguably took place when President

Juan Crisóstomo Falcón dictated the Decree of Citizen's Guarantees on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1863 (Carrera Damas 2007). Previously, since the nation's declaration of Independence in July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1811 – after two decades of armed struggle under the leadership of General Simón Bolívar against the Spanish Empire – the country had been governed essentially by authoritarian regimes, albeit most were elected constitutionally. The nature of rule during most of the nineteenth century in Venezuela and most of Latin America reflected, as argues Keane, a substantial contradiction for, although the constitutions of the emerging republics that broke from Spanish rule were remarkable and even innovative by world standards,

strangely they worked against democracy and in favour of wealthy men with a hunger for power, politically ambitious men for whom government based on elected representatives was a way of ensuring *subordinación* of the represented: their quiet deference to political rulers and silent acceptance of massively uneven distributions of wealth (2009: 393).

The new republics had, in effect, “brand-new forms of representative government”, which were elected under constitutional law, and established “basic freedoms of assembly and the press” (Ibid: 391). Yet, *caudillismo* or rule by strongmen backed by the military was democratic only in appearance. And it was under such political and social logic that the press existed. Newspapers followed a highly-partisan trend established in the early nineteenth century by *Gazeta de Caracas* (1808-1822) and *Correo del Orinoco* (1818-1822)<sup>21</sup> (Grases 1967 and 1981, Febres Cordero 1993).

President Falcón's proclamation of “total freedom of individual and political rights for all Venezuelans” in 1863 was a direct call for a more profound democracy, stronger institutions and federal system (Carrera Damas 2007: 161)<sup>22</sup>. However, this timid first step towards a representative democracy was to end six months after its declaration, without implementation of any sort, as a new Constitution disapproved it. Some eighty years had to go by until the second stage in the nation's “long march towards

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<sup>21</sup> *Gazeta de Caracas* is considered the first newspaper to be published in Venezuela, of a monarchist bent; *Correo del Orinoco* was founded by independence leader Simón Bolívar, and re-launched by President Hugo Chávez in 2009 (Grases 1981, Febres Cordero 1993).

<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I have translated direct quotes from authors Aguirre, Aguirre and Bisbal, Bisbal, Botía, Britto García, Capriles, Caballero, Carrera Damas, Castellanos, Díaz Rangel, Febres Cordero, García Ponce, Grases, Quiñonez, Parra, Pellegrino, and Pasquali –all belonging to works not published or not available in English– from Spanish.

democracy”, which was to be initiated by a group of social-democrats and left-of-centre ideologues on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945 (Ibid).

With its strong patriotic tone and based in the town of Angostura, *Correo del Orinoco* served as a tribune for the confection of a republican ideal, spearheaded by Bolívar and fellow Venezuelan *independentistas*. By 1822 various newspapers had emerged, based mainly in Caracas, Maracaibo and Angostura, and were used as political and ideological tools in the “republican task of conforming public opinion” after independence had been gained (Aguirre 1998: 40). They followed during the early-nineteenth century the “journey of the revolution for independence” (Grases 1981: 5), and Article 181 of the new Venezuelan Constitution, signed in 1811, where it was stated that

men shall be free to manifest their ideas through the press, but in case public stability and social dogma, Christian morale, property, the honour of a citizen are attacked or perturbed by someone, that person shall be made legally responsible (cited by Grases 1981: 5).

The first newspapers in Venezuela had a very short lifespan and fluctuating publicity content, mainly due to the intense levels of power-shift among the various combating political factions and to the economic hardships that such cycles entailed (Grases 1981, Febres Cordero 1983). During and after the armed struggle for independence there were continuous clashes of interests between the pro-monarchy, republican, conservative, liberal-federal and other *caudillista* groups – it was yet another example of the dominant trend of partisan press in Latin America (Grases 1967 and 1981, Febres Cordero 1983). Readership was very reduced, and yet communication through the press “was almost the only form of expression of ideas and the mechanism *par excellence* to influence the public opinion” (Aguirre 1998: 41). Yet, the press was highly-politicised, and journalists had little regard for accuracy and balance (Febres Cordero 1983).

On various occasions Bolívar himself advised that newspapers be informative on topics that were of public interest and newsworthy (Febres Cordero 1983). He also expressed the need for the press to publish debates that helped society build a new national identity. However, debate became essentially political, and journalism politically polarised (Ibid). Moreover, the figure of Bolívar divided the press to significant degrees and after, during the successive power struggle between Liberals and Conservatives,

the polarising figure became General José Antonio Páez, a conservative *caudillo* who was elected president by Congress in 1829 (García Ponce 2001, Williamson 2009). Such were the traits of his autocratic regime, that *paecismo* and anti-*paecismo* – that is, Liberals and Conservatives – were to dominate the press up until the 1860s (Ibid).

During the Páez era most newspapers portrayed a distorted reality of the country, according to their respective political agendas (Grases 1967, Madero 2009). Most of the intellectuals and politicians who demanded unrestricted freedom of the press tended to be partisan in their practice (Grases 1981). Arguably, this would become a characteristic of the press during the nineteenth century in Venezuela, which presented its more militant facet under Paéz, and later during the Federal War and during the regime of President Antonio Guzmán Blanco.

Venezuela's Federal War was the result of the armed insurgency of 'federalists' who, under the slogans of 'Death to the oligarchy!' and led principally by General Ezequiel Zamora<sup>23</sup>, called for land reforms and popular revolution. Zamora would not live to see his party in power, but the other two federal *caudillos*, Generals Juan Crisóstomo Falcón and Antonio Guzmán Blanco, were to rule the country throughout ongoing uprisings that followed the war (Salcedo Bastardo 1996).

#### **4.2. Modern autocracy and first ideas of press professionalism**

President Falcón's Decree of Citizen's Guarantees in 1863, which Carrera Damas (2007), among others, considers the republic's first step towards democracy, was preceded by an 1861 manifesto in which he stated that Venezuelans were tired of "half-freedoms" and "half-repressions" imposed by a political system that places freedom under an antagonistic framework; a system of "two different faces where neither one says the truth" (cited by Capriles 1976: 72). His demand for freedom, pluralism and social justice, under a new federal political and legal scheme, would be disregarded soon after by the oligarchy and by his successor as President, the autocrat Antonio Guzmán Blanco.

A leading federal figure during the war against the conservatives, Guzmán Blanco became President in 1870. Although during his first of three periods as head of state he took the law of 'universal suffrage' to a new level and carried out civic reforms, he

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<sup>23</sup> The radical reformist ideas of Ezequiel Zamora (1817-1860) have been very influential for Hugo Chávez's personal political ideas (Barrera and Marcano 2006).

would betray the democratic principles that the federalists had defended (Salcedo Bastardo 1996, García Ponce 2001). Guzmán Blanco established a dictatorship that was to last eighteen years, systematically crushing armed insurgency and denying the existence of a free press (Ibid, Madero 2009).

Yet, albeit a restrictive environment for a free press, some pro-democracy clandestine newspapers emerged under the regime of Guzmán Blanco (García Ponce 2001), and arguably modern journalism began to develop. Pro-government editor Fausto Aldrey, according to many, is considered a precursor in the professionalisation of the trade (Grases 1981, Ibid). It is with him that in Venezuela

a truly informative journalism begins... His is the first newspaper in the country that pays collaborators... He invests in quality columnists and printing equipment,... the never-ending and polemical letters to the Director are replaced with information related to what is happening in the nation (Febres Cordero 1983: 485-486).

It could also be argued that Aldrey's newspaper, *La Opinión Nacional*, among other pro-Guzmán Blanco outlets, unwillingly prompted the appearance of some informative anti-regime, satirical publications, which helped channel resistance towards Guzmán Blanco's non-democratic regime and towards those that succeeded his government into the end of the nineteenth century.

After clashing for over three decades with the Conservatives, and succeeding in the Federal War, the Liberals never fulfilled their promises of pluralism, freedom and social justice. On the contrary, the latter fortified "agricultural oligarchy" and a "semi-feudal *caudillismo*" (Febres Cordero 1983: 487). Admittedly, during the Federal War period there had been no innovation in the press whatsoever, yet in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, albeit working under non-democratic conditions, some changes took place in news practice, dynamics of news gathering, and informative agendas (Grases 1967 and 1981, García Ponce 2001). Aguirre argues that normative, professional journalism did not exist in Venezuela during the nineteenth century, yet those who pioneered and wrote in the press arguably represented the country's *intelligentsia*, and had a "dual occupation" in the sense that

when they were not occupied in political or governmental activities, they were dedicated to the study and circulation of themes and ideas

like the construction of viable progress; freedom of the press as the only expression of a civilized society; the need of education as the only route for fighting despotism, etc; all of which denotes that (these pioneers) are the first historical figures associated with that of the journalist (1998: 41-42).

According to the main figures that spurred the early press in the country, its principal aims, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, were twofold: to serve as an important tool in the formation of republican and democratic citizenship; and to enhance public debate among society while checking on the government (Grases 1967 and 1981). The latter claim echoes the European and North American forms of canonical liberal thought.

Hallin and Mancini have argued that the press in Latin America during the nineteenth century was practically an instrument through which “dictators and political factions promoted their ideologies and ambitions” (2007: 92). They explain that the dominant model in the region was that which was ‘inherited’ from Spain and southern Europe, in which the press tend to operate as a mechanism for “political intervention” (Ibid). Yet, according to Pedro Grases (1967 and 1981), during much of the nineteenth century in Venezuela, the pioneering figures expressed the influence of the liberal principles of the press of Great Britain and of the United States – and not of Spain – in the shaping of their ideals and craft.

The rights-based content of the First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, and the notion that government should not interfere with speech and publication unless it is done so in order to protect other important rights, were crucially influential in the Venezuelans’ ideas of practice within the press and the formation of a normative character (Ibid, Aguirre 1998). These ideals were certainly very difficult to live up to in the practice of journalism. The intermittent clashes between political factions – mainly resolved through armed conflict and *coup d’états* – ; the *personalistic* leadership, with a lack of interest for genuine institutions; and the sustained social and economic inequality among the population were arguably the key aspects of the broad socio-political context in which the press operated (Capriles 1976, Aguirre 1998, García Ponce 2001). As a partial consequence of such conditions, a gap was evident between the alleged libertarian and liberal ideals that journalists aspired to reflect in their work and the reality of their journalistic daily practice.



### 4.3. Gómez, clandestine media and the Generation of 28

One very distinctive aspect of Venezuela within the Latin American region has been its sustained exploitation of the western hemisphere's largest oil reserves within its own territory; the exportation of the product<sup>24</sup>; and more importantly: its economic dependency on it and the ways such dependency permeates social and political life (Martínez 1971, Salcedo Bastardo 1996, Caballero 2010). It could be argued that the "irruption of oil" brought forth the economic and political changes that "consolidated the modern state" in Venezuela during the early-twentieth century (Capriles 1976: 71).

Ironically, the events that brought about the exploitation of oil, which were to drastically shape the nation's history and culture, occurred under one of its most absolute despots, General Juan Vicente Gómez (Salcedo Bastardo 1996, Caballero 2010). He seized power after sending his 'boss', president Cipriano Castro, into exile in 1908<sup>25</sup>.

The ultimate *caudillo*, Gómez perceived the army as the "base of the state", and with a strong hand ruled the country until his death in 1935 (Caballero 2010: 35). During the first years of his regime he promoted an 'ideal' of relative freedom for the press (García Ponce 2001, Díaz Rangel 2007, Hidalgo 2009). His predecessor, Castro, had showed scant tolerance for dissident newspapers and even imprisoned some of its writers and owners (Ibid).

Under a similar journalistic tendency but in a political climate of apparent lesser restrictions, some newspapers that had been closed during the Castro regime reappeared under the first years of Gómez being in power. *El Eco Venezolano*, *El Nuevo Diario* and *El Universal* were the main pro-Gómez dailies. The latter, founded in 1909 and which arguably inaugurated the country's "modern commercial press" (Caballero 2010: 58), was considered at the time a liberal daily – in the Anglo-American sense of the term – and was to be very influential to the current date. In general, during Gomez's early days as head of state, the press was relatively free yet could not be critical of the President. Apparently, the press no longer needed to be an extension of a political party, and Gómez "welcomed their criticisms of both the liberals and the conservatives" (Ibid).

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<sup>24</sup> Since its discovery in 1914, the significant majority of Venezuelan crude oil has been exported to the United States; which has been historically its main buyer (Martínez 1971).

<sup>25</sup> President Cipriano Castro had ruled since 1899 with a corrupt and frail regime, and accumulated a foreign debt which in 1903 caused a blockade in the Venezuelan ports imposed by British, German and Italian ships (Caballero 2010).

However, Gómez's tolerance for a dissident press was tested most emphatically in 1913, when *El Pregonero* published an editorial backing a rival presidential candidate of Gómez for the constitutional elections in 1914. The government ordered the imprisonment of both the editor and the candidate, and the newspaper's offices were destroyed by presidential orders (Díaz Rangel 2007). As of 1913, Gómez gained increasing power, and was able to dissolve political parties and crush all attempts of insurgency. Torture was widely used in prisons, mostly to dissuade political prisoners and journalists (Salcedo Bastardo 1996, Caballero 2010).

Gómez brought relative peace to the republic – something most citizens valued as priceless, since Venezuela had been in an almost constant state of war during and since its independence. Peacekeeping under his regime was also highly beneficial for the foreign companies – mainly U.S., British and Dutch – that began exploiting the oil fields (García Ponce 2001, Caballero 2010). The nation's economy began to gravitate almost exclusively around petroleum. And Gómez became a mere instrument for the extraction of oil by foreign companies, imposing “the solution of order, peace and work – the basis of an autocracy – which ended up turning Venezuela into a modern bureaucratic state” (Capriles 1976: 76).

This process pushed Gómez towards a strong political centralisation backed by the military and a government-controlled network of communications (Ibid, García Ponce 2001). By the mid-1920s the press had no freedom whatsoever (Ibid, Hidalgo 2009).

The social and economic consequences of a newly oil-driven industry, which prompted a slow exodus of the rural population to urban areas, determined to a significant degree the dynamics of the news media. The traditional political role of the press began to give way to one in which entertainment content prevailed, and print outlets started to concentrate in the largest urban centres. Political commentary in the press was scarce and was seemingly supplanted by an apparent “ideological neutrality while a dependency in foreign news agencies became evident” (Capriles 1976: 81).

Under Gómez the “great industry” of the press had been born in Venezuela, and “there was no room in it for small outlets” nor for “idealist experimentalists” (Ibid). Yet, following the example of newspaper *Fantoches*, launched in 1923, some satirical and experimental newspapers surfaced. In 1928 a clandestine newspaper, *El Imparcial*, was launched exclusively by students. It was highly critical of Gómez and formed by

those who would become the pro-democracy *intelligentsia* during the first half of the twentieth century (Hidalgo 2009, Caballero 2010). Many of these students – known as the Generation of 28 –, who were either imprisoned or forced into exile, developed their own anti-Gómez, pro-democracy, revolutionary plan. It was inspired mainly in Marxist readings and in the Mexican Revolution<sup>26</sup>. Known as the Plan of Barranquilla, it was written in 1931 by young left-wing politicians and formulated the ideal of a future revolution and the need for an alternative model of democratic governance, in what became Venezuela’s “first political essay based in historical materialism” (Caballero 2010: 111).

#### **4.4. First steps towards modern democracy (and in radio)**

The first radio station experience in Venezuela was Broadcasting Central de Caracas, launched in 1926. It functioned irregularly and closed down two years later. In 1930 the first privately-owned radio station was launched, Broadcasting Caracas – which would later become Radio Caracas Radio (RCR). Though it offered some news content, most of its programming was based on entertainment (Bisbal 2007). In order to ensure advertisements by sponsors, it did not broadcast any criticism towards Gómez’s regime and offered scant political comment. Six years later, the Venezuelan state founded Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV), which has since operated as a state-ran outlet, with news content that adheres to the interests of the ruling government (Ibid, Pasquali 1980). Once RNV was launched, the first set of radio regulations was approved. Thirteen new radio stations operated in Venezuela then, all of which broadly adopted the model laid out by Broadcasting Caracas, with few differences (Ibid).

In 1935, following Gomez’s death, Congress elected General Eleazar López Contreras as President. He initially promoted some reformist policies which included the liberation of political prisoners and softened restrictions to the press. Students and intellectuals who had been in exile during the Gómez era returned to Venezuela, in the hope of being active agents of democratic change and receiving support from the Venezuelan society (Madero 2009). The press and the universities became “the two pillars” of a new yet “fragile” democracy (Caballero 2010: 122)<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> The Mexican Revolution began with the liberal movement of Francisco Madero aiming to overthrow President Porfirio Díaz’s authoritarian regime, and was spurred by popular calls for land reform and for rights for the peasantry, and by anti-Díaz insurrections led by rural revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata, Pascual Orozco and Pancho Villa, throughout Mexico between 1910 and 1913 (Williamson 2009).

<sup>27</sup> In 1935, newspaper *El Heraldo* published a daring manifesto stating that the people of Venezuela

Conditions had changed dramatically by early 1936: Contrera's government suspended constitutional warranties, imposed press censorship, and prohibited the publication of advertisement and propaganda without previous government authorisation (Díaz Rangel 2007, Madero 2009). A newly-established 'censorship committee' approved or not the circulation of information and advertisement.

At one point the 'censorship committee' seemed not to have read in detail a text submitted by newspaper *La Esfera*, entitled 'Democracy or dictatorship?'. Once published, it provoked an immediate reaction among both the civil society and the regime (Díaz Rangel 2007). Sanctions were imposed on the newspaper. This was arguably the main trigger of a general strike that took place on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1936. The people took to the streets of Caracas, in part led by the two main political leaders of their generation, Rómulo Betancourt and Jóvito Villalba (Hidalgo 2009, Caballero 2010).

The media, student unions, and pro-democracy movements backed the strike. It was the first time in Venezuela that "the press, in bloc, responded decisively and energetically against an arbitrary and irrational act of the government"; while some radio stations backed the press (García Ponce 2001: 146). Caballero argues that to many this moment represented the nation's entry into "political modernity and democracy" (2010: 124). At the time, intellectual Joaquín Gabaldón Márquez wrote that on that date Venezuelans became "conscious of the true meaning of freedom of the press" (cited by García Ponce 2001: 148).

In a similar scenario to that of Gómez's regime, various news outlets were closed down and journalists and dissidents imprisoned; yet Contreras made certain concessions due mainly to the immense pressure of a growingly stronger civil society, but also following his will to introduce a more institutional character to his regime (Madero 2009). When Isaías Medina Angarita, another military man, was voted President by the Congress in 1941, the vast majority of the population expected a significant democratic aperture. In this sense, one of the most relevant actions of Angarita's first year in power was to allow influential left-wing party Acción Democrática and the Communist Unión Popular to gain legal status (García Ponce 2001, Caballero 2010).

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aspired "to be part of democracy that is specific and elective" (García Ponce 2001).

When the Second World War broke out, Venezuela was the world's third largest oil producer and its first exporter. The United States relied on that exportation strongly. Yet, most citizens and the government could no longer view the petroleum industry as "a foreign enclave" but rather as something truly "important for the people whose arms extracted it from its soil" (Caballero 2010: 127). Angarita introduced new oil policies in the country, which seemed beneficial for its sovereignty and its people (Salcedo Bastardo 1996). This was celebrated even by his opponents as another important step towards democracy – Venezuelans seemingly felt they owned part of the country's oil, symbolically; and this would serve to promote "not an industry of war", but one "more inclined to peace" (Caballero 2010: 127).

The political and social climate during Angarita's regime was rather favourable for the media and journalism. In 1941, the nation's first professional journalists' association, AVP, was founded. This organisation succeeded in opposing a regime-formulated press regulation programme, while establishing the "defense and improvement of the moral, social and economic-judiciary status" of both national and foreign journalists working in Venezuela "regardless of their political or religious beliefs" (cited by García Ponce 2001: 160). That same year a new Law for Telecommunications was approved. In the document, it was expressed that the state was the "exclusive entity that regulates national telecommunications", since all are considered of 'public service' (Quiñonez 2010: 65). The regulations also established that the state was the sole provider of permissions and concessions for a particular person or group to exploit telecommunications activity (Pasquali 1980, *Ibid*). Capriles argues that, even though

the state had the virtual monopoly over radio broadcasting and only admitted one form of concession,... it would renounce to its right, as offered by a favourable law, of elaborating a comprehensive communications policy... and would ultimately grant concessions which were by no means precarious... to privately-owned outlets in the hands of an elite group (1976: 92-93).

Although the Telecommunications Law established that broadcasting concessions had to be requested by the privately-owned outlets to the state on a one-year-period basis, this was hardly the case. Once a radio outlet proved not to be critical of the government, it was permitted to carry on its lucrative operations and the concession for broadcasting was tacitly extended (Capriles 1976, Quiñonez 2010). It is not surprising

that since its emergence in Venezuela – and arguably until the arrival of Chávez in power in 1998 – a minor segment of radio content has been news-oriented and has provided a check on the government. Pasquali argues that radio in the country has been, since its beginning, a “vehicle for selling publicity” and “not an instrument for information” (1980: 225).

During the early 1940s the daily *Últimas Noticias* – arguably the first modern popular newspaper in Venezuela, and to this day one of the most influential – was launched, prioritising informative content and offering pages for free comment (García Ponce 2001, Díaz Rangel 2007). By then, both *El Universal* and *La Esfera* attributed great importance to competing for news scoops, a novelty within the country’s journalistic culture (Ibid). Together with *Panorama*, *Últimas Noticias* and *El Nacional* – a daily founded in 1943, which went on to become one of the nation’s most influential – this set of newspapers began to redefine Venezuelan journalism: accurate information became an inherent value, the sources became more relevant and diverse, news gathering was carried out in a more direct manner, meetings between editors and reporters to discuss news stories were introduced, and the reporter became a substantial communication figure (Ibid, Díaz Rangel 2007).

#### **4.5. The Pact of Punto Fijo, new dictatorship, and advocate media**

According to Carrera Damas (2007), the second great moment of the nation’s democracy was initiated on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945, when the emerging social-democratic political parties and a modern strand of the military forces joined efforts to overthrow the regime of Angarita and begin a process of political democratisation. Part of this included installing universal and direct presidential elections for the first time, enhancing freedom and social justice, and strengthening democratic institutions (Madero 2009). A key problem of the regime had been that it had indeed “opened up political debate across the nation, but had closed it down during the elections” (Caballero 2010: 129).

Leftist party Acción Democrática (AD), under the leadership of Betancourt, had conspired with the military, but it was the latter that had a greater responsibility in overthrowing the Angarita administration. Both groups formed a revolutionary junta, and called for Constituent Assembly elections and for Presidential elections in 1946 (Carrera Damas 2007, Caballero 2010). In December 1947, Rómulo Gallegos, member of Acción Democrática, was elected president in the most pluralist elections the nation

had known. The recently founded parties COPEI (Political Electoral Independent Organisation Committee) which was a Christian centrist democratic group, and URD (Democratic Republican Union) which represented a secular centrist position, both participated in the elections. Political poignancy was evident, and this was reflected in the media (Díaz Rangel 2007).

During the 1946 Constituent Assembly elections and the 1947 Presidential elections – the first in Venezuela’s history to be “direct, universal and secret” – the media proved to be predominantly partisan, calling for people to vote for a specific party or candidate (Ibid: 105). Yet, this democratic aperture was to end soon. In November 1948 President Gallegos was deposed by a military coup, backed by “social forces which did not approve of democratic changes” (Carrera Damas 2007: 162).

A military junta was to rule for almost two years before one of its members, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, took power after another coup d’état in 1952. His regime again imposed censorship on the dissident press, and opposition leaders were imprisoned or forced into exile. Newspapers that had backed parties AD, COPEI, and the Communist were banned (Díaz Rangel 2007, Madero 2009). Any media outlet – the majority of them opposed Pérez Jiménez – that presented a pro-democratic profile had to deal with newly-established censorship committees and suffered restrictions similar to the ones experienced under Gómez (Ibid, Bisbal 2007).

Just like radio was first introduced in Venezuela during one of the harshest dictatorships – that of president Gómez – the first regularly-operating television station was launched under the military junta that Pérez Jiménez presided. In 1952, state-run Televisora Nacional de Venezuela (TVN 5) made its appearance as a dependency of the Ministry of Information; its content was also an extension of the government’s views (Pasquali 1980, Hernández Díaz 2008). Venezuela became the ninth nation in the world to have a television service.

One year after, commercial television appeared, and seized the vast majority of the audience – the new outlets were Televisa and Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) (Capriles 1976, Pasquali 1980). Like Televisa, three regional TV stations that emerged outside Caracas between 1956 and 1957 had a short lifespan. During this period, both the state-run and the commercial television outlets were concentrated in Caracas, reaching less than ten percent of the national territory (Ibid, Bisbal 2007). Also, their content relied mostly in programmes produced in foreign countries, mainly in the U.S.

The oil boom contributed to Pérez Jiménez's possibility to invest strongly in public construction and transport development, but the repressive nature of his regime provoked a strong rejection from the popular sectors of society, while the proscribed political parties, mainly AD and the communist, provided the main focus of resistance (Capriles 1976). Pérez Jiménez's attempts to disguise the dictatorial character of his military regime through apparent electoral calls all failed.

The country's only School of Journalism, based in Caracas and founded in 1946, was closed down by the dictator's orders in 1951. But it was the invalidation of political parties and workers' unions, the annulment of the 1947 Constitution, and the setbacks to the democratic advancements achieved during the late 1940s which became more unpopular among most of society (Carrera Damas 2007). Students took to the streets in protest during the last months of 1957, and an attempt of military coup took place. Though it failed, the action set the main stimulus for a popular insurrection that was to overthrow Pérez Jiménez in 1958. A significant number of news outlets backed the popular uprising. The media strike that followed the failed military coup was a decisive factor for the initiation of a general strike which, together with a new pronouncement of the military, forced the President to hand in all powers on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958 (Díaz Rangel 2007, Caballero 2010).

It is on this day that, according to Carrera Damas, the third step in Venezuela's "road towards democracy" is taken (2007: 164). The events of January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958, demonstrated that the impulse for democratic change did not come from the government, but rather from the civil society. And, although much political agitation followed those events,

on many occasions it was the call from democratic leaders, through the media, which spurred the extensive and massive popular manifestations against those that, time after time, attempted to perpetuate military rule (Ibid).

The people in the street had shown not only their strength as a social force but their will to live in democracy and to defend it (Caballero 2010). The gains of this "renovated democracy" were to be established in the Constitution of 1961, in which the democratic advancements of "political, economic and social rights" were evident (Carrera Damas 2007: 164). The dominant political parties capitalised on these popular demands –



leaders Rómulo Betancourt of AD, Rafael Caldera of COPEI, and Jóvito Villalba of URD signed in October, 1958, a pact of governance known as the Pact of Punto Fijo (Salcedo Bastardo 1996, Caballero 2010). This agreement was backed by the armed forces, the largest business organisations, trade unions, and the Catholic Church (Lander 2008). The Communist party was excluded from the *puntofijista* deal in order not to preoccupy the predominantly anti-communist military sector and to send an assuring political message to the U.S. (Carrera Damas 2007). Political parties AD and COPEI would dominate the political spectrum during the second half of the twentieth century.

The fall of Pérez Jiménez was followed by successive civilian leaderships; all of them with presidents elected through plural, direct and universal vote. These elections were supervised by a neutral electoral commission, and its verdicts at all moments “were accepted almost unanimously by the Venezuelan society, and not only by the political establishment” (Caballero 2010: 205). Betancourt was voted president in January 1959. After him Raúl Leoni, Rafael Caldera, Carlos Andrés Pérez, Luis Herrera Campins and Jaime Lusinchi were successively elected presidents for five-year terms. Each of them implemented varying government policies, but their regimes can be considered a part of a “systematic application of broad guidelines for a national liberal-democratic project” (Ibid).

Carrera Damas (2007) argues that a key aspect of such liberal-democratic project was the statist character of the regime, with a strong tendency to centralising power. This, he argues, led to the conformation of a society that became too reliant on the ‘big state’ (Ibid).

The press and news media had played a key part in the breakdown of the dictatorship, and as of 1958, with Betancourt as elected president, were arguably the first beneficiaries of the popular and liberal democratic regime: they regained relative freedom of information and opinion (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007).

Betancourt’s instalment of his democratic project became threatened by successive military revolts – all of which failed – , and by radical leftist insurgent movements that attempted to follow in the steps of the Cuban Revolution (Díaz Rangel 2007, Caballero 2010). But even though Betancourt had fierce enemies in both the radical Right and Left, by 1964 he became Venezuela’s first President elected democratically by the people to end his full constitutional period in office.

In the early 1960s, news outlets that either sympathised with the Pérez Jiménez's regime or promoted communist ideals were suspended or shut down, while it became common for constitutional guarantees to be suspended (Díaz Rangel 2007, Lander 2008). The most influential newspapers and broadcast outlets, with the exception of *El Nacional*, aligned themselves with the governmental projects and with the parties of the Pact of Punto Fijo (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007).

During the first years of the 'newly-born democracy', the audience of commercial television grew significantly. In 1960, the Cisneros financial group bought Televisa and founded Venevisión – it was to become for the rest of the twentieth century, together with RCTV, the nation's most viewed media outlet (Capriles 1976, Bisbal 2007, Hernández Díaz 2008). The state-run station was to have less than two percent of the viewers' share, while RCTV and Venevisión combined had over 90 percent (Ibid). Ironically though, the private commercial outlets relied primarily on government publicity for their functioning. So, an aspect underlying the battle of television stations for audience rating – particularly RCTV and Venevisión – was their dependence on government publicity and loans, their low financial investment compared to their almost exclusive profit-making goals, and their heavy reliance in foreign programmes of all genres (Capriles 1976, Pasquali 1980). Politicians believed then that neither radio nor television – whether state-owned or private-owned – would represent a political or ideological threat: news content averaged eight percent of the total broadcast content, and did not play a systematic watchdog role (Pasquali 1980, Caballero 2010). Political and social critique in news content and opinion was significantly more evident in the press.

#### **4.6. 'Clientelar' media and the consolidation of a two-party system**

The oil revenues were also contributing to economic growth and a general improvement in the population's quality of life. Industrial and economic expansion brought about upward social mobility, even though there was still significant inequality and some levels of repression towards overt political dissidence (Lander 2008). But, insurgency and revolution were not welcomed by the majority of the people in the 1960s (Caballero 2010). During the regimes of Raul Leoni and of his successor, Rafael Caldera, founder of COPEI party, the "legitimacy of the democratic regime was strengthened and the two-party system consolidated" (Lander 2008: 70).

In a climate of relative social, political and economic stability during the mid-1970s great expectations were generated among Venezuelans (Madero 2009). The Inter-American Press Society declared that, for the first time, the Venezuelan government had championed “freedom of expression” within a regime of “freedom and democracy” (cited by Díaz Rangel 2007: 133). Importantly, Caldera’s electoral campaign introduced a controversial facet of media and power: for the first time a news media group – Cadena Capriles, owners of *Últimas Noticias* daily and nine other publications – openly backed a candidate in exchange for obtaining seats in Congress if Caldera was elected president (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007). This changed aspects of the relations between news media and political parties, with outlets openly campaigning for specific parties<sup>28</sup>; and had negative repercussions in news media: some outlets relinquished balanced, accurate and fair information, and began to function on the basis of the political affiliations of its owners (Ibid).

While most of Latin America was under dictatorial rule in the 1970s, Venezuela proved to be strengthening its ‘democratic project’ through the broadening of a party system, civic political participation, independence of institutions, and more consistent freedoms of the press and of expression. Caldera, argues Caballero, was probably the first leader in Latin America in achieving that democracy be “accepted by those who despised it as egalitarian (‘communist’) and as secular (‘atheist’)” (2010: 225). Carlos Andrés Pérez, of rival party AD and who succeeded him as President in 1974, inherited a country with a well-consolidated political system, loyal armed forces, a relatively upright opposition – particularly after the foundation of progressive left-wing party Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)–, massive popular support, and a rise in oil prices so high that the “outlook became not only optimist, but delirious” (Ibid: 235).

During the mid-1970s a “collective delirium of ‘Great Venezuela’” began to take form within the country’s society; an image of richness and consumption “without much effort” developed among Venezuelans (Lander 2008: 70). This was arguably exacerbated by the nationalisation of oil and iron ore by the Pérez administration. With political and economic measures such as those it became difficult for left-wing parties to accuse Pérez of being pro-Imperialist or neo-liberal. His politico-economic programme, argues Caballero, could instead be defined as “bourgeois democracy” in which the exploitation of oil and its revenues was developed through “state capitalism”

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<sup>28</sup> An important example of political campaigning took place during the 1973 general elections, when influential media group De Armas overtly sided with Acción Democrática party in exchange for possible legislative posts (Díaz Rangel 2007).

and then allegedly distributed among the population (2010: 238). It became difficult for the critical socialist voices to find receptive ears in a society that believed in the idea of being prosperous (Lander 2008).

The news media reflected such feast of prosperity and consumerism, with the emergence of new outlets, expansion of broadcasting networks – which were amassing local media enterprises from different parts of the country within a corporatist frame – and an audience or readers that had more income than previously (Capriles 1976, Pasquali 1980, Caballero 2010). Under such a social and economic climate, it seems hardly surprising that there existed significant reduction in government sanctioning of critical news media.

In 1976, state-funded television network Venezolana de Televisión (VTV) was created, and during its early stages did not accept publicity (Ibid, Bisbal 2005). With VTV and TVN-5, Venezuelans counted with two nominally ‘public service’ television outlets – which have since transmitted information elaborated by successive governments (Hernández Díaz 2008). It was also during this time that regional and communitarian television stations began to emerge.

By the late 1970s, television had become Venezuela’s media platform with the widest demographic reach and penetration: around 80 percent of homes owned a television set and the coverage of the three main stations reached almost 70 percent of the national territory (Bisbal 2005). Even though by 1975 commercial radio outlets had grown to 137, their reach was more local than that of television and their audiences significantly smaller. Importantly, both broadcasting mediums dedicated very limited time to news content, and its quality was poor (Pasquali 1980 and 1991, Bisbal 2005).

Overall, by 1980 approximately 96 percent of Venezuela’s radio stations were privately-owned, as were 80 percent of television stations (Pasquali 1991). Over 52 percent of the combined broadcasting content was imported, including news – a tendency that seems to have been maintained into the twenty-first century (Ibid, Hernández Díaz 2008), and which has been systematically criticised by authors of developmentalist and political economy trends (Capriles 1976, Pasquali 1991, Beltrán

2008). In contrast to such broadcast trend, a daily founded in 1979, *Diario de Caracas*, became an example of a vigorous and analytical style of news elaboration. It was the country’s first newspaper to develop a book of style and was able to work with relative

independence (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007)<sup>29</sup>.

The Pérez regime arguably culminated the triumph of the 'democratic project' set by the leaders of Pact of Puntofijo, but it also became the first government to initiate the nation's rapid economic downfall and social deterioration (Caballero 2010, Parra 2010).

The electoral triumph in 1978 of Luis Herrera Campins, representing the COPEI party, stressed that bipartisanship had become the norm in Venezuela's representative democracy – the vast majority of people, and the media included, tended to side with either AD or COPEI, even though there existed over twenty different parties of different ideological shades participating in elections (Ibid, Lander 2008). Left-wing parties found it very difficult to confront effectively the populist political mechanisms of bipartisanship, and radical insurgency had been discarded as a means to attain power – not only in Venezuela, but in most of Latin America – as institutional democracies gained ground in the region during the 1980s.

By the early-1980s, under President Herrera Campins, Venezuela ceased to have Latin America's strongest economy and, instead, began to experience a financial crisis and a sharp rise in levels of poverty. Oil prices dropped dramatically, inflation rose, the external debt became unsustainable, the official exchange rate of the national currency was devalued significantly, the flight of local capital grew – a set of financial and economic constraints which were being experienced by Venezuelans for the first time (Madero 2009). If, during the Pérez administration the state had become a sort of Leviathan, with high expenditures, in the ones that followed this reality was met with increasing bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption and clientelism (Caballero 2010). Arguably, the combination of two factors – an economic crisis and an oversized state – led to intense public corruption, a trait that has accompanied Venezuela's political and social landscape since.

#### **4.7. News media: from critical passivity to mirrors of social unrest**

In the news media, from the mid-1970s onwards, governmental and political parties' advertisements represented over a third of the total of publicity in the media. As a

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<sup>29</sup> *Diario de Caracas* developed reporters' specialisation in thematic areas and arguably formed a new generation of journalists in a non-traditional vein of what entailed parallelisms with Anglo-America's New Journalism.

partial consequence, many news outlets became quite submissive to the government and not critical of any of its policies and of parties' actions (Capriles 1976). Also, many media owners had become part of the political establishment, and this was arguably reflected in such critical 'passivity'. Some of them had decided that in order to obtain greater profits, attain relative autonomy and political influence, a strategy to follow was to become more active in formal politics while expanding their media properties – even if that meant being congressmen and editors simultaneously (Botía 2007). President Herrera said at the time:

In Venezuela, media owners determine beforehand which events are to occur during the day and request their reporters to find data that would corroborate such information. In effect, in Venezuela there exists more freedom of enterprise than freedom to inform (cited by Díaz Rangel 2007: 79).

It seems likely that some media owners were capitalising in the deterioration of the leading political parties and trade unions. Public opinion – spurred by the news media – pinpointed the flaws of the government party's economic and political policies and, more importantly, the growing state corruption. This critical stance was further strengthened when the government, in the early 1980s, imposed a policy of fiscal control and the administration of currency exchange through an official body.

Paradoxically, as argue Díaz Rangel (2007) and Caballero (2010), most of the Venezuelan media did not react critically to such draconian economic measures or to the growing corruption in the public sector. Some news outlets, particularly within the press – which had always maintained a more critical informative vein than the broadcast media in Venezuela, as argued by most analysts (Aguirre and Bisbal 2010) – feared that the government would not grant them the permission and beneficial currency exchange rates to buy the required materials for publishing (Ibid). In turn, many newspapers, in what can be considered self-censorship, decided not to check on the government nor investigate cases of corruption for fear they might not be able to buy supplies and equipment, of which over 90 percent needed to be imported. Most of the news broadcasting media remained uncritical. Yet, a handful of newspapers adopted a critical attitude, and began investigating political 'scandals' and promoting social debate (Botía 2007).

During the regime of Jaime Lusinchi, who had been elected President in 1983, the

official currency exchange control was selectively used to impose restrictions towards many media. Not since the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez had the Venezuelan media experienced such restraints and limitations (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007). Yet, the private press and some broadcast news media began reacting to the way most Venezuelans were alarmed by the government's corruption. Arguably, the most intense political debates within society and the media began to gravitate around the corruption in the official sector, as of the mid-1980s (Madero 2009, Caballero 2010). Defiantly, some news media – led by dailies *El Nacional*, *Panorama*, and *El Impulso*<sup>30</sup> – investigated cases of corruption in Lusinchi's cabinet (Díaz Rangel 2007).

In 1988, Carlos Andrés Pérez ran again for the nation's Presidency as candidate of the AD party, and defeated his rivals in a landslide. During the following electoral period, in 1993, Rafael Caldera was also re-elected. Both had held relatively successful previous governments, but ended their respective second periods not in a memorable manner: Pérez was forced out of the Presidency by the Supreme Court; while Caldera, at the end of his presidential term, had to symbolically bury the document which had given shape to Venezuela's representative democracy, and of which he was one of the three signers: the Pact of Punto Fijo (Reid 2009, Caballero 2010).

The deterioration of the political system and the inefficiency of the public administration became too evident (Carrera Damas 2007). Political parties and trade unions had gradually spiralled into a crisis and were no longer the "main channels of expression of popular demand" (Lander 2008: 73). The democratic project of the *puntofijistas* – or rather the AD-COPEI bipartisanship – was arguably in a state of emergency, and the economy was very unstable. It was in this context that Pérez decided to introduce neo-liberal policies of economic adjustment, in accordance to the International Monetary Fund's guidelines (Lander 2008, Caballero 2010).

A few weeks after Pérez had announced his new economic measures and government policies a social explosion, which would later be known as *El Caracazo*, took place in February, 1989 (Ibid, Williamson 2009). The popular revolts started in Caracas and spread to other places in the country. Rioting and looting took place on a scale unknown to twentieth-century Venezuelans, to which the government reacted by suspending some constitutional guarantees and declaring a state of emergency (Ibid).

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<sup>30</sup> *El Impulso* (based in Barquisimeto) and *Panorama* (based in Maracaibo) have been, since their foundation in 1904 and 1914, respectively, two of the most influential non-Caracas dailies in Venezuela (Botía 2007).

These events, which resulted in the death of between 1000 and 3000 citizens, mainly at the hands of the police forces and the National Guard, were at the time interpreted as a mass protest against speculative prices (Ibid, Hernández 2008). Others claimed it was a popular ebullition of “communism in its purest form”; but, as expresses Caballero, it was arguably a mixture of both (2010: 319).

Generally, the media reacted to the *El Caracazo* cautiously. Pérez had only been a few weeks in power and was regarded by most media owners as a leader that would stimulate a freer environment for news media (Díaz Rangel 2007). The media portrayal of *El Caracazo* was therefore predominantly one that focused on the looting and social disorder caused by protesters, and partially overlooked the political and social meaning of such events. For, as Lander argues, *El Caracazo* represented the “terminal crisis” of a twenty-year deterioration of the *puntofijista* political programme and of the dysfunctional social welfare in Venezuela (2008: 71-72).

The social and political crisis was to worsen: in 1992 President Pérez suffered two coup attempts. The first, on February 4<sup>th</sup>, was carried out by the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MVR 200) with Lieutenant-Coronel Hugo Chávez as its visible leader (Reid 2009, Williamson 2009). The loyal armed forces crushed the insurgents. The second *putsch* took place on November 27<sup>th</sup>, and was led by a group of high-ranking officers. The military insurrection was, again, defeated by the army (Ibid). In both cases there was bloodshed, and even though the armed insurgents’ call for Venezuelans to ‘take to the streets’ to back them failed, it became evident that they had gained the sympathy of many citizens and of part of the media (Botía 2007, Caballero 2010).

Following the first coup, the government reacted with the temporary suspension of some constitutional rights and restricted the flow of news nationwide (Botía 2007). Since the 1960s, Venezuela had not experienced military coups; and neither had its media experienced such official emergency measures of restriction (Ibid). Some news media reacted against the censorship measures and called for a ‘media’ strike, which turned out to be only partially successful (Díaz Rangel 2007).

Constitutional rights were again suspended after the second 1992 coup. Yet, unlike months earlier, Pérez did not impose censorship on the media. It seems that were he to have executed such actions again the outcome would have been similarly negative for his administration. But by then various media had already began a crusade of



denouncements against the President (Botía 2007). During and after 1992 the hostility of the news media towards Pérez grew in intensity, sometimes at the price of manipulating or even partially making up news that condemned the President at a personal level (Ibid)<sup>31</sup>. The nation's most influential media succeeded in debilitating the President and his cabinet, particularly after accusing him of the misappropriation of public funds and of the presidential discretionary fund.

In May 1993, the Supreme Court began a legal process to remove him from office. Pérez became Venezuela's first and only President to have been forced out of office institutionally by the Attorney General – and the media was a key component of such a political event (Botía 2007, Caballero 2010).

#### **4.8. Media's role in the end of *puntofijismo* and the rise of Chávez**

The negative perception of Venezuela's two main political parties was such that, for the first time since 1958, a candidate that did not belong to either won the presidential elections in 1993 (Díaz Rangel 2007). Caldera, who had founded one of those parties, COPEI, decided to run for the Presidency with a hybrid party, Convergencia. After winning elections, he initiated his mandate aware of the political power the media had gained, their growing tendency towards a journalism of accusation, and called for the media to respect the "ethical values of democracy" and provide the people with "their right for a truthful information" so that "justice and veracity" was not manipulated or altered (cited by Díaz Rangel 2007: 149).

Caldera's project for a new media law and a code of ethics was perceived by the majority of the media as a threat to freedom of expression. His cabinet emphasised that the owners of the media – not so much the reporters – were seeking to demonise the government and were being abusive of their freedoms (Ibid, Hidalgo 2009). The news media continued underlining the crisis in the democratic system and, to a lesser extent, the economic measures – labelled 'neo-liberal' by Caldera's opponents – that had been taken in an attempt to find solutions to the financial depression and the vertiginous inflation the country was experiencing (Hidalgo 2009, Caballero 2010).

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<sup>31</sup> By the late 1980s, the media had gained significant power, and became pivotal in the refutation of President Pérez's project of constitutional reform (in 1992) that entailed, among many of its aims, the prohibition of media monopolies and promotion of the right for 'truthful' information (Díaz Rangel 2007).

During the 1998 Presidential elections some media did not hesitate to present Hugo Chávez, a leading figure of the first of the two 1992 military coups, as a political alternative to the traditional parties and to Punto Fijo politicians (Hidalgo 2009, Reid 2009). Also, the main parties of the Left backed Chávez's newly-founded Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement), as he began campaigning as presidential candidate (Lander 2008).

It was arguably Chávez's reformist, anti-establishment, and nationalist discourse that won him most followers during his electoral campaign (Sánchez Urribarri 2008, Caballero 2010). Contrary to many European nations and the U.S., the establishment's neo-liberal policies were no longer seen as acceptable generators of social justice and material well-being by most Venezuelans, just like in most of Latin American societies (Barret *et al* 2008, Williamson 2009). Authors of different ideological strands agree that there was also an important military ingredient in Chávez's political discourse, as well as a component of radical populism which appealed to many voters (Lander 2008, Caballero 2010). Yet, his discourse, like his political project, began to polarise opinions early on during his electoral campaign.

Caballero argues that Chávez's political and ideological project has been best characterised by the ideas of sociologist Norberto Ceresole, who proposed a "communion" between the *caudillo*, the army, and the people which "excluded all institutions and mediators" such as political parties, unions, syndicates (2010: 361). Furthermore, he argues that his was a personalist and authoritarian project. Lander, on the other hand, formulates that Chávez's political project, albeit with a militarist stance, was anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist in character, seeking to broaden popular participation (2008).

Such polarisation was evident in the way some influential media – Venevisión and *El Nacional*, for example – backed him; while others – RCTV and *El Universal*, among others – opposed him vehemently (Bisbal 2009). During the electoral campaign, though, most media were biased against Chávez; and the organisation Bloque de Prensa declared that he represented a "threat to the freedom of the press" (Díaz Rangel 2007: 154).

Chávez became the first military *putschist* to be democratically elected as President of Venezuela. Two months after taking office in February 1999, he called for an open referendum to elect representatives of a Constitutional Assembly who would, in turn, write and pass a new Constitution (Barrera and Marcano 2006, Botía 2007, Reid

2009). The new constitution was approved, introducing a “generous catalogue of fundamental rights and different venues for their protection”, empowerment of minority groups, relative freedom for the private sector to “exploit and commercialise natural resources”, elements of participatory democracy such as various types of referenda and promotion of “new associative forms for social and economic ends” (Sánchez Urribarri 2008: 183).

Among its many changes and reformist clauses, the new constitution allowed for presidential second-term elections and increased presidential terms from five to six years, while also granting more power to the head of state. It is in this context that Chávez renamed the nation ‘Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’, stressing his ideological affinity with independence hero Bolívar (Barrera and Marcano 2006, Williamson 2009).

The opposition reacted by expressing that the National Assembly was handing over too much power to Chávez and to the armed forces. According to the new constitution, elections needed to be held in order for the president to be legitimatised again. In July 2000 these took place and Chávez was re-elected while his allied parties obtained the majority of seats in the newly established National Assembly (Botía 2007, Williamson 2009).

Sánchez Urribarri argues that, in the initial power struggle between Chávez’s government and the opposition, both showed certain moderation and pragmatism, but this “uncomfortable equilibrium” became ineffective, as of 2001, when both forces “engaged in a zero-sum confrontation for power” and radicalised their political positions (2008: 183).

In April 2001, Chávez said publicly that the media were enemies of his Bolivarian revolution; and two months later, during celebrations of Journalists’ Day, he expressed that he maintained “a complex system of relations with the media as part of a historical clash” (cited by Bisbal 2009: 17). Three months earlier the first mass protests against Chávez took place, as a reaction to the President’s wishes to introduce new Bolivarian educational curricula in schools. Other protests followed in reaction to the way the President was allegedly governing “by decree using power legislation”, and he was accused of authoritarianism, “reducing basic freedoms”, and promoting a proto-totalitarian social model inspired in Fidel Castro’s Cuba (Sánchez Urribarri 2008: 184). On the other hand, Chávez’s followers – the Chavistas – interpreted his new economic

and political measures as a means to deepen a revolution for the underprivileged, and welcomed the social programmes of health-care, education, and communitarian production – known as *misiones* (*missions*) – that were introduced (Ibid, Lander 2008).

Opposition parties and groups formed, in 2001, the organisation Coordinadora Democrática, in an effort to articulate political ideas and actions; but it was arguably the media that played the most effective confrontational role as critics of Chávez during the early 2000s. The two main traditional political parties – AD and COPEI – had lost mass support, and fragmented partly into parties such as social-democrats Un Nuevo Tiempo and Alianza Bravo Pueblo, and Christian-democrats Primero Justicia, among others (Petkoff 2010). These, however, were still associated to the traditional party system and, during the first half of the 2000s, lacked mass support – albeit by 2007 their support grew and represented around 45 per cent of the electorate (Ibid, Romero 2008)<sup>32</sup>.

The vast majority of private-media editors and journalists were not balanced in their opinion and news agendas, favouring to varying degrees anti-Chávez positions. Newspaper *TalCual*, founded in 2000 by left-wing politician and editor Teodoro Petkoff, reintroduced front-page editorials, most of which were critical of the government (Botía 2007). By then, the media that had once sympathised with Chávez, such as *Venevisión* and *El Nacional*, began to show an anti-government bias in their news coverage (Díaz Rangel 2007).

President Chávez launched officialist newspaper *El Correo del Presidente* and began to increase his presence in broadcasting mediums. *Aló Presidente* was the government's first formal attempt to launch a regularly broadcasted programme in which Chávez addressed the audience (Castellanos 2009, Bisbal 2009). The first format was launched through the RNV radio network; and after 1999 it was switched to the television network Venezolana de Televisión (VTV). After then, the President appeared regularly on screen, talking to citizens, supporters, members of his cabinet, reporters, in a conversational mode that rarely lasted less than four hours (Ibid). The broadcast programme *Aló Presidente* was arguably conceived to have a twofold

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<sup>32</sup> During the 2008 regional elections, oppositional parties gathered a total of 45.1 per cent of the general vote, while the pro-Chávez forces obtained 53.8 per cent. 61.2 per cent of eligible voters (18.2 million) participated in the elections - the lowest abstention index during the 2000s for a non-Presidential election. By comparison, during the 2004 regional elections, pro-Chávez parties obtained 58.7 per cent of votes, and the opposition 41.2 percent. In a four-year period, oppositional parties augmented 4 per cent in electoral following (Romero 2008).

function: one was to establish a direct connection between “the leader and the people”, and the other was for Chávez to “impose to the media and oppositional organisations” the news agenda of political and social issues that he thought to be crucial (Castellanos 2009: 35).

#### **4.9. Chavismo, opposition and the politicised media battlefield**

By early 2002, the bulk of the private media – with few exceptions – systematically reproduced a negative image of Chávez and his administration, and assumed an overt role as political agents (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007). Like the state-owned media, they reflected – and promoted to varying degrees – political polarisation, which intensified as the opposition carried out multiple protests on the streets (Hawkins 2003, Cañizales 2009b). Arguably the largest one took place on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in which demonstrators clashed with Chávez supporters, as the former marched towards the Presidential palace demanding the President stepped down (Ibid, Villegas 2009). Twenty people died due to gun violence – including one journalist – and over one hundred were injured.

Amid the chaos and civil unrest, a faction of influential military officers, together with business groups and some figures of oppositional political parties joined forces to execute a coup d'état (Barrera and Marcano 2006, Reid 2009, Villegas 2009). Chávez allegedly resigned as President (Ibid). The head of business organisation Fedecámaras, Pedro Carmona, was immediately sworn in as interim President, the state and legislative institutions were dissolved, and the Constitution abolished. Various authors have argued that the George W. Bush administration was supportive of the coup, and that various governments of Latin America and Western Europe welcomed the ousting of Chávez (Lander 2008, Villegas 2009).

There has been heated debate about the role of the Venezuelan media in the April 2002 coup d'état, yet all analyses stress the key role they played in this crucial historical event. During the mass demonstrations that took place on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, almost all of the private media covered the anti-Chávez protests considerably, maintaining an anti-government informative bias (Hawkins 2003, Botía 2007, Cañizales 2009b, Villegas 2009). The President waged long and successive official blanket messages – known as *cadena*s – which all national broadcasting outlets were obliged to transmit at the same time, arguably in order to impede the flow of information related to the protests against him (Ibid). The main television networks

reacted by simultaneously, in a split screen, showing both the President's message and live images of the mass demonstrations against him in various parts of the country. Similarly, most radio outlets transmitted both events, while the majority of the press carried out intense coverage of the protests (Ibid).

As a reaction to the rebellion of the majority of the media, the President attempted to force off the air those influential media outlets that were opposing him – namely RCTV, Venevisión and Televisión. However, these found a way to partially broadcast the demonstrations – which they backed (Hawkins 2003, Díaz Rangel 2007). During the coup many media outlets that were state-owned or that supported the government were besieged by Carmona's security forces (Botía 2007, Villegas 2009). After Chávez was forced to resign as head of state and the coup was consummated, the media – during April 12<sup>th</sup> and early April 13<sup>th</sup> – barely published or transmitted any relevant information about the country's political and social situation. Newspapers, with few exceptions, did not circulate during those two days; while most private television and radio stations decided not to transmit news content (Ibid).

When Chávez returned to power, on April 13<sup>th</sup>, most of the private media maintained what many considered a concerted 'information blackout' (Botía 2007, Britto García 2010). Even by April 14<sup>th</sup>, the main opposition newspapers did not circulate, under various pretexts – *Últimas Noticias* and *Panorama*, both moderately pro-Chávez did circulate. According to Luis Britto García, during the events of April 2002, most of the private media in Venezuela "lied about Chávez's supporters killing opposition demonstrators", made pacts with "the new dictatorship", "lied about Chávez resigning", and "contributed to the communication blackout that ousted Chávez" (2010: 24).

Media owners denied any involvement in the coup, and there is no evidence that the private media conspired for there to be one, even though most owners and editors were overtly contrary to Chávez's political position and ideological narrative (Cañizalez 2009b). Some communitarian media outlets challenged the 'information blackout' of the opposition media, demanding for constitutional order to be restored (Parra 2010). By April 14<sup>th</sup>, the signal of state-owned VTV was re-established and some opposition commentators, such as Petkoff, condemned the coup in various media platforms (Botía 2007, Villegas 2009).

The manner in which most of the Venezuelan media covered and treated the events of April 2002 led to a significant drop in their credibility – for the first time since 'media

credibility' surveys began, more than 55 percent of Venezuelans expressed they did not trust the media (Bisbal 2005 and 2009). Also, and in part as a consequence of the 'information blackout', hostility and physical aggression among Chávez supporters towards private-media journalists increased significantly from 2002 (Botía 2007, Cañizalez 2009b).

Following the coup, Chávez's tone towards his adversaries became somewhat moderate, but this changed in December 2002 when the opposition, this time led by workers' union leaders, representatives of the Fedecámaras organisation, and directors of state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)*<sup>33</sup>, called for a general strike (Barrera and Marcano 2006, Reid 2009). The news media that were affiliated to either *Bloque de Prensa* or *Cámara de Radio y Televisión* and many of their reporters decided to assume a political role by supporting the strike, abandoning "the necessary equilibrium and impartiality" to inform about the development of the strike (Botía 2007: 282). In order to reactivate the oil industry, the government resorted to the military, foreign investors, and co-opted some economic groups. Amid the economic deterioration Venezuela was going through with oil production falling by around 80 percent, this action was crucial in bringing "the oil industry – and the country – back on track after the conflictive 2002" (Sánchez Uribarri 2008: 184).

#### **4.10. The rise of state media, legal framework, censorship**

Having survived the coup and the general strike, Chávez was able to start to consolidate himself in power. Very importantly, his government realised that one of the "weaknesses" they experienced during the events of 2002 was the "limited quantity of state media to transmit their political message – and not the content of the latter" (Castellanos 2009: 36). Chávez announced at the time "an acceleration of his drive to achieve 'twenty-first-century socialism'", and for the first time defined himself publicly as a "communist" (Reid 2009: 172). A key aspect of his socialist and statist plan consisted in creating, intervening or buying existing broadcast media, newspapers, magazines, web sites, and in setting up a network of communitarian or 'alternative' media (Ibid, Bisbal 2009). Pro-government voices argue that the hegemonic control of the media laid in the private sector, which predominantly opposed Chávez (Parra

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<sup>33</sup> State-owned and state-run petroleum corporation *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)* was founded in 1975, by President Carlos Andrés Pérez. It explores, refines, distributes and commercialises Venezuela's natural gas and oil. It is by far the country's largest business corporation and main source of national income; and has been ranked # 36 as the world's largest and wealthiest corporation by *Fortune* and *BNAmericas* (2003).

2010). However, the opposition and the majority of the private media argue that the state was establishing a communicational hegemony not only by increasing significantly the number of media outlets it owned, but also by trying to eliminate or co-opt dissident voices in the media (Bisbal 2009, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Indeed, the number of media outlets owned by the state grew significantly. If in 1999 only one television station belonged to the state – Venezolana de Televisión (VTV) – and one news agency (AVN), by 2007 it had added to its list of television outlets TVES, ANTV, Vive TV, Ávila TV, and TeleSur<sup>34</sup> – the latter has had a signal for Venezuela, and another one that is international (Ibid, Cañizalez 2011). Of the four television channels that in 2007 had national coverage, two were state-owned; the other two – Venevisión and Televén – have been private and, since 2003, shifted to politically moderate positions. In 1998 the state owned one radio network – Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV) –; by 2010 it had added networks YVKE, Radio Rumbos, and the international Radio Sur; while at least 200 communitarian broadcasting outlets began to operate in political-ideological alignment with the government (Ibid, Conatel en red 2012)<sup>35</sup>.

In relation to the press, Chávez launched or re-launched four newspapers with public funding: *Vea*, *Correo del Orinoco*, *Ciudad Caracas*, and *El Correo del Presidente*<sup>36</sup> (Bisbal 2009, Cañizalez 2011). To these, the government has added the Bolivarian News Agency, formerly known as Venpres, which became part of the Ministry of Communication and Information (Ibid).

By 2008, only two private-owned television networks were operating with a nationwide broadcast signal: Venevisión and Televén; and the two others that continued working with a limited geographical coverage were news channel Globovisión – which has maintained its strong anti-Chávez viewpoint – and sports channel Meridiano TV (Palencia 2009, Quiñonez 2011). Approximately forty private, small local channels

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<sup>34</sup> TeleSur represents one of Hugo Chávez's most ambitious media projects. It is a 24-hour news television network that is funded by states of the region: Venezuela's government provides 51% of the funding, the Argentinean 20%, the Cuban 19% and the Uruguayan 10% (Palencia 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Even though state-owned and state-sponsored media outlets have increased in numbers significantly since 2002, the vast majority of the readership/audience consumes media content produced and distributed by the private media. For example, between 2000 and 2010, private television stations averaged an audience share of 77.6 per cent, whereas state stations averaged 5.8 per cent (satellite television/cable television/ other television averaged 16.6 percent) (Bisbal 2009, Weisbrot and Ruttenberg 2010).

<sup>36</sup> State-funded newspaper *Correo del Presidente* was closed during 2002, after allegations of corruption (Quiñonez 2011).



operated, some of which have linked up with others in order to create commercial circuits (Ibid).

It is estimated that 412 commercial private-owned FM radio outlets and 209 private-owned AM radio stations were operating nationwide in 2008, a quarter of which were operating from the three largest cities: Caracas, Maracaibo and Valencia, and affiliated to networks (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando 2008). By comparison, the amount of communitarian radio stations had by 2010 reportedly grown to around 300 (Conatel 2008, Bisbal 2009), and almost all of them supported the government's political standings (Cañizales 2009b and 2011, D'Elia and Reyna 2011).

The vast majority of the Venezuelan press, however, has maintained private ownership: out of the 95 daily newspapers and five weekly newspapers that were being published by 2008, less than ten percent were state-owned or state-subsidised (Ibid). During the second half of the 2000s, all main press outlets developed highly-active online platforms for their news and comment dissemination. It is noteworthy that, by 2008, around 21 per cent of the population connected to the Internet for informative and communicational purposes; while in 1998 only two per cent did (Conatel cited by Farreras Rodríguez 2008). This follows that Venezuelan news-content websites have grown significantly during the 2000s, with sites Analítica, Aporrea, Noticias 24 and Noticiero Digital being the most popular.

Arguably, during the Chávez era “both the national and regional media” continued to be “characterised by their diversity” and the private media “has not been concentrated in the hands of few” – instead, the media system has hardly been maintained as “vertical”, as is the case in most of Latin America (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando 2008: 193). Yet, by 2008 there had been significant shifts in media ownership and conglomeration in Venezuela, mainly due to the government's statist and interventionist strategies – these have been driven “essentially by political and ideological motives, rather than by economic ones” and in detriment of private ownership (Pellegrino 2010: 47)<sup>37</sup>.

Luz Neira Parra argues that, the acquisition and creation of media outlets by the state, is part of a strategy to generate an “integral system” of information and communication that addresses the “expectations of citizens” living in a society that is changing from a

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<sup>37</sup> For a description of the main media groups in Venezuela and their ownership characteristics, see Appendix B.

neo-liberal one to “a more inclusive democracy” (2010: 118). Bisbal contends that the rise of state media property was part of a Chávez-led strategy that sought to establish an informative and communicational hegemony, authoritarian and defined by the President, in order to steadily silence independent and private media (2007 and 2009). It is noteworthy to mention that Chávez benefited immensely from a 1,400% rise in prices of state-owned oil between 1998 and 2010<sup>38</sup>; and that his administration was able to inject much of that income into buying media outlets, designing a robust communications strategy, while continuing to invest in the social programmes or *misiones*.

The new media judicial framework set forward by the Chávez administration, since 2000, has allegedly had a restrictive effect on the critical, private media (Bisbal 2008a and 2009, D’Elia and Reyna 2011). To some critical observers, not only have the set of telecommunication reforms established restrictions for news content, but have allegedly been manipulated by the government to censor critical media (Ibid, Cañizalez 2009b and 2011). Furthermore, there have been allegations that these media reforms were drafted in an ambiguous manner and have been used in non-constitutional ways by the government to also impose prior-censorship, punitive financial sanctions, remove broadcast licences, and close down media outlets either temporary or permanently (Hawkins 2003, Bisbal 2009, D’Elia and Reyna 2011).

Others contend that the new set of media laws were part of Chávez’s political project, which seeks to establish a “normative system” of broadcasting that is “adequate to the media reality” (Parra 2010: 119). Like Parra, pro-government commentators affirm that through this legal framework, the media is expected to become less monopolised by family groups and conglomerates; while opening up effective ways for popular activism and inclusive participation (Ibid, Hawkins 2003, Conatel 2008). Some argue that together with Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, Venezuela is the Latin American country with the best telecommunications policies and infrastructure (Parra 2010, Conatel 2008).

Very importantly, a part of this legal framework contributed significantly to the rise of communitarian media during the 2000s. With the increasing amount of state-owned news outlets, an expansive network of communitarian media that supported the Bolivarian process, and the foundation of the personally-controlled political party

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<sup>38</sup> Prices of crude oil rose from approximately U.S. \$ 8 a barrel in 1998, to around U.S. \$ 116 a barrel in 2008 (PDVSA and Econometrica 2008).

Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Venezuelan Party, or PSUV)<sup>39</sup>, Chávez attained a strong hold on the country's power during the second half of the 2000s (Bisbal 2008a and 2009, Caballero 2010).

In 2007, the Chávez administration decided not to renew pro-opposition RCTV network's broadcasting licence, accused RCTV of supporting the April 2002 coup, took away its infrastructure and equipments and handed it to the state-funded TVES, whose programming reflected the state's political and ideological position (Bisbal 2009, Palencia 2009, Cañizalez 2011, Páez 2011)<sup>40</sup>. Popular rallies took to the streets in support of RCTV, while the network directors argued that they had never conspired in any coup and no legal stance had linked them to it. Significantly, stations Venevisión and Televén, both also accused by Chávez loyalists of having supported the 2002 coup, significantly moderated their former pro-opposition position, and both of their licences were renewed (Bisbal 2009, Cañizalez 2009b and 2011). Less than two years later, the government ruled a legal motion in January 2010 which prohibited RCTV to operate through cable or satellite platforms in the country (Weisbrot and Ruttenberg 2010).

By 2009, the government had closed down 34 private radio and television stations, most of these of dissident, critical content (Reporters Without Borders 2009, Cañizalez 2011). That same year, followers of Chávez attacked the headquarters of pro-opposition television station Globovisión, and the government imposed economic fines, legal sanctions, and temporary arrests for some of its staff (Committee to Protect Journalists 2009, Ipys 2010). International and local non-government human rights and freedom of the press organisations – including Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists, Ipys and Provea – which had condemned Chávez's measures towards RCTV, reacted even more critically towards the state closure of the 34 broadcast outlets<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> The United Socialist Venezuelan Party, or PSUV, was founded on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007. It represents the umbrella political party for all pro-Chávez political and social forces, and is arguably the largest left-wing party in the Americas with an estimated 5.5 million members, in 2007 ([www.psu.org.ve](http://www.psu.org.ve)).

<sup>40</sup> RCTV was, until 2007 and together with Venevisión, Venezuela's most popular television outlet. Its average audience was 5.6 million when it operated with open terrestrial signal, its share of TV audience averaged 31 per cent, and its publicity investment 26 per cent of the television market (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando 2008, Pellegrino 2010).

<sup>41</sup> For Reporters Without Borders' report (02/08/2009) on governmental withdrawal of broadcasting licences to 34 outlets, see Appendix C.

#### **4.11. Growth of journalistic professionalism and its limitations**

Allegedly, not only had legal hostility from the government to private news outlets and critical reporters increased, but so had physical attacks, threats and harassment towards media workers since 2002 (Ayala-Corao 2005, Ipys 2010)<sup>42</sup>. Such a hostile environment for journalists – unknown since the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez – is in large part the product of social and political polarisation (Hawkins 2003, Bisbal 2009, Ipys 2010, Lozada 2011). Even though the majority of victims are professionals of the pro-opposition news media, pro-Chávez journalists have also been intimidated, beaten, and their equipment destroyed or confiscated (Ipys 2010, Provea 2010, Freedom House 2010). There is no governmental policy for the protection of journalists (Ibid, Ayala-Corao 2005). By early 2010, there were approximately one attack on a journalist reported every three days to various local NGOs, six media workers were killed in violent circumstances, and at least five attacks with explosives on the private residences of dissident journalists or on private news headquarters were reported, while social unrest and repression of dissidence increased (Ipys 2010, Amnesty International 2010)<sup>43</sup>.

It is important to stress that, although media censorship and harassment towards journalists have become widespread and have risen to critical levels during the Chávez era,

direct censorship by political and legal means and the exercise of self-censorship using the government's resources were a reality in Venezuela long before Chávez came to power... self-censorship has been routinely achieved through threats, bribes or indirect pressures by editors (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando 2008: 207).

During Venezuela's democratic era the above-mentioned aspects of censorship and other forms of limitation to journalistic autonomy have clashed variably with the process of professionalisation of journalism (Aguirre 1998 and 2010). Since 1958, academic formation and professionalisation in media practice have grown significantly in the country, mainly due to certain social mobility and to the establishment of

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<sup>42</sup> For reports and surveys carried out by various local and international non-government organisations on the freedom of the press in Venezuela and journalists who have been victims of violence in the 2000s, See Appendices D and E.

<sup>43</sup> For Amnesty International 2010 Freedom of expression and Human Rights report on Venezuela, see Appendix F.

normative and legal frameworks in the national media market and workplaces (Ibid, Garrison and Goodsell 1996). Aguirre argues that, throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, Venezuelan journalists and media workers can be characterised as “middle class in their formation, incomes, and social status”, and can be politically and ideologically defined as predominantly leftist (2010: 64).

However, the idea of journalistic professionalism that evolved during Venezuela’s democratic era, the presence of normative professionalism and of its ethical tenets – like in most parts of Latin America – has not been cemented intensively or uniformly (Aguirre 1998 and 2010); instead it arguably “lacks the standing as the all-powerful, consensual model which it had during the ‘high modernism’ of journalism in the United States and the United Kingdom” (Waisbord 2013: 194).

Liberal, western notions of media professionalism and journalistic ethics have informed to varying degrees the practices of editors and reporters, but have not developed as core principles, while it seems that a hybrid construct – drawing from different models and embedded in a specific national context – is the predominant form of understanding journalistic professionalism (Ibid, Aguirre 1998, Botía 2007).

As partisan media and advocate journalism practice intensify in the Chávez era and under the logic of polarisation – paradoxically in parallel with the relative intensification of the presence of western, liberal-influenced, professional journalistic ideals among some dissident, pro-opposition reporters and editors – the very idea of journalism’s role in democracy, its practical and ethical tenets, remain strongly contested.

#### **4.12. Conclusion**

This part of the study explicates and discusses the history of Venezuela’s media and journalism and their relation to key political and social events that have defined the country’s difficult – and at times tortuous – path towards democracy (Carrera Damas 2007). It charts the different mechanisms which the press and other media have reflected and been an active part of the power struggle in Venezuela. Addressing selectively the political and socio-cultural evolution of the nation, and the development of its media, are necessary steps in providing a contextual space from which to examine and understand empirical aspects of the news media and journalistic practice during the Chávez era.

In doing so, the chapter also explores the historical tensions between an authoritarian, *caudillista*, elitist tradition and an institutionalist, liberal-inspired, democratic project that have existed since the nation's independence from Spanish rule. Evidently, neither one is clear-cut; instead, they are highly-nuanced and – even when assessed somewhat schematically – both maintain patent elements of populism and statism to varying degrees, and a longstanding deficit of social justice – all of which arguably represent characteristic traits of Latin America's political culture.

Overall, the press in Venezuela was constituted as partisan during the nineteenth century and more often than not suffered the effects of intense political polarisation, censorship and limitations to freedom of expression. If, during its beginnings, journalism was mainly influenced by Iberian cultural models – and to some extent by those of France and Great Britain –, during the second half of the twentieth century the regional impact of U.S. culture and its geopolitical hegemony became patent in the nation's culture and in the configuration of most occupational/professional identities. This was arguably the product of Venezuela's vertiginous – albeit chaotic and incomplete – entrance into modernity, during the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Caballero 2010).

As Waisbord explains, journalism, which is “located at the crossroads of politics, economics, society, culture, and technology” is extremely “sensitive to broad transformations” (2013: 5). Key transformations brought about during the twentieth century include the exploitation of oil deposits by U.S. corporations, the penetration of liberal capitalism, the redefinition and implementation of electoral democracy, and the delegitimisation of the political class as epitomised in the social upheaval of *El Caracazo* in 1989 (Capriles 1976, Reid 2009, Caballero 2010).

Evidently, a notable transformation in Venezuelan society was the result of the rise to power of Chávez and the prevalence of his hybrid, statist and populist political project of national re-foundation.

The news media and journalists, as explained in this chapter, have systematically mirrored and been active participants of these changes. In the political and social conflict which divides Venezuelan society under Chávez, the media and its workers have been at the centre of the ideological clash – among colliding views and models with problematic consequences for media pluralism, journalistic autonomy, fair and

balanced reporting, normative and ethical news production, and constructive democracy debate.

## Chapter 5

### Methodology

This study investigates issues and questions related to news media and journalistic practice in Venezuela, the extent to which these may be embedded or not in democratic tenets and whether or not they promote such values. Research focuses mainly on exploring professional practice in a limited national setting – the context of Venezuela –, within a defined period of time (2000-2010) during which president Hugo Chávez and his government have ruled the country.

The main questions that underpin this research are:

- How do journalists in Venezuela evaluate their practice and the ways in which they represent the nation's political and social reality?
- How do media professionals interpret the implications of journalistic practices in Venezuela for democracy?
- How do journalists and media-related workers characterise Venezuela's socio-political environment and democracy during the Chávez era?
- How do politics, ideology and cultural/historical factors shape news production in Venezuela, and to what degree do journalists consider themselves agents of politicisation and of democratisation?

In order to address this study's principal research questions and those that are tributary, it is necessary to review methods of research and identify those most appropriate for this study. The various perspectives, theories and models examined in the study's literature and historical reviews have informed, to a degree, the research techniques that are best suited to the research questions outlined above.

Media studies allow one to research both quantitatively and qualitatively a determined phenomenon (Silverman 2001, Jensen 2002). In quantitative research it is required that the "variables under consideration be measured," and how often each variable is present (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 48). It is essentially framed within a methodology consisting of data gathering, categorizing and quantifying it (Silverman 2001, *Ibid*). Its numerical findings arguably permit greater accuracy and exactitude in the reporting of certain results, and some of the most common of these techniques are surveys, questionnaires, content analysis, and experiments of mathematical



measurements (Berger 2000, *Ibid*). The use of these quantitative techniques did not seem the most appropriate for the research questions under examinations here. As stressed earlier, this study focuses on analysing the opinions, perceptions and subjective experiences of a group of people – practising journalists and media-related professionals in Venezuela – and in order to answer the research questions the study does not require that the statements and opinions of the latter be “tested or ‘explained’ by their confirmation and frequency” in quantitative data (Flick 2009: 25).

### **5.1. Use of qualitative methods**

If ‘quantitative’ refers to “how much, how large, the amount of something”, ‘qualitative’ emphasises the “essential character of something” (Kvale 1996: 67). Qualitative research in social or media studies explores and evaluates the characteristics and implications of a given phenomenon, by evaluating the socially-constructed nature of reality in the past and the present, and by answering questions related to how meaning is created and interpreted within such social experience, with sufficient accuracy for them to have analytical consistency and be potentially falsifiable (Jensen 2002, Seal *et al* 2004, Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In most qualitative methods of research the variables may or may not be quantified or measured (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). These variables are believed to provide for certain researchers a “deeper understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data” (Silverman 2001: 32). Thus, for examining individual opinions and social factors that cannot be measured, for example, through exclusive statistics use or numerical data due to the investigative nature of the study, qualitative methodology is recommended. Techniques and methods of a qualitative approach include in-depth interviews, field observation, discourse analysis, case studies, focus groups, among others (Bertrand and Hughes 2005, Wimmer and Dominick 2006). These seem particularly suitable when there is a preference for understanding both meaning and behaviour, that is when “attempting to document the world from the point of view of the people studied” (Hammersley 1992, cited by Silverman 2001: 38), and for observation rather than experiment. Among the advantages of using these methods are the possibilities to view “behaviour in a natural setting without the artificiality that sometimes surrounds experimental or survey research”, thus potentially increasing the “researcher’s understanding of a phenomenon under investigation” (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 49).

Additionally, qualitative methods – embedded in an inductive and hypothesis-generating approach – allow greater flexibility when analysing uncharted phenomena, thus also allowing the researcher to pursue new ideas (Silverman 2001). The questioning approach may vary, depending on the technique used, but all generally reflect an exploratory vein that enable the researcher to initiate the study with a predetermined set of questions, and to then develop follow-up questions as demanded by new findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Wimmer and Dominick 2006).

Some critics have pointed out certain limitations of qualitative research (Ibid, Berger 2000). One is that samples can sometimes be too small to offer the researcher a means by which to quantify and compare information that may prove to be more 'reliable' or 'objective'. As expressed by Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick, a qualitative approach is occasionally used as a "preliminary phase of a project to further investigation" (2006: 49). Yet, they also argue that qualitative data may be all the investigation required for a particular research. Another critique is the risk of some of these methods not being used objectively enough, due particularly to "the human interaction inherent in the interview situation", or to the difficulty an observer may present in detaching professionally from his subject matter (Kvale 1996: 64).

This critique is questioned by Steiner Kvale and other authors in the sense that if objectivity refers to "reliable knowledge, checked and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice" which can be "cross-checked" and "verified", then various methods of qualitative research comply with this notion of objectivity (Ibid: 66). Moreover, qualitative techniques such as person-to-person, in-depth interviewing can sensitively "reflect the nature of the object investigated", since they are able to gain "objectivity of knowledge" through a "intersubjective interaction" between the researcher and the object researched, that is through rational argumentation and understanding of meaning in language and texts (Ibid). Like many other authors (Berger 1998, Wimmer and Dominick 2006), he finds that there exists a dichotomised idea about quantitative and qualitative research, in which the "hegemony on the quantitative side" may still be dominant, since it tends to be viewed as more 'scientificist'. Yet, he insists that it is necessary for social science researchers to gain further competency in analysing social experience as a linguistic construct rather than a merely mathematically-constituted reality (Kvale 1996).

Due to the nature and complexity of this study, qualitative techniques of research

proved to be most suitable. As mentioned above, the main questions of this study address news media and journalistic practice in the context of contemporary Venezuela, between 2000 and 2010. The research sets out to examine factors and to use variables that lead to documenting a phenomenon from the perspectives of different people: news media practitioners, and also editors, media owners, NGOs' representatives, media scholars, politicians, public functionaries, commentators.

## **5.2. The qualitative interview as a research technique**

To meet the standards of effective research while gathering and processing information in order to assess the way journalism and media-related occupations have been practiced in Venezuela during a specific period of time, and answering the main research questions, original research for this study relies mainly on interviews. Interviewing is regarded as “the central resource through which contemporary social science engages with issues that concern it” (Atkinson and Silverman cited by Rapley 2004: 15).

Importantly, during the preliminary stages of this study other qualitative methods were also considered for the research, so as to underpin the rigour of the findings obtained through qualitative interviewing and the analysis of these. As highlighted by various authors, the utilisation of qualitative techniques such as content, narrative, discourse, and conversational analysis can be valid tools through which to assess and interpret the meaning of the data obtained by various qualitative means, including interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 1998 and 2005, Silverman 2001, Flick 2009). The use of the above mentioned qualitative techniques would possibly entail varying levels of validity and reliability for this research as secondary methodologies, yet would represent a diversion from its essential focus and in relation to its main objective, which rely on the collection and analysis of “the personal and the political” in the explanations and opinions of individuals (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 279), within the socio-political environment of Venezuela during the Chávez era. Also, the prospect of using such techniques arguably represents a risk in shifting the emphasis of the analysis towards the ordered meaning of codes and language, rather than privileging the nuanced ways in which individuals – reporters, editors, media-workers and media-related commentators – express and interpret their daily experiences within a specific national context (Manning and Cullum-Swan 1998). For this purpose, as already expressed, the qualitative interview represents the most adequate methodological tool (Kvale 1996, Berger 1998, Silverman 2001, Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

Typically, the interview consists of an “asymmetrical encounter”<sup>44</sup> in which a researcher or interviewer requests information from an informant or interviewee (Gubrium and Holstein 2001: 3-4). A basic interviewing process entails extracting relevant information from interviewees through their linguistic constructions, by the researcher or interviewer (Ibid, Wengraf 2002, Bertrand and Hughes 2005). At first glance, interviewing as a way of collecting information might appear self-evident and empirically simple, yet in practice it represents a potentially sophisticated methodology and an affective technique for understanding and assessing the “rhetoric of socially situated speakers” and their thoughts, perceptions and feelings (Lindlof cited by Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 74).

According to Kvale (1996), there are various inherent and specific aspects to qualitative research interviewing when seeking to understand and describe the perceptions and opinions of interviewees. Understanding meaning is arguably the most important aspect of this type of interview. What is said and expressed by interviewees must be understood and interpreted clearly by the researcher. Both levels of factuality and meaning are to be covered in qualitative interviewing, but it tends to be more difficult to interview “on a meaning level”, since the interviewer must listen to the “explicit descriptions and meanings” as well as what is “said between the lines” (Ibid: 32). It is crucial for the researcher to obtain nuanced opinions and descriptions from the interviewees with precision. For in qualitative interviews it is “precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation” that would correspond to “exactness” in quantitative techniques (Ibid).

Although general opinions from interviewees can be highly relevant in a study, qualitative interviewing tends to pursue opinions, insights and descriptions related to specific themes, situations and events. Therefore, specificity in this type of interviewing is important. This aspect directly relates to that of focus. Another aspect inherent to the interview process is the potential ambiguity that some interviewees show in their answers (Kvale 1996, Silverman 2001, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Sometimes different statements from the informant might even be contradictory or the person might be concealing data or opinions that the interviewer is eager to know. In some of these cases, as Silverman argues, such responses can be interpreted as “displays of

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<sup>44</sup> Gubrium and Holstein (2001) formulate that interviewing involves the exercise of power differential, whereby the interviewer/researcher, during the interviewing process, holds more power than the interviewees.

perspectives and moral forms” (2001: 112). But, as formulated by Kvale (1996), ambiguity and contradiction in answers might also spring from the way the questions are formulated or as a result of a general failure of communication in the interview process. Conclusively, he argues that the aim of qualitative research interviews is

not to end up with unequivocal and quantifiable meanings on the themes in focus. What matters is rather to describe precisely the possibly ambiguous and contradictory meanings expressed by the interviewee (Ibid: 34).

However, it could be argued that certain statements of the interviewees may arise from accurate and transparent reflections of what seem objective contradictions of a social reality. In these cases, it is worthwhile asking follow-up questions to interviewees or even point out the contradictory responses expressed (Berger 1998, Wengraf 2002). This, however, must not be done in a way that contaminates or frames the respondent’s answers.

The aspect of the qualitative interview as an interpersonal situation coincides with the idea of Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2001) of the interview as an “asymmetrical encounter” through which specific knowledge can be attained. During the interview process the interviewer and the interviewee tend to influence each other (Kvale 1996, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Such influence can be reciprocal or unidirectional, and can operate on both emotional and cognitive levels, depending on the individuals, the context and the theme of the interview.

Researchers must be conscious of this interpersonal dynamic, both during and after the interview, while analysing its results (Ibid, Silverman 2001, Rapley 2004). As long as this type of influence is recognised and adequately acknowledged by the researcher it does not represent a methodological mistake (Kvale 1996, Gubrium and Holstein 2001).

### **5.3. The semi-structured, in-depth interview**

Of the different techniques of interviewing, the in-depth, semi-structured approach represents the most suitable for the objectives of this research. Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing entails “a certain degree of standardization of interview questions, and a certain level of openness of response by the interviewer” (Wengraf 2002: 62).

Such openness allows respondents to articulate opinions and ideas which may not necessarily relate directly to a specific question asked by the interviewer, allowing subjective information to build naturally which can ultimately have a valuable bearing on the research (Kvale 1996, Bertrand and Hughes 2005).

As a way of generalising, Kvale argues that this type of interview should not be “strictly structured with standardized questions” nor be completely “non-directive”; rather it should focus on a set of themes, which have been predetermined by the interviewer in order to answer the research questions (Ibid: 34). Importantly, Kvale’s and Brinkmann’s (2009) criteria for interviewing qualities – which stress the need for the interviewer to be knowledgeable, structuring, gentle, sensitive, open, steering, critical, remembering and interpreting – pertain particularly to the in-depth interview.

Indeed, this type of interview process requires previous preparation of questions and some degree of ‘structuring’ (Ibid, Wengraf 2002). For example, the researcher may decide to have six standard interview questions and, optionally, use one or various follow-up questions after each answer (Ibid). Alternatively, the researcher may prefer to selectively allow some “digressions” by certain interviewees providing the former seem productive and if they raise valuable information and ideas that had not been contemplated as part of the pre-elaborated sets of questions (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 79).

It is worth highlighting that at times the interviewer might not find it pertinent to use many of the specific pre-elaborated questions (Ibid, Rapley 2004). Ultimately, this depends on the complexity of the information that is being sought for the research, and on the interviewee’s propensity to answer in depth and unambiguously.

Some problems can arise when using the in-depth, semi-structured approach. For example, some interviewees may be reluctant to answer what they consider sensitive issues, or may be too shy, or perhaps may feel constrained to talk freely and might end up offering irrelevant and inconsequential information (Ibid, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Also, some interviewees might not be ready to dedicate at least twenty minutes of their time – as recommended in this type of interview – or elicit responses that relate to the research goals (Ibid). To tackle these issues it is crucial for the interviewer to follow optimal qualification criteria on the one hand, and on the other to prepare a sample of interviewees that is both representative of the population studied and in which each individual is knowledgeable of the topic and can express ideas logically.

Like all research methods, in-depth, semi-structured interviews may present some limitations. Wimmer and Dominick (2006: 122) have argued that “generalizability” can represent a difficulty in this type of interview process, because it is generally carried out with a non-random sample and the questions asked are non-standardised. Hence each interviewee might respond very differently or, for example, one interviewee might answer a question which was exclusively asked to him or her. This might pose problems for effective and non-bias interpretations of individual answers. Arthur Berger (1998) and Ina Bertrand and Peter Hughes (2005) stress the need for applying complex analytical and interpretative techniques to the data gathered so that the study is qualitatively sound. Also, they find that, in semi-structured interviews, time needs to be carefully monitored, compared to other types of interviews, so that the researcher can obtain the required data or information for the study to be effective.

However, according to many authors, the use of the in-depth interview technique offers many advantages, particularly when carrying out qualitative research (Berger 1998 and 2000, Gubrium and Holstein 2001, Wimmer and Dominick 2006, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Arguably the most important asset of this technique is its capacity to gather a great amount of detailed information and for the researcher to pursue topics that seek to answer the study’s questions (Berger 1998 and 2000). Furthermore, if compared to other research techniques, an in-depth, intensive interview “provides more accurate responses on sensitive issues” (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 122). The knowledgeable, sensitive, and understanding rapport between interviewer and interviewee tends to facilitate an environment of confidence and trust.

Another positive aspect of the in-depth interview is that it is a technique through which unexpected yet relevant information can be obtained, due to its relative flexibility and sense of adaptation to specific contexts and subjects. In fact, a respondent may raise an important issue, highly relevant to the topic studied, which had not been included in the general thematic structure of the interview and, additionally, responses can be as personal as insightful (Ibid, Bertrand and Hughes 2005). Yet, this form of in-depth interview should also impel the interviewer to prepare questions, themes, categories that relate to the study’s main questions, thus clarifying the goals of the researcher (Ibid).

Because of the reasons explained in previous paragraphs, face-to-face conversation is generally encouraged above other forms for in-depth, semi-structured interviewing

(Kvale 1996, Gubrium and Holstein 2001, Wengraf, 2002, De Leeuw 2008). Yet, the conducting of these by telephone – albeit less flexible than a face-to-face process – can be a technique of similar levels of effectiveness (Shuy 2001). Arguably, in-depth interviewing conducted by telephone is the most adequate technique after face-to-face interviewing, when the latter is not viable (Ibid, De Leeuw 2008). Among its advantages, telephone interviewing tends to present greater cost-efficiency – a relevant consideration for this research, since travelling from Great Britain to Venezuela was required. Also, it offers respondents who are sensitive to the presence of interviewers and to questions of delicate content the possibility of physical detachment, which can contribute to enhancing a more open form of conversation (Ibid, Wimmer and Dominick 2006).

A communication tool which can be put at the service of semi-structured interviewing is e-mail correspondence. Even though this technique is generally used to administer questionnaires, surveys, or short structured interviews through the Web, it represents a useful means to underpin, if used selectively and efficiently, the interviewing process (De Leeuw 2008). For instance, email correspondence can be used to request interviewees to expand on certain issues which were presented during the interview or to request them to respond to structured questions or provide additional data (Ibid).

#### **5.4. Application of interviewing techniques, sample, and fieldwork**

Drawing from various explanatory works about research methodology, as reviewed in the above paragraphs, this study's research questions demanded an empirical approach based on a qualitative investigation of the practices, attitudes and professional approaches of active journalists in Venezuela.

A total of forty-two semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out. Thirty-four of these were set up with an array of Venezuelan journalists and editors; and eight with news media owners or managers, media scholars and commentators, media-related NGOs' spokespersons, politicians and public functionaries – the list of the names of all interviewees, their occupations/posts, and the media organisations they worked for during the 2000-2010 period, are presented in Appendix G. During the fieldwork, newspaper professionals were prioritised over broadcast media ones for various reasons. Firstly, newspapers in Venezuela are perceived as the most analytical, opinionated and intellectually robust of all mediums (Pasquali 1991, Aguirre 2010). Secondly, Venezuelan print media employ as a collective the largest amount of



journalists (Ibid). Thirdly, newspaper journalists proved to be more accessible for interviewing than those of broadcasting, and after carrying out a number of interviews the former seemed to be arguably more knowledgeable about professional journalism. Lastly, under Chávez's media policies and legislation, newspapers seem to be permitted a more critical stance than broadcast media – the press is, overall, more independent than the broad spectrum of broadcasting outlets (Botía 2007, Cañizalez 2009b and 2010)<sup>45</sup>.

To achieve breadth of scope and to obtain a representative qualitative sample, the study identified forty-two interviewees that displayed significant variation in the opinions, information, and general data they were able to provide (Gobo 2004). To achieve that, I had to ascertain in advance what represented a meaningful variation and which combination of discerning interviewees was likely to provide it (Ibid, Weiss 1995). The nature of the research questions required that the sample of professionals and commentators interviewed was heterogeneous – particularly in their political and ideological viewpoints. The media professionals interviewed were chosen primarily on the basis of their own political and ideological alignment and that of the news media outlet they work or had worked for. Due to the highly-polarised political and social environment in Venezuela, it became quite feasible to define the sample of the interviews in terms of the ideological and political positioning of the news organisations these worked for during the 2000s. Also, the levels of public influence and opinion-making power the news outlets the professionals worked for are argued to entail, according to existing studies, was an important factor for selecting the journalists interviewed (Bisbal 2008b, Cañizalez 2009b).

Another important aspect of the selection criteria was that, whenever possible, journalists had some degree of “editorial responsibility” (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986: 23) and that they covered news related to politics or community or legislation or the economy, or a combination of these. The sample purposely mixed professionals of varying hierarchical levels working within the outlets. Overall, and having taken into consideration the time and logistic limitations of the research, the sample was both representative of a universe of news media professionals in Venezuela and arranged so as to assist resolving the research questions. Such representativeness can therefore lead to varying degrees of generalisations in its findings (Gobo 2004).

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<sup>45</sup> The legal framework for telecommunications and the media, established by Hugo Chávez since 2001, has introduced reforms and laws that directly affect the broadcast media more than the press (Hawkins 2003, Bisbal 2009, Cañizalez 2009b).

Initially, over fifty potential interviewees were contacted, but nine refused to be interviewed, and had to be replaced. To avoid possible imbalance in the sample, those media workers that were contacted and declined being interviewed were replaced by others of similar political standing and overall professional profile. Also, some journalists, during the 2000-2010 period, had worked in different news organisations, so they were able to comment about the experience of working in various outlets.

Thirty-seven interviews with the broad group of respondents were carried out face-to-face, each of at least forty-five minutes duration. Five of the in-depth interviews of similar time extension had to be elaborated over the telephone, because of time and financial limitations, and due to issues related to the interviewees' logistics. Email correspondence was used with three individuals that had been previously interviewed in person or by telephone, requesting their follow-up responses and additional insights on the basis of what they had already expressed. The questions in the emails were not extensive – far from it: three short questions were asked to each of the three respondents<sup>46</sup>.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in Caracas, Venezuela's capital city, since it concentrates by far the largest amount of the influential news media outlets. All interviews were carried out in Spanish – which is the native language of all interviewees and myself –, and afterwards transcribed (in Spanish), then selectively translated into English. The majority of the interviewees were non-English speakers and preferred to speak in their native language. All interviews completed were recorded, so as to capture the information provided by the interviewees, and facilitate listening to them for transcription and later analysis. From the total time dedicated to the interviewing process, the average time dedicated per interviewee was of fifty-four minutes. In order to arrange the meetings, potential interviewees were contacted by email or by phone, or both.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out in Venezuela during three different fieldwork spells (26<sup>th</sup> March 2012 to 14<sup>th</sup> April 2012; 20<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to 09<sup>th</sup> June 2012; 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2013 to 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014). In April 2012, and during late May and early June 2012, Presidential election campaigning was beginning to take place in Venezuela –

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<sup>46</sup> Email correspondence was established, after carrying out interviews, with the following interviewees: Clodovaldo Hernández (15/10/2013), Felipe Saldivia (25/05/2013), and Fabiola Zerpa (27/05/2013).

elections were held on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 – and these political circumstances could have influenced aspects of the interviewee’s responses; and arguably shaped the highly-polarised political context in which the interviews took place. The process of telephone interviewing, through which the opinions and views of five persons were collected, commenced on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2013 and was finalised on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

When all potential interviewees were first contacted, over seventy-five per cent agreed to being interviewed as soon as I had briefly explained the nature of the study, aspects of confidentiality and transparency for the process of interviewing. The remaining persons contacted requested further information about the purpose of my research and my professional background. The majority of these agreed to carry out the interview at a later date. A smaller group, however, turned down the proposal. The majority of these worked for official or pro-government news organisations, and requested being contacted later – which I did, systematically, but to no avail. On the other hand, other journalists and scholars contacted were able to offer some recommendations in the ‘recruitment’ of some interviewees.

As already mentioned, the interviews were focused on a set of themes and questions that were pre-structured, following methodological directives (Kvale 1996)<sup>47</sup>. Yet, during the process of interviewing it became necessary to adapt to the varying types of responses by the interviewees, following their comments and opinions, so as “to follow up on and to work with them and not strictly delimit the talk” to a pre-established agenda and set of questions (Rapley 2004: 18). Notwithstanding the central insight into the interviewees’ experiences and perceptions, it also became important to address, to some extent, their knowledge of the profession and their interpretation of key concepts for the research, such as ‘democracy’, ‘socialism/capitalism’, ‘community’, ‘professionalism’, etc. Very occasionally, some anecdotal digressions from the interviewees seemed necessary in order to allow an effective interaction and allow me to return to the main questions.

The sample of the news reporters and editors interviewed was taken from the following representative set of news media organisations, all of which have websites which in part reproduce the work of journalists/collaborators:

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<sup>47</sup> For the semi-structured interviews’ guide, preliminary structure and questions, see Appendix H.

#### Newspapers:

- *Últimas Noticias*: Daily tabloid, moderately pro-government, popular/middle class readership, group-owned, nationwide circulation.
- *El Universal*: Daily broadsheet, pro-opposition, conservative, middle-class readership, family-owned, nationwide circulation.
- *Correo del Orinoco*: Daily broadsheet, officialist, popular/middle-class readership, state-owned, nationwide circulation.
- *El Nacional*: Berliner-format daily, pro-opposition (formerly pro-regime), popular/middle-class readership, family-owned, nationwide circulation.
- *Diario Vea*: Daily tabloid, pro-government, family-owned, popular/middle-class readership, state-subsidised, nationwide circulation.
- *TalCual*: Daily tabloid, pro-opposition, ideologically centre-left, group-owned, mainly middle-class readership, nationwide circulation.
- *Ciudad Caracas*: Daily tabloid, officialist, popular/middle-class readership, state-owned, local circulation.
- *Panorama*: Berliner-format daily, moderately pro-government, centrist ideology, popular/middle-class readership, family-owned, non-Caracas-based (Maracaibo), regional circulation.
- *El Mundo*: Berliner-format daily, moderately pro-government, mainly financial content, middle-class readership, group-owned, nationwide circulation.
- *El Libertario*: Of varying format and periodicity, independent, anarchist, group-funded and group-owned.

#### Radio networks:

- Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV): State-owned, officialist, socially-mixed audience.
- YVKE Mundial: State-owned, officialist, socially-mixed audience.
- Unión Radio: Group-owned, commercial, moderately oppositional, socially-mixed audience.
- FM Center: Group-owned, commercial, oppositional, mainly middle-class audience.
- Radio Voces Libertarias: Community-owned, state-funded, local popular audience.
- Radio Tiuna: Community-owned, state-funded, local popular audience.
- Fe y Alegría Radio: Catholic Church-funded, socially-mixed, national audience.

Television stations/networks:

- Venezolana de Televisión (VTV): State-owned, officialist, socially-mixed audience, mixed content, open-signal nationwide reach.
- Globovisión: Group-owned, commercial, oppositional, socially-mixed audience, mainly news/opinion content, open-signal, reaches Caracas and Valencia.
- TeleSur: Owned by six Latin American states, state-subsidised, officialist, socially-mixed audience, mainly news/opinion content, transnational reach.
- Televisora de la Asamblea Nacional (ANTV): State-owned, officialist, socially-mixed audience, political and legislative content, open-signal nationwide reach.
- Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV): Group-owned, commercial, oppositional, socially-mixed audience, mixed content (closed-downed in 2009; formerly open-signal nationwide reach).
- Televisión: Group-owned, commercial, moderate, socially-mixed audience, mixed content, open-signal nationwide reach.

The other eight in-depth interviews were carried out with media scholars, news media owners, officials of media-legislation institutions, representatives of media-related and human rights NGOs, political commentators and columnists, and independent media activists. Again, a political or ideological balance was taken into consideration when assembling this sample.

Most of these eight interviewees could be selectively considered 'experts' in the fields of media, politics, governance, legislation, human rights, activism, and related areas. They tend to possess richly-grounded practical and theoretical knowledge in at least one professional field (Littig 2007; Flick 2009).

Experts' opinions and motives expressed in interviews – based on their personal knowledge, proven experience in specific occupational fields, and sense of critique and enquiry – can be very useful for context, conceptual bearings and expansive comment, thus enriching research (Ibid, Weiss 1995). This set of 'experts' made significant contributions in reporting their perceptions of the country's media and political realities, thus deepening the debate on journalism practice and democracy.

## 5.5. Elaboration of thematic strands

The theoretical framework and the historical research informed, to a significant degree, the themes to be developed in the interviews. Yet, it was the array of responses and opinions of the interviewees from where these emerged more clearly. The thematic strands or variables that were defined in this study are not destined to measuring data, but rather to support the qualitative analysis of the interviewees' opinions and reports, and relate these to the research questions. Ten thematic threads were thus developed:

- Democracy, populism and Venezuela's non-liberal shift;
- Polarisation and journalism as political struggle;
- Ownership, economic factors and ideological hegemony;
- Press freedom, censorship and legal challenges;
- Gatekeeping, journalistic autonomy and 'internal' censorship;
- Presidential/official messages and agenda-setting;
- Community, democratic participation and coverage of elections;
- Sources, access to information and the idea of news balance;
- Credibility, watchdog role and investigative journalism;
- Ideas of professionalism, journalists' contribution to ethics and to democracy.

## 5.6. Ethical considerations

When carrying out fieldwork and using the above-explained research methodologies it was imperative to be aware of ethical considerations and to apply them. Even though there is no fixed international normative of ethical standards (Ryen 2004), there is a relevant degree of agreement among theorists about the broad guidelines, necessity and implications of ethical work. John A. Barnes elaborates what seems a well-grounded formulation about ethical factors when he argues that these

arise when we try to decide between one course of action and another not in terms of expediency but by reference to standards of what is morally right or wrong (cited by Henn *et al* 2006: 26).

Formulations such as the above places, on the one hand, the participants or interviewees, rather than the researcher, at the core of the research plan; and on the other, it amplifies ethical issues beyond fieldwork to the various stages and aspects of the whole research process (Ibid, Ryen 2004). Qualitative research techniques

involving direct contact with participants, such as semi-structured and in-depth interviewing, tend to emphasise the need to protect the respondents' interests and to communicate to them transparently and professionally the nature and purpose of the research (Ibid).

The above-mentioned ethical considerations have been an integral part of this study. Yet, when describing the fieldwork experience – since each essential component of the research involved a direct rapport with participants and weighted their opinions – it is pertinent to address specific aspects of how, during the process of interviewing, I was aware of ethical research principles and applied them.

All interviewees and persons contacted for interviews, comments, recommendations and opinions were informed about the purpose of the research and its main aims. When asked for further information related to the study design, the sample, logistical aspects and my professional background I delivered it in a direct and transparent manner. Therefore, there was always 'informed consent', and none of the interviews were the product of a casual or accidental encounter, nor was there concealment about the nature of the study (Ryen 2004, Ruane 2005). However, I was conscious of the existing polarised views on journalism, culture, society and politics, and during both my interview design and its undertaking I tried not to offer excessive personal information about myself to the interviewees for, the more information a researcher in this type of contexts provides, the more the interviewees "will inevitably 'slant' what they say in the light of their interpretation of 'who' they think" the researcher is and what they assume "the effect of the researcher will be" (Wengraf 2002: 189).

None of the participants requested a promise of anonymity. Very importantly, in six interviews, at different times, the respondents requested a promise of confidentiality, which is that some information they provided would neither be used in the research nor made known publicly. This, as Wengraf argues, tends to refer to what "journalists consider 'confidential background briefing'", in which none of the information may be published and "any background briefing or contact may not be revealed either" (2002: 187). Such promise of confidentiality was only requested by the six interviewees in few brief parts of the process of conversational interviewing.

In order to build trust with the participants prior and during the process of interviewing, recommendations – which have been described in previous paragraphs of this chapter – from various texts were followed, most notably those of Kvale (1996), Wengraf

(2002), and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Trust is the key component in building a good field relation, and should establish a positive environment for effective communication between the researcher and the participants (Ryen 2004). In this sense, the questions were designed so that they presented the least conflicts of interests as possible, and no ideological or political positioning on my behalf.

Throughout the process of interviewing I became aware that predominantly I had become a 'listener', who occasionally 'steered' the conversation towards the focus of the main and tributary questions when there had been long digressions by the interviewees. In the vast majority of the occasions the place and site of the interviews was decided by the participants, and these tended to be quiet places such as closed offices or work cubicles. Knowing about their journalistic and professional work previously also proved to be helpful in establishing a good rapport and in trying to build an empathic fieldwork relation.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

The topic and character of this research, as argued in this chapter, demands a methodological approach that is essentially qualitative. For mapping and evaluating journalistic practice in a highly-polarised national context, the technique of in-depth semi-structured interviewing proved to be consistent and pertinent.

The samples for this form of qualitative interviewing were defined using critical variables, from a purposely diverse universe of people, in which contrasting political and ideological perspectives and practices were underpinned. Ethical aspects were considered during the various stages of the research, from designing specificities in methodological techniques and carrying out fieldwork, to contextualising and analysing the data gathered. The elaboration of thematic strands for organising the analysis emanated, firstly, from ideas and information generated in the interviews and, secondly, from the varied scholarly literature reviewed. The ten thematic threads developed proved to be an effective organising frame in the gathering data, as well as in the critical analysis, of the study's findings, as highlighted in the following chapters.



## Chapter 6

### Description and explanation of findings

This extensive chapter presents the main findings of this research's in-depth interviews with Venezuelan journalists, editors, media owners, media-related public functionaries, media-related NGOs' spokespersons, journalism scholars, and political commentators – representing the core of the study's data gathering and fieldwork<sup>48</sup>.

The wide and substantial range of the interviewees' nuanced, contrasted views and perceptions are in this section gathered and discussed in a predominantly descriptive vein, whereas in the chapter that follows these are analysed through a process of linkage of the empirical findings and theoretical and historical narratives<sup>49</sup>. In order to interpret the broad and substantial content emerging from the in-depth, semi-structured interview process, while being consistent with the central aims and research questions of this study, ten different themes of discussion were developed. These ten thematic areas, amalgamated around ideas and concepts explored in the theoretical chapters of this study, and encompassing opinion-patterns emanating from the interview process, are not mutually-exclusive nor self-confined. Due to the intrinsic characteristics of the qualitative research techniques employed, some thematic strands may occasionally overlap. The ten themes elaborated and evaluated are the following:

- Democracy, populism and Venezuela's non-liberal shift;
- Polarisation and journalism as political struggle;
- Ownership, economic factors and ideological hegemony;
- Press freedom, censorship and legal challenges;
- Gatekeeping, journalistic autonomy and 'internal' censorship;
- Presidential/official messages and agenda-setting;
- Community, democratic participation and coverage of elections;
- Sources, access to information and the idea of news balance;
- Credibility, watchdog role and investigative journalism;
- Ideas of professionalism, journalists' contribution to ethics and to democracy.

Each theme concludes with a brief summarising paragraph.

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<sup>48</sup> The list of the names of all interviewees, their occupations/posts, and the media organisations they worked for (2000-2010) are presented in Appendix G.

<sup>49</sup> I have translated from Spanish into English all direct quotes from interviewees, in this and other chapters.

## 6.1. Democracy, populism and Venezuela's non-liberal shift

Under this thematic strand this research seeks to chart and assess the way various Venezuelan journalists and relevant media commentators understand democracy and the democratic role of news media. Evidently democracy, as illustrated in the first chapter, has different meanings according to different people. It is hardly a consensual concept, and its normative proposals are varied (Corcoran 1983, Duncan 1983, Bobbio 1987, Callinicos 1991, Dahl 1991 and 1999, Held 2006, Keane 2009). The role of the media within a democracy conceptually follows such diversity of views and interpretations (Keane 1991 and 2009, Bolaño 1999, McQuail 2005, Sartori 2007b, Aguirre and Bisbal 2010).

Very importantly, the following paragraphs seek to illustrate the ways the study's interviewees perceive and evaluate the political shift brought about by the Chávez administration, its basic characteristics, and the likely democratic and non-democratic components of his socio-political project.

The majority of the interviewees, when asked about the nature of democracy and whether or not the Chávez-led political project entailed democratic values, reflected an almost binary divide in terms of their understanding of democracy and the government's democratic credentials. It also became patent that Chávez has, according to every interviewee, attempted to shift the country's political path, and in doing so has become a very divisive figure.

### 6.1.1. *Pro-Chávez and 'revolutionary' views on democracy*

Editor-in-Chief of the *Últimas Noticias* daily and press historian Eleazar Díaz Rangel<sup>50</sup>, considers that democracy under Chávez should be mainly characterised by the introduction of a plural and participatory means of debating and making decisions collectively. In this sense, he claims that Chávez's government has not only made the disenfranchised sectors of society active political decision-makers, but also the military who, prior to Chávez's petition for the draft of a new Constitution in 1998, were not eligible to vote. According to Díaz Rangel, the nation has witnessed a revolutionary process that is "undeniably popular, and which has upended an old two-party corrupt political system, and its neo-liberal policies."

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<sup>50</sup> Eleazar Díaz Rangel, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

All of the interviewees that work in official news outlets and organisations agree in defining the socio-political project led by Chávez as both democratic and revolutionary. Marco Hernández<sup>51</sup>, who worked at various private news outlets prior to becoming Director of Corporate Communications at state-run Conatel (National Telecommunications Commission) and co-founding NGO Periodistas por la Verdad<sup>52</sup>, finds that a key aspect of the revolutionary character of Chávez's political process has been the way the government has "embraced socialism and broken down an entrenched capitalist tradition". He and Mercedes Chacín<sup>53</sup>, who worked at *Últimas Noticias* as a reporter before joining officialist daily *Ciudad Caracas* as Deputy Editor, find that prior to Chávez's arrival to the Presidency, the political and economic model that dominated Venezuelan society was distinctively capitalist, and not truly democratic.

Clodovaldo Hernández<sup>54</sup> – who worked at *El Universal* as a reporter and has been a collaborator at state-funded dailies *Correo del Orinoco* and *Ciudad Caracas* – claims that this liberal model neglected the essential needs of the popular sectors and was clientilistic, exploitative and corrupt in nature. As with seven other interviewees, Chacín, Clodovaldo and Marco Hernández defend a socialist-inspired democracy modelled in Marxist ideals of egalitarianism, direct deliberation, and rule by the workers and exploited social groups.

Chávez's government, according to both Chacín and Carlos Revette<sup>55</sup> – who works as a reporter/host at National Assembly Television (ANTV) and at pro-government radio network YVKE Mundial – represents a new way to understand democracy, particularly because it has deepened the participation of the majority, that is, of the poor. Michel Caballero<sup>56</sup> – a political reporter at state-owned Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV), who worked until 2006 at officialist news agency Agencia Venezolana de Noticias (AVN) – argues that "those who support the President are primarily those that were excluded, almost invisible during previous governments; now Chávez has empowered them by making them key political agents."

When Chávez's political project is defined by some interviewees as anti-imperialist, they also articulate a need to challenge the "dominant" and "interventionist" political role that

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<sup>51</sup> Marco Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Periodistas por la Verdad ("Journalists for the Truth") is a pro-Chávez non-government organisation of journalists, founded in 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Mercedes Chacín, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Clodovaldo Hernández, interview by author, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

<sup>55</sup> Carlos Revette, interview by author, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2013. (Telephone interview).

<sup>56</sup> Michel Caballero, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

the U.S. – *the Empire*, as Chávez refers to it – has played in Venezuela and Latin America during the twentieth century. According to Ernesto Villegas<sup>57</sup> – who worked as reporter in *El Universal* until 2002, afterwards in state-owned VTV and in *Ciudad Caracas* as Editor-in-Chief – under Chávez’s government Venezuela “no longer behaves as a colony of the U.S.; it stands up to Washington’s attempts to dominate it”. The social and economic policies brought forward by Chávez and his populist reconfiguration of foreign policies have, according to most pro-government interviewees, strongly deepened the nation’s sense of sovereignty. Chacín says: “sovereignty is an important component for democracy, and Venezuela under Chávez has regained it.”

A reporter at TeleSur TV and at daily *Correo del Orinoco*, Douglas Bolívar<sup>58</sup>, considers that the Chávez administration represents a non-conventional type of democracy. Editor and co-owner of *Vea* daily, Tania de García<sup>59</sup>, agrees with such broad characterisation, in the sense that it is not framed within western, representative and liberal models. “Democracy is not only about the popular vote and elections, like some right-wing people think – it must offer participation and social justice for everyone,” says De García. Similarly, it is argued by journalist Bolívar that democracy is essentially about creating the best possible means for all citizens to exchange ideas in a free and plural way; to have access in equal terms to welfare, public services and information; and very importantly, to empower the whole of society. This, Bolívar, Chacín, De García and Villegas claim, is what Chávez proposes, and such has been the popularity of his social and political policies that he has won elections repeatedly.

Marco Hernández indicates that the Chávez government represents a significant shift in the way democracy has been understood and experienced in Venezuela and in Latin America. He argues that Chávez became president promoting a political project that bears no resemblance with the “light, complacent, non-radical Left” that Venezuelans were accustomed to. Furthermore, he and Alexis Colina<sup>60</sup> – coordinator at communitarian radio *Voces Libertarias* – argue that “Bolivarian socialism” derives from a different vision of the European social-democratic tradition. Social-democracy, according to Marco Hernández, Chacín and Colina, is not revolutionary and is a political model based in preserving the *status quo* of the elite; it is not primarily concerned with

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<sup>57</sup> Ernesto Villegas, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas Bolívar, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Tania de García, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Alexis Colina, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

ending the exploitation of workers and the impoverished.

This radical process of popular empowerment and social transformation, according to the views of most of the pro-government media professionals interviewed, should be led by Hugo Chávez. They argue that he has spearheaded a movement of social inclusion and alleviation of poverty, and that he possesses a unique capacity to connect with and express “the will of the people”. Both his personal and political traits place Chávez as a leader who, according to Rafael Caraballo<sup>61</sup> – head of programming at communitarian outlet Radio Tiuna –, goes “well beyond the traditional canons of a President”. A majority of pro-government interviewees agree with Caraballo’s formulation that the President has a “unique connection with the people”, and that the latter expect him to be their leader in the country’s political and social transformation.

#### 6.1.2. *Liberal critiques to Chávez’s political project*

Teodoro Petkoff<sup>62</sup>, a former *guerrillero* turned moderate-left-wing political leader and Editor-in-Chief of daily *TalCual*, contends that Chávez’s “hyper-leadership” has gradually turned into an autocracy of sorts. “There is nothing very democratic about a political project that tries to tie up all aspects of the national political life around Chávez’s persona,” says Petkoff. Political reporter Hernán Lugo-Galicia<sup>63</sup>, who works at daily *El Nacional*, argues that the manner in which the President’s words and actions permeate all spheres of the political and social life, particularly among his followers, is not genuinely democratic because it offers no space for plural and open debate.

After 2007, according to Petkoff, it became clear that Chávez’s political project relied entirely on his personal leadership: “All political and economic policies have been increasingly gravitating around Chávez. It’s he who decides everything”. Similarly, former left-wing party leader and dissident columnist Américo Martín<sup>64</sup>, argues that Chávez has, mainly through the media, kept repeating that his “socialist project” depends exclusively on his leadership and continuously emphasising that this should not be questioned.

Eighteen of the interviewees that work in private pro-opposition media argue that a key trait of democracy should be to nurture open political debate and deliberation, within a

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<sup>61</sup> Rafael Caraballo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Teodoro Petkoff, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Hernán Lugo-Galicia, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Américo Martín, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

context of freedom and diversity. Lugo-Galicia claims that debate has been restricted under Chávez. Not that there is no freedom of expression, he argues, but its quality has been “diminishing dramatically”, particularly because of the “intimidation and bullying” critics of Chávez suffer from the government and its followers. Petkoff and Martín argue that under the Chávez administration there have been limitations to freedom, yet some spaces have remained open for the opposition to express their political and economic ideas, as well as their critiques.

Taisa Medina<sup>65</sup>, Information Editor at daily *El Universal*, has a more trenchant view: “Chávez’s political process is not a democracy – end of story”. According to her, the President has imposed an autocracy, curbing human rights and limiting basic freedoms. “He has turned the notion of ‘the people’, in a strident populist discourse, to signify his own persona – for him they are one and the same thing, and this cannot be called a true democracy.”

Seventeen professional journalists and editors interviewed disagree with the definition of the Chávez regime as a socialist democracy or as plainly “socialist”, yet most concede that it entails socialist elements. “Even though Chávez’s rhetoric is radical in its confrontational tone, his regime is neither truly socialist nor truly revolutionary,” says Petkoff. Though he considers that Chávez’s government has introduced political changes in Venezuelan society, he emphasises that these do not hold a profound revolutionary nature; nor have revolutionary changes taken place. Journalist Ewald Scharfenberg<sup>66</sup>, who was Director of Media NGO Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (Ipys)<sup>67</sup> during the 2000s, argues, in a similar tenor to that of Petkoff and Martín, that in Venezuela as of 2002, there has existed a formal pseudo-institutional structure but there has been no real separation of powers. “The estate, the legislative power, the judiciary power and so on are all dominated by one person: Hugo Chávez,” says Scharfenberg.

Like most interviewees who have taken a critical stand towards the Chávez administration, Moraima Guanipa<sup>68</sup> – media professor at Central University of Venezuela (UCV) – believes that democracy should rely on the strength and independence of institutions, fairly-elected politicians, robust political parties, and

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<sup>65</sup> Taisa Medina, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Ewald Scharfenberg, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Instituto Prensa y Sociedad Venezuela (Ipys) is a non-government organisation working in defending rights for journalists and freedom of expression. It was founded in Caracas in 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Moraima Guanipa, interview by author, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

freedom to check on the government and to dissent. Alonso Moleiro<sup>69</sup>, political reporter in *El Nacional* during the early-2000s before joining the Unión Radio network, argues that the Chávez government has weakened institutional and multi-party democracy. “We have a president who, early on, decided to strengthen conflict because he believes that political pacts and political concessions is something that belongs to the bourgeois, whereas conflict is revolutionary,” he argues. Similarly, Pedro Pablo Peñaloza<sup>70</sup>, presenter with Globovisión TV and political reporter in *El Universal*, says that Chávez’s is a “dogmatic government which accepts no critiques”, and that “the government party (Venezuelan United Socialist Party, PSUV) and its policies are determined by whatever the leader says.”

Marcelino Bisbal<sup>71</sup>, media professor and analyst at Andrés Bello University, claims that Chávez’s political project cannot be called a democracy, but nor is it anti-democratic. He defines its paradoxical and hybrid nature as that of “a mixed creature with strong populist and militarist elements, which have been part of the history of Latin America; riding under Chávez on a wave of pseudo-leftist, anti-neo-liberal rhetoric”. Petkoff, Martín, Moleiro and Bisbal argue that Chávez’s “populist” and “anti-liberal” rhetoric owes a lot to the Cuban leftist model led by Fidel and Raúl Castro, in which the state rules in the name of revolution.

Martín, coinciding with eleven interviewees, also argues that Chávez’s political project belongs to the tradition of Latin American *caudillos*. He finds a paradox in Chávez “claiming to be a democratic and radical socialist, when truly he is a typical Latin American *caudillo*”. Yet, Petkoff claims that although Chávez leads a militarist and authoritarian regime, with some traits of *caudillismo*, he does not belong to the Latin American tradition of military dictatorships of the twentieth century. Even though the President has gradually broken down traditional norms of political coexistence, promoted the belief in a personal leadership and an unwillingness to negotiate politically with the political opposition, according to both Petkoff and Moleiro, he has not been inspired by the dictatorships that ruled most of South America between the 1960s and 1980s.

Chávez’s hybrid political project has both socialist and neo-liberal elements, according to Martín, Moleiro and Petkoff. They hold the view that Chávez has maintained an anti-

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<sup>69</sup> Alonso Moleiro, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Marcelino Bisbal, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

liberal rhetoric, and has made alliances with anti-liberal regimes such as the Cuban, Iranian, Belarusian, among others; but that the “rentist way in which he has managed the oil industry and the reliance on oil money, especially with the U.S. as its main energy-trading partner, is one example of a capitalist-modelled economic plan,” argues Martín.

Journalist Hugo Prieto<sup>72</sup>, who has worked as political reporter at *El Nacional* and at *Últimas Noticias*, argues that the Left-Right political framework when assessing Chávez’s democratic credentials is not too relevant. Similarly, Guanipa argues that “Chávez’s political model is a complex new thing in which, through his own hyper-leadership, the President has tried to impose a hegemonic plan that has not been fully assimilated and understood – not even within Chavismo.”

According to Prieto, Chávez benefited from the fact that previous governments in Venezuela had overlooked key democratic aspects such as promotion of equality and inclusion, plural political participation, and social responsibility. Rafael Uzcátegui<sup>73</sup>, coordinator at Provea<sup>74</sup> and co-founder of anarchist newspaper *Libertario*, describes the old *puntofijista* political system as “decaying, clientelist, corrupt and unwilling to address effectively the basic concerns of the majority of the population – the poor”. Under Chávez’s rule these social sectors have been, in Prieto’s words, “empowered by the regime, even if they are still in a state of poverty. They have a President who talks to them and about them, and this is a major gain.”

### 6.1.3. *Hyper-polarisation and democracy*

Uzcátegui and Prieto, albeit being critical of many aspects of Chávez and his policies, separately argue that the disenfranchised under the Chávez’s administration feel much more visible, valued and dignified than before; and that such a major shift in their political empowerment and representation constitutes a democratic feature. The discourse of Chávez has also brought forth the novelty of hyper-politicisation among the poorer sectors, according to the majority of interviewees. And what seems apparent, argue Guanipa and Prieto, is that hyper-politicisation has been deliberately promoted by the government in order to be able to impose a specific political model. If many

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<sup>72</sup> Hugo Prieto, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012 and 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Rafael Uzcátegui, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Provea (Programa Venezolano de Educación y Acción en Derechos Humanos) is a non-government organisation, which operates in the defence of human rights, workers’ rights and assistance to grass roots movements. It was founded in Caracas in 1988.



professionals such as Clodovaldo and Marco Hernández, Villegas, and Chacín consider such hyper-politicisation as positive for democratic advancement; others – like Bisbal, Guanipa, Lugo-Galicia and Medina – consider that it has also had negative consequences: the emergence of a divided and polarised society and the impoverishment of democratic debate.

Just as the understanding of democracy and its values proves to be varied among interviewees, so are the reflections of these about the nature of the media in a democracy and the way they interpret their own professional roles as media practitioners and commentators within Venezuelan society. For this study, assessing the intersection of democratic practice and journalistic values through the perspective of media-related workers in Venezuela is of uppermost importance. The above-mentioned aspects – central to this research – are covered throughout the following thematic threads in more depth.

## **6.2. Polarisation and journalism as political struggle**

The high levels of politicisation have defined a most significant character of Venezuelan society under the Chávez administration (Bisbal 2009, Petkoff 2010, Lozada 2011). The traits and dynamics of such politicisation within a social framework of political conflict have been defining a new form of intense polarisation in the nation (Ibid). Social and political polarisation within a national context tends to represent a crisis of democratic values such as plurality, inclusiveness, deliberation and public security; and its negative effects can permeate “all the vital spaces of every person” (Diez 2011: 60).

This part of the research charts perceptions and opinions of journalists and of media-related professionals in relation to the way journalistic practice in Venezuela has become politicised, through which mechanisms, and to what degree. In attempting to characterise such politicisation and its effects, the interviewees offered some relevant insights regarding the role the media have played in reflecting polarisation and intensifying it. Various scholars and commentators have argued that, in Venezuela, polarisation can be understood by looking at its news media (Bisbal 2009). Through the views of its practitioners one may be able to comprehend how the media operate at the centre of a politically-polarised confrontation, and how journalists and editors have been working in such a contested environment during the Chávez era.

All interviewees believe that political polarisation has increased markedly in the

Venezuelan media during the 2000s. A notable majority of the journalists and media-related professionals interpret polarisation as a negative circumstance, one which tends to represent an obstacle for democratic exchange and inclusive conflict solutions within society. Journalist Felipe Saldivia<sup>75</sup>, Editorial Advisor for daily *Ciudad Caracas* and reporter at *El Universal* until 2002, considers that the diversity of voices is an indispensable democratic component, and that “extreme political polarisation and confrontation in Venezuela has been weakening the dynamics of democracy”. According to Petkoff, polarisation in Venezuela “relies on that harmful friend-enemy equation, and hardly offers space for rational and moderate views, while closing down dialogue and civic debate”. Víctor Hugo Febres<sup>76</sup>, journalist at RCTV and Televisión networks during the early-2000s and co-founder of Los del Medio group<sup>77</sup>, argues that polarisation exacerbates “conflict, intolerance, exclusion, social and political violence – all anti-democratic features.”

#### 6.2.1. *Dynamics and strategies of media polarisation: pro-opposition views*

Thirty-three of the professionals interviewed contend that journalistic practice has, since 1998, become increasingly polarised and militant. Bisbal argues that political and ideological struggle found a “new space” in the Venezuelan media, which “ended up changing the identity of the media landscape in the country and the role of news and of journalists”. He suggests that the news media during the Chávez era has become characterised by “the dominant elaboration and consumption of information and counter-information, propaganda and manipulated news, underpinned within a frame of polarised and polarising views at previously unknown levels.”

Yet, the intensity and types of polarisation, most of the interviewees argue, have varied throughout the 2000s. In this sense, Xabier Coscojuela<sup>78</sup>, Deputy Editor at daily *TalCual*, arguably condenses the views of many – particularly of those journalists of moderate pro-opposition leanings – and offers a pertinent descriptive account of the different “stages” of political polarisation in the news media during the period studied.

In Coscojuela’s opinion, it is important to consider that during the 1980s and 1990s there was some level of polarisation within Venezuelan society. During these two

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<sup>75</sup> Felipe Saldivia, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Víctor Hugo Febres, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Los del Medio is a group of journalists of different political and ideological leanings, who joined efforts to discuss political and professional issues as a consequence of the 2002 national crisis.

<sup>78</sup> Xabier Coscojuela, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

decades successive governments promoted a predominantly neo-liberal economic and political agenda and reduced social assistance, generating discontent among the popular sectors. The media played a crucial role in attacking political parties at the time, as argued by eight interviewees. Díaz Rangel argues that polarisation within the media, although significantly exacerbated during Chávez's rule, is by no means new in Venezuela. "Political polarisation has historical roots – it suffices to analyse our press during the nineteenth and twentieth century and find that at various stages they were radically partisan and polarised," explains Díaz Rangel.

Coscojuela argues that "from the 1980s and during the 1990s Venezuelan private media played *anti-politics*, they began to promote a polarisation between the political class and the people". "Soon enough the media realised the mistake they had made", he says. During his 1998 presidential campaign, Chávez capitalised on this negative perception of traditional party politics.

Guanipa, Medina, Petkoff and Cristina Marcano<sup>79</sup>, who worked as Politics Editor at *El Nacional*, express that as soon as he became president, Chávez overtly attempted to divide the country between "friends" and "enemies". They argue that, during the beginning of his rule, Chávez was the most visible element in promoting an antagonistic scheme through a discourse that clearly defined two blocs of opposing ideological and political projects: "the people" versus "the oligarchy".

Between 1999 and 2006, according to Coscojuela, polarisation was reshaped as the private, pro-opposition media played a very active political role. Most of the private media began to discourage any intention of dialogue with the government. The pro-opposition media felt, as argued by Coscojuela and Zerpa<sup>80</sup> – investigative journalist at *El Nacional* –, that they could play the role of political parties and become defining elements in what seemed a symmetrical struggle for power between Chavismo and the opposition.

Most journalists working in private, pro-opposition media agree that the most confrontational and politicised anti-Chávez positions within the media appeared during 2002 and 2003. This became evident in the way that the most influential private media mishandled information and displayed a strong anti-government bias during their coverage of the April 2002 coup d'état, and of the general strike between December

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<sup>79</sup> Cristina Marcano, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Fabiola Zerpa, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

2002 and February 2003. Coscojuela, Febres, Moleiro and María Alejandra López<sup>81</sup> – who worked as a journalist and then as manager at Unión Radio network – observe that the private pro-opposition media showed their most radical political facet during the coverage of those events. They argue that the actions of these news organisations were mistaken, and were also harmful for democracy.

The way most of the private and pro-opposition media operated in their news coverage of the opposition-led anti-Chávez actions during 2002 and early 2003 was refuted by the majority of the population, and it became patent very soon that beliefs of credibility towards the media declined significantly. This is the shared view of the majority of interviewees. Yet, in the opinion of most of the private-media journalists interviewed, many private media organisations after 2003 shifted to a more normative role, albeit still maintaining their political tendencies. “They realised they should not continue trying to replace political parties and being so radically biased,” says Lisseth Boon<sup>82</sup>, investigative journalist with *El Mundo* and *Últimas Noticias* dailies; while Zerpa argues that most of the pro-opposition media “restored a more balanced and less strident role, and this has to do with the relative strengthening of the political opposition of a more moderate leaning during the second half of the decade”. According to Boon and Aliana González<sup>83</sup>, who in 2000 worked as Community Editor at *TalCual* and *El Universal* before joining *El Nacional* as Information Editor, the intention to recover normative journalistic proceedings was more evident among journalists at the time than it was among some media owners.

Coscojuela, Guanipa and Marcano argue that in 2007, when the more moderate opposition leaders gained control of the main parties rivalling the President, it became evident that Chávez resolved to strategically intensify polarisation for political purposes. If the government had been following a policy of confrontation before, once Chávez won re-elections in December 2006, it “manifestly became less tolerant of any type of criticism in the media,” says Coscojuela. Most pro-opposition interviewees agree with the view that “the President and the regime since then tried to systematically humiliate journalists or critics,” as argued by Juan Antonio Alonso<sup>84</sup>, tribunals and courts reporter with *El Universal*.

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<sup>81</sup> María Alejandra López, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Lisseth Boon, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Aliana González, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Juan Francisco Alonso, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

The vast majority of pro-opposition media journalists and editors share the view that the main promoter of political polarisation during the second half of the 2000s was the President, while the most visible opposition leaders and private news media had shifted to a less confrontational tone. Martín says that “Chávez has been very effective in increasingly stimulating and provoking polarisation – it’s his best way to win elections by turning them into a plebiscite of sorts.”

During the second half of the Chávez era, in Coscojuela’s assessment, the state and officialist media began closing down almost all access to critics of the President. Within that same period of time, as formulated by Alonso, it became very rare for government-affiliated or officialist columnists to write in pro-opposition media outlets. During the first half of the 2000s it had been common for some pro-Chávez commentators to write in the critical, private press or to appear in critical broadcasting media. But, as the government “raised its level of aggressive rhetoric, its sympathisers in the media became even more radical,” argues Diana Carolina Ruiz<sup>85</sup>, reporter and programme host at Globovisión TV.

Moleiro believes that the “aggressiveness” of the state media towards critics has been so intense and systematic – particularly during the second half of the 2000s – that he sometimes justifies the use of news in critical media as a means to openly confront the government. Javier Mayorca<sup>86</sup>, reporter of military affairs and crime with *El Nacional*, argues that “in a regime that has become as sordid and autocratic as Chávez’s, independent news media should use their agendas to uncover and denounce the regime’s manipulation and corruption.”

Bisbal, Guanipa and Petkoff argue, in a similar manner, that Chávez and the state media seek to exacerbate polarisation and in doing so impose a hegemonic communication and information supremacy on all Venezuelan society. “In order to achieve supremacy in power, the regime seeks to annihilate all its political rivals, all its media critics,” says Petkoff. Part of this process, according to Bisbal, consists of “neutralising or coercing the media that the government sees as critical or potentially critical”<sup>87</sup>. These views are shared by the majority of the pro-opposition interviewees.

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<sup>85</sup> Diana Carolina Ruiz, interview by author, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

<sup>86</sup> Javier Mayorca, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Marcelino Bisbal exemplifies “silencing” or “coercion” of some private news outlets by the regime with the cases of broadcasting networks Venevisión TV and Unión Radio. These were outlets that were quite oppositional during the early years of Chávez’s first term in office. He explains that “Venevisión re-negotiated with the government the likely continuation of its transmissions by

### 6.2.2. *Binary schemes in news, binary audiences*

According to eighteen interviewees, the scheme whereby opinion programmes have one pro-government presenter alongside an oppositional one has become much more common during the second half of the Chávez era. This binary scheme of presenting opinion and news stresses the environment of polarisation, as argued by Marcano. However, Globovisión TV, which is the most fervent pro-opposition broadcast media according to the vast majority of interviewees, “rarely has government officials and spokespersons in its opinion and interview programmes’ people – they dare not go there,” says Ruiz.

Similarly, state television network VTV hardly broadcasts anti-government spokespersons or critics in its programmes. VTV and Globovisión TV, most interviewees concur, represent the two most radically polarised broadcast outlets of national impact in Venezuela, each in an opposite extreme of the spectrum of political and ideological polarisation. Ismael Bravo<sup>88</sup>, news reporter with RCTV until its closure in 2007, argues that “it is also noteworthy pointing out that Globovisión, since the mid-2000s, has been the only television station left with a critical stance and a certain watchdog role towards the government, but does not have nationwide coverage”. Similarly, in the opinion of Víctor Amaya<sup>89</sup> – who worked as news producer at Unión Radio and afterwards as Politics editor in *TalCual* – it is “revealing” the way a “highly-polarised radio station like YVKE Mundial has radicalised its pro-Chávez position throughout the decade; whereas private-owned Unión Radio, had to neutralise its pro-opposition tendency after 2006 – this has been the trend in Venezuela’s broadcast media.”

By most accounts of pro-opposition journalists and editors, in private television and radio outlets political opinion has been decreasing – particularly the type that denounces government actions and policies. This, according to Bisbal and Moleiro, is a partial consequence of the media owners’ reaction to the implementation of telecommunication laws by the government, directed primarily at the broadcast media. The press are less affected by these new regulations, and have arguably been “allowed

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sacrificing the critical stance it once had towards Chávez while Unión Radio, which had been pro-opposition in its news and opinion content, was coerced by the government as of 2006 to introduce pro-regime presenters in its programming.”

<sup>88</sup> Isnardo Bravo, interview by author, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

<sup>89</sup> Víctor Amaya, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

more freedom and less coercion, so we have seen that the most critical voices and news of denunciation are to be found in the printed media,” explains Amaya.

Prieto believes that most journalists have fallen into “the trap” of polarisation which has been principally promoted by the government, and followed by the opposition. He finds that the most noteworthy mechanism of such a “trap” has consisted in many media and journalists deciding to prioritise not the relevance of information but the fulfilment of their audiences’ expectations. “The accuracy and veracity of information lost relevance in relation to what the radicalised audiences wanted to see, read or hear. This had not happened in Venezuela before,” argues Prieto.

During the Chávez era, in Prieto’s assessment, a tendency has grown among most journalists to seek information which allows them to confirm a specific point of view, that best represents the journalist’s political beliefs and, very importantly, that is aligned with those of his or her audience. Boon, Febres, Medina and Uzcátegui express sharing this view.

In the described polarised environment, in which many journalists are more concerned about their audiences than in the nature and quality of news, information “can be reduced to a lifeless merchandise,” argues Prieto. The majority of journalists in Venezuela, according to him, have become convinced that they should only respond to an audience, and in doing so they have assumed an already-established view of reality – be it ideological, political or economic. These types of concessions towards an audience, in the opinion of Febres and Prieto, affect negatively the journalistic profession, and society at large.

For those media professionals who do not identify themselves with either Chávez’s political programme or with that of the opposition parties, it has become increasingly difficult to find a receptive audience, according to Uzcátegui. Prieto claims that he belongs to a minority of journalists who have “not fallen into that dynamic of extreme polarisation” and that, although he has lost an important part of the readers or audience he previously had in the pre-Chávez era, he senses that it was his own non-polarised stance that allowed him “to have access to sources on both sides of the political spectrum”. Cases such as his are rare.

Eighteen interviewees expressed the view that, during the 2000s, they witnessed a growing tendency of reporters interviewing sources that think alike and align with their

respective ideologies. This, they agree, was not evident in journalistic practice before 2000. Such tendency reveals a journalistic position which “lacks depth, sense of contrast and debate: sometimes it even lacks ideas,” says Marcano. A troubling aspect of such tendency is that information and opinions emanating from news media outlets have become very predictable for the public, lacking contrasted representations of reality – this view is shared by Febres, Prieto, Uzcátegui and Villegas.

### 6.2.3. *Pro-government and Chavista perspectives on media polarisation*

Chacín argues that “an openly ideological media which addresses an equally overtly ideological audience is positive for journalism and society”. Saldivia agrees to a degree with Chacín’s opinion. He argues that for socialism to permeate Venezuelan society, a certain level of politicisation must be introduced and promoted by the state and by as many social agents as possible.

However, as argued by Saldivia and Marco Hernández, political participation of the popular sectors and their politicisation has been combated by the traditional elites and by most of the private media, as has been the political project Chávez promotes. “It is in the interest of the political ultra-right wing for the people and for Chávez’s followers not to have a political voice; so the right-wing media has tried everything to discredit the President and his followers; but both the government and the people reacted to this, and this led to polarisation,” argues Saldivia. According to Jordan Rodríguez<sup>90</sup>, reporter with TeleSur TV after working with ANTV in the early 2000s, before Chávez rose to power “the media was an integral part of the ruling elite, but the President defied that in the name of socialism; the reaction of the private media was to confront him – this is how political polarisation started, back in 1999.”

Díaz Rangel and Argelio Pérez<sup>91</sup>, Deputy Editor at daily *Ve*, argue that the private, pro-opposition media have contributed more significantly to the highly-polarised climate than the state and pro-government media. Díaz Rangel argues that “most of the responsibility should fall on the oppositional media, because of the way these openly campaigned against the government as soon as Chávez took office”. Pérez explains that “because we promote a revolution and class struggle, the private sector or the right wing demonised us and said we caused the polarisation”. A majority of pro-government professionals interviewed agree with the above-mentioned opinions of Díaz Rangel,

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<sup>90</sup> Jordán Rodríguez, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>91</sup> Argelio Pérez, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012.



Rodríguez and Pérez.

According to Caballero and Ameliut Hernández<sup>92</sup> – news reporter with VTV –, prior to 2003 Chávez-sympathising journalists could work comfortably in any news media regardless of their political leanings. During the second half of the 2000s they believe, like Pérez and Villegas, that a pro-government journalist would not be allowed by private owners to work in a pro-opposition news organisation. “I don’t think that during the second-half of the 2000s there were news media outlets in the country that were not political, – maybe with the exception of a few television and radio stations – ; but in general, one finds only small variations of political leanings within our media,” says Hernán Canorea<sup>93</sup>, news reporter at Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV).

Chacín argues that a news outlet “can only be honest towards its audience by clearly showing its ideological standing, and not by appearing to be supposedly neutral and by hiding its political nature”. She and Saldivia maintain that “socialist” and “truly democratic” media must be politicised, ideological and formative in terms of political discussion. Saldivia finds that, for example, Globovisión TV, albeit being “hysterically oppositional, pro-U.S., and recklessly biased towards the right-wing”, is carrying out “its own role in politicising – this is positive, even though I don’t agree at all with their ideological outlook”. He argues that this type of media content, from a revolutionary perspective, is “much preferable to outlets which essentially seek to stimulate consumerism, capitalistic values and alienation by means of frivolous content, such as the large television stations Venevisión and RCTV.”

Nine journalists and editors working in pro-government media say that Chávez has led politicisation in the media as a means to get across his policies of popular participation and confront the opposition. “Chávez was the first leader to address media owners and reporters publicly, by their name, in his speeches, when he felt they were misguiding the people. He exposed their wrongdoings and obviously this did not go down well in the private right-wing media,” says Rodríguez. According to Villegas, as soon as the President “exposed the abuses and hidden agendas of the right-wing media, these intensified their adversarial character”. “Soon enough, particularly between 2000 and 2003, it became an open media war,” explains Clodovaldo Hernández.

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<sup>92</sup> Ameliut Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Hernán Canorea, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

During Chávez's rule, Chacín argues, both "revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries" have been increasingly able "to overtly express their own ideology and from which standpoint each one looks at reality – now I can express the way I look at reality from my socialist perspective". Bolívar says that, although politicisation in Venezuelan society reflects a "positive step", such have been the high levels of polarisation, political conflict and animosity that it "seems necessary to promote a truce between all media in all sides of the political spectrum". According to the majority of interviewees this might seem desirable, but not probable in the near future. Prieto argues that "polarisation, like Chavismo, is here to stay; for it has indeed acquired a historical character."

The foregoing thematic section has charted the opinions and perceptions of journalists, editors and media commentators in relation to the increasing tendency to hyper-polarisation among Venezuelan media and its workers, and the impact this has been having on journalistic practice. It seems evident that the news media – and Venezuelan society – had not experienced such high levels of politicisation and ideological struggle during its twentieth century democratic period. The majority of interviewees – regardless of each one's political tendencies – agree that, in general, the media in Venezuela not only have reflected political and ideological polarisation, but have promoted it. From the opinions expressed by journalists, it could be argued that most would endorse Bisbal's formulation that the clash of doctrinal ideas in Venezuela between two very different national political projects – one Chávez-led, the other oppositional – have found in the media a "new space for militancy and confrontation". Some journalists, on both sides of the ideological spectrum, express a desire to rise above hyper-polarisation, while adopting a more balanced and normative role as media professionals. However, another group – whose political standings are mainly premised on radical narratives, and who support Chávez's government – view polarisation as positive within the media, because it allegedly galvanises social mobilisation and revolutionary ideals.

### **6.3. Ownership, economic factors and ideological hegemony**

As explained in previous chapters, the configuration of media ownership is a key aspect – as stressed in the neo-Marxist tradition and in critical political economy – in the definition of information and communicational content produced by media organisations (Mosco 1996 and 2006, Mattelart and Mattelart 2005, Sparks 2007). News and opinion content in commercial and private media, under such critical perspectives, tends to curb representation of social diversity, restrict access to production, depoliticise the public,

and ultimately represent a tool for elitist dominance (Mosco 1996 and 2006, Bolaño 1999).

The largest and most influential media in Venezuela, as highlighted already, have been traditionally owned by family groups and local corporations (Bisbal 2009). During the twentieth century these have operated predominantly under a commercial framework, loosely adopting liberal-inspired values (Ibid, Díaz Rangel 2007). Yet, the wide majority of interviewees in the study expressed the view that, during the 2000s, important changes took place in the structure of media ownership.

There is general consensus that prior to Chávez's arrival to power there was limited possibility for public service and communitarian media to gain terrain and a larger share of the audience. Saldivia argues that the media had been operating in a "capitalist and oligarchic framework" during decades until the Chávez administration began "its struggle to change things around". "The media here had been run by a group of families, and the prime-time audiences belonged to them – the share of people watching state television or listening to state radio was very small, but has grown under Chávez," explains Revette. However, as expressed by Rodríguez, "the revolutionary media still need to grow much more, we are still far from having half of the national audience."

### 6.3.1. *Pro-government outlook of media ownership*

According to Díaz Rangel, during the 1980s and 1990s the media in Venezuela became more powerful than in previous decades and played a stronger political role. Thirteen interviewees agree with Díaz Rangel's view that during the early 1980s the media – particularly certain newspapers – intensified their politicised stance. At the time, most of the private-media owners aspired for national political activity to gravitate around the media, and not the other way around. "The Chávez administration inherited a media landscape in which news outlets had a lot of political and economic power," says Rodríguez.

Bolívar, Caballero, Chacín, and Saldivia are critical about the way the "elitist" concentration of the most influential media reflect and promote the political and economic interest of its owners, while reducing possibilities for the media to present and represent the diversity of many interest and minority groups, their opinions and a pluralistic portrayal of reality. Bolívar argues that part of Chávez's early policies

consisted in “democratising” the media spectrum, strengthening the state media in order to “effectively offer the people the means to inform and debate through their own voices – this implied a revolutionary change.”

Such a radical shift, by which the state would grow significantly in ownership of outlets while also stimulating community media, in the words of Marco Hernández, was not welcomed by the private media and the political opposition during Chávez’s first years in power, with very few exceptions. *El Nacional*, for example, which traditionally had been a left-wing or left-of-centre daily, like some other media, backed Chávez during his electoral campaign and his first months in office, but soon after “gave a right-wing turn,” according to Saldivia<sup>94</sup>.

There is consensus among the interviewed journalists working in state media that during the 1990s clientelism between some members of government, business corporations and the owners of private media was deeply engrained. This dynamic, they argue, affected the functioning of the news media in a negative way because these interest groups would hardly check on the economic elite’s wrongdoings. Part of the Bolivarian process in relation to the media, they suggest, implied changing this situation.

According to some interviewees, as soon as it became evident that Chávez was challenging the dominant family-owned or capitalist corporatist structure of the media during the early 2000s, most news outlet owners reinforced their journalistic advocacy approach. Some pro-Chávez interviewees defined the advocate, anti-government procedures of most of the private news organisations then as “media terrorism”. This type of “terrorism” has been, according to Pérez, a “Machiavellian” and “anti-ethical” reaction to the President’s “revolutionary plan” to turn the media into an instrument with which to stimulate community media and mobilise his followers. In the opinion of the majority of pro-government professionals, most of the private media set out to play an anti-Chávez agenda-setting role, criticising his actions and policies, promoting the idea of his ousting, and at times, as argued by De García, “depicting him as a Latin American Hitler.”

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<sup>94</sup> The Editor of *El Nacional* during 1998, Alfredo Peña, became member of Chávez’s first Cabinet. Similarly, Carmen Ramia, wife of the newspaper’s owner, Miguel Henríquez Otero, became the first Minister of Information of the Chávez administration. This situation, however, lasted for less than six months. They then became strongly oppositional towards Chávez.

This confrontation, according to almost every interviewee, led to the break-up between the private media and the state. On April 11<sup>th</sup> 2002, a massive anti-Chávez street protest took place in Caracas. Protesters demanded the President step down from office, and Chávez surrendered after an influential faction of the military and some business leaders led a coup d'état. Almost all the private media carried out what became known, in the words of many pro-government interviewees, as a "media sabotage" followed by an "information blackout". Villegas explains that after very tense days of confrontation between most of the private media and the state, during April 11<sup>th</sup> the main commercial television outlets decided to "illegally split the screen into two parts". In one half they transmitted the obligatory official message from the President, in the other the oppositional march towards the Presidential palace. "It was evident that the private media owners were involved politically in the coup that followed," says Villegas. The "information blackout" would last until April 13<sup>th</sup>, and was implemented "by its owners in clear orchestration with those that carried out the coup," says Marco Hernández. "The events of April 2002 represent better than anything else the hegemonic struggle for power in our media," says Rivette.

### 6.3.2. *The rise of hyper-politicised newsrooms*

Since the April 2002 coup d'état, the migration of media workers from one outlet to the other has been increasingly determined by the ideological affinity of journalists and owners. "After 2002 and 2003 it became very difficult for a pro-Chávez journalist to work in a pro-opposition media organisation," says Díaz Rangel. "In earlier decades that had not been the case – newsrooms were ideologically mixed," he adds. "After 2002, newsrooms in almost every media began to be less diverse in their ideological composition," says Clodovaldo Hernández. De García, Bolívar and Marco Hernández argue that pro-government media are more likely to accept pro-opposition professionals working as reporters, than the reverse.

Most journalists working in private media contradict the above formulations. Dissident journalists González, Mayorca and Medina argue that in the private-owned newspapers where they have worked there is no political or ideological discrimination in the newsroom. "We've learnt to live with political differences and, very importantly, most reporters are increasingly aware of the need for dialogue and diversity," says González. In the private news media, as argued by Mayorca, the owners and editors "do not try to unify the political criteria of its journalists" and most of them operate in a "more independent and pro-democratic way than those in the Chavista media, which tend to

operate as instruments of state propaganda.”

In the opinion of Uzcátegui, the officialist media are “essentially propaganda tools of the state”, while most of the communitarian or ‘alternative’ media are “not truly alternative, but rather artificial” and have “been gradually reduced to projects of the state”. Like sixteen other interviewees, Uzcátegui argues that the Chávez government has tried to “co-opt and appropriate” all notions of alternative media. “It is a paradox that the communitarian media claim to be ‘alternative’ and ‘independent’, when it is the opposite – the vast majority of them are allowed to operate as long as they only promote state policies,” says Coscojuela.

### 6.3.3. *Ideology and “newsroom migration”*

All pro-opposition journalists interviewed argue that newsroom constitution in private media has been during the 2000s more ideologically diverse than those of the state media. Yet, most agree that this type of diversity has been diminishing. “After the 2002 coup and the 2003 general strike it became very difficult for Chavista reporters to work in any opposition media,” explains Moleiro, not because barriers were set by the owners or the organisation, but mainly because polarisation also brought forward a “newsroom migration”. Since then, according to Zerpa, a “new logic” began to operate in newsrooms, and it dictated that “if I’m a revolutionary then I should work in a revolutionary organisation, and if I’m pro-opposition then I should be working in a pro-opposition outlet.”

Díaz Rangel says that *Últimas Noticias*’ newsroom presents political diversity, but even so he admits that it is gradually becoming more homogeneous, like the rest of Venezuela’s news media, due to the dominant polarisation. The majority of the interviewees agree with the notion that newsrooms in general have become significantly more politically and ideologically homogenous than in previous decades. Most express that this is not desirable, but that it is an inevitable consequence of the broad social and political clash of ideas in Venezuela. Exceptions to this view, like those of Chacín and Pérez, do not find that a lack of ideological diversity within a news organisation – or within society for that matter – is negative for journalistic practice. “Within a revolution you want politically-conscious reporters who are fully engaged with the revolution,” argues Pérez.

#### 6.3.4. *The surge of state-owned and state-sponsored media*

April 2002 also became a defining moment in the strategic approach the government had maintained towards media ownership. According to Caballero, Clodovaldo Hernández and Rodríguez, after the efforts of most of the private media in supporting the ousting of Chávez the government realised it needed to further reinforce its media influence and ownership. “Chávez opted not to openly attack the traditional, oppositional media but to create a robust alternative media system,” says Clodovaldo Hernández. As someone who monitors closely Venezuela’s media landscape, he claims that between 2002 and 2010 communitarian media outlets grew from around ten to more than 300. “The state does not want to own media outlets, it wants to democratise them,” he argues. Saldivia contends that with the existence of a vigorous network of community media, Venezuelan society can have a more participatory role in the media while communitarian outlets “also serve as communication and information shields against the hegemony of the private media.”

Even though the state owns or funds more media outlets than any previous government in the country’s history, Marco Hernández argues that it does not want to grow into a “media behemoth”. The state, in his view, has developed a policy for non-profit ‘alternative’ media so that these can have an autonomous voice. “History in Latin America has taught us that it is important to have an autonomous media that can inform with independence from U.S. influence and capitalist forces,” he argues. In case there is a change of government, Bolívar, Canorea and Marco Hernández believe that communities throughout the country would be able to maintain their media spaces for debate, critique and dissidence.

Bisbal is one of many critical voices assessing the Chávez-led process of launching over 300 communitarian media outlets. “The so-called ‘alternative’ or ‘communitarian’ media work essentially as information and communication instruments in favour of the state hegemony,” he expresses. In his view, not only does the state own more media outlets than ever before, but the vast majority of communitarian media are an integral part of the government’s political strategy – a phenomenon unseen before in the country. Similarly, Diana Lozano<sup>95</sup> – reporter of legislation at *El Nacional* – argues that the state “not only has television outlets such as VTV, ANTV, Tves, TeleSur, Avila TV, Catia TV; it also has almost all of the so-called communitarian media to support its

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<sup>95</sup> Diana Lozano, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

political discourse.”

Before the Chávez administration, according to many journalists, it was rare to find a community radio dedicated to broadcasting overtly advocacy journalism. This, by most accounts of pro-opposition interviewees, has changed drastically. Very importantly, public broadcasting, which has been traditionally controlled and run by the government, has been radically politicised. “These media, unfortunately, no longer play a normal role of public service”, argues Bisbal, but instead have increasingly grown into the “media apparatus of a state-communicator”. To exemplify this phenomenon, he highlights the growing state-ownership of television stations: “by 2010 the state owned seven television stations with national coverage, two of regional coverage and finances over 30 communitarian pro-government television outlets, so the government has more than 40 television stations in total”. The private sector, according to Bisbal, Bravo and López, owns 35 television stations, but most of these have been politically neutralised through government pressure. Similarly, Petkoff argues that the state has become a “media monster”, owning significantly more news outlets than any previous government, while promoting “communitarian media within a model similar to that of the ‘Soviets’ – all of which depended on the central political party”<sup>96</sup>.

The majority of interviewees working in private media argue that the state media have, on the one hand, grown significantly during the Chávez administration and, on the other, promoted content that is almost exclusively aligned to what the President and his government dictate. According to Bravo, Guanipa, Mayorca and López, the Chávez administration has succeeded to a significant degree in its “hegemonic media and communicational strategy” – to use Bisbal’s terms. But, as seventeen interviewees point out, even though the government have a quantitative dominance in media ownership, the significant majority of the audience and readers consume mainly private-media information. “All existing surveys and data – even those of state institutions – show that over 85 per cent of Venezuelans prefer watching, listening or reading the private media, and not the content offered by the state media,” says Bisbal. This, he, Bravo and Ruiz argue is because, in general, private outlets are less propagandist in their pitch and offer content that is of better quality and more diverse in terms of genre or themes.

Most pro-opposition interviewees believe that the state has become, since the second half of the 2000s, the principal owner and sponsor of the country’s broadcast media.

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<sup>96</sup> “Soviet” is here used to connote the supposedly locally-elected communal councils, through independent mechanisms, in the former Soviet Union.



There is consensus that the majority of the press is owned by large families or corporate groups. Most of the pro-government journalists interviewed defined the latter type of ownership as “oligarchic”. As explained by Canorea, Marco Hernández and Villegas, such oligarchy refers to a traditionally capitalist model of ownership, by which the owners seek to utilise the media as platforms for their political agendas. Yet, eight interviewees maintain that, given the significant shifts in the country’s media landscape and ownership, such a definition is not fit. “Only the government and its followers talk of an oligarchic media, but that is only a caricaturesque view of the media structure today; in reality it is Chávez’s government that has become oligarchic” says Prieto.

Like Bisbal, Prieto argues that the Chávez government has tried to monopolise the media and that it has set forth a hegemonic agenda; “but not hegemonic in the strict sense Gramsci defined it, for Chávez imposes everything, and he does not believe in soft power but in decrees. This is evident in the way public-service content has been supplanted by state propaganda”. Many pro-opposition interviewees agree with the above formulation, while stressing that the Chávez administration has become the leading government of the Americas in media ownership.

#### 6.3.5. *Effects of official regulations and state economic strategies on the media*

Two important aspects of Chávez’s “hegemonic” media strategy, as argued by nineteen interviewees, have been, on the one hand, the new legal framework the government introduced for the media and, on the other, the economic strains on the private sector imposed by a statist government. Scharfenberg explains that the Social Responsibility Law for Broadcasters (*Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio, Televisión y Medios Electrónicos*, or RESORTE) and the Telecommunications Law (*Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones*), decreed in 2003 and 2010 respectively, have been a means for the government to further control ownership and content in the media. The RESORTE law, as explained by Lugo-Galicia and Scharfenberg, allows for a fast change of ownership, and the government has taken advantage of this<sup>97</sup>.

Opinion is divided almost in a binary scheme among interviewees in relation to the political purpose of the media laws the Chávez administration established. Bisbal, Ruiz

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<sup>97</sup> According to Lugo-Galicia, an example of governmental capitalisation of new media laws in terms of state ownership and control over content was evident in Miranda State, once Chávez-loyalist Diosdado Cabello became its governor in October 2004, and forced the acquisition of eight local private radio stations by the government.

and Scharfenberg argue that, before 2000, the private media worked with relatively little regulation, but since then have met an increasing number of laws that have a clear political purpose in undermining private ownership and dissident opinion. In contrast, Clodovaldo Hernández, Rodríguez and Stephanie Sartori<sup>98</sup> – news reporter at VTV – argue that the set of new laws for media, particularly in broadcasting, is a means to change the traditional elitist ownership to a more democratic one, while also curbing the alleged destabilising efforts some private media have made against Chávez.

Almost every interviewee expressed being aware of the way the news media in Venezuela, particularly the press, have been traditionally reliant on state financial support and patronage. “The economic base for the majority of the press has traditionally depended to a significant degree on state capital,” explains Moleiro. Under the Chávez administration, according to most pro-opposition journalists, the government began to withdraw all sponsorship from any news outlets that was critical or that was not predominantly pro-government in its news and opinion content. Most of these private news outlets – as argued by Bravo, Coscojuela and Lugo-Galicia– have suffered financial setbacks as they have lost all the state sponsorship and advertisements they once had. Yet, many of these news organisations, rather than shifting their news agenda towards a “neutral” or a pro-government one, or resorting to making any sort of political pact with the state, searched for new business models and financial strategies so as to remain operative and have relative independence in news production and opinion.

*El Nacional* and *TalCual*, which in the views of the majority of journalists represent the most adversarial pro-opposition press, are two key examples of news outlets which have had to reduce significantly since 2000 the number of staff members and of newspaper pages because of financial constraints, mainly deriving from a significant drop in both private and state advertisement. Similarly, the two most vocal oppositional television networks – RCTV and Globovisión TV – suffered economic difficulties because of their critical stance towards the government. Additionally, Bisbal, Bravo and Ruiz argue that the official obligatory blanket broadcastings or *cadena*s have also been used by Chávez as a means to financially affect commercial media outlets, since these cannot transmit their planned programming and agreed advertisements.

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<sup>98</sup> Stephanie Sartori, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2012.

Lugo-Galicia and Laura Weffer<sup>99</sup> – an investigative reporter with *Últimas Noticias* who worked in the early 2000s at *El Nacional*, *TalCual*, and *Fe y Alegría* radio station – explain that an additional obstacle for the growth and independence of the private news media has been the political instrumentalisation of currency-exchange control, import permits and price regulation by the government. “Chávez also tries to asphyxiate the private news media by restricting the acquisition of foreign currency, and in an economy that is heavily dependent on imports it becomes very hard to buy all sorts of equipment and products,” says Lugo-Galicia. “A lot of private radio stations, for example, have had to become more entertainment-driven and government-friendly in their content in order to be allowed to purchase dollars – everything has to be bought in U.S. dollars – so as to buy technical equipment,” explains López.

In the view of over half of the interviewees, a significant part of the private media was undergoing important managerial changes during the early years of the Chávez administration. The new and younger owners proposed operational models which were arguably more commercial and less politicised for the outlets they acquired. This also implied that they originally sought to strengthen a more normative form of journalism, somewhat modelled, according to Saldivia, in the “traditional North American commercial practice”. However, as expressed by Bolívar, politicisation among Venezuelan society became so entrenched early on in the Chávez’s era, that the new proprietors were unable to escape from the emerging polarising scheme in the political environment. “Reality forced them to become political,” says Saldivia.

In the preceding paragraphs, the theme explored has provided different views about the shift in media ownership under the Chávez administration, and the manner in which the state has significantly augmented the number of news outlets it owns and supports financially. Opinions can offer an almost binary reading in relation to the reasons for, and the character of, the Chávez-led strategy to increase and reinforce the media that are supportive to his political project and that echo his ideological messages. The composition of newsrooms has undergone significant transformation, generally guided by the political leanings of reporters, editors and owners.

Very importantly, in the view of pro-Chávez interviewees the private, pro-opposition media still have a larger share of the audience/readers and aim to undermine the revolutionary process spearheaded by Chávez. Most pro-opposition journalists claim

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<sup>99</sup> Laura Weffer, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

that, on the contrary, the state has sought to outweigh in number and quantity of production – by also using hundreds of communitarian media, which are predominantly of Chavista leanings – the private news outlets and dissident voices in the media. The latter have been facing new economic pressures and legal challenges from the governmental and judiciary bodies.

The newly-established telecommunications regulations have had a negative impact in most of the private news media, according to pro-opposition interviewees, in curbing their critical agency. For pro-Chávez journalists, these new laws have allegedly promoted popular, participative democracy.

#### **6.4. Press freedom, censorship and legal challenges**

As explained in previous chapters, the ideals of freedom of the press and of freedom of expression are considered basic principles for the media to operate as a democratic force – this has been mainly stressed by western, liberal authors (Siebert 1963, O'Neill 1990, Keane 1991, Curran 2002). According to many interviewees, limitations to freedom of expression, censorship and prior-censorship – critical obstacles for independent, fair, balanced, and professional journalism – have been present throughout media practice during the nation's democratic era. However, many claim that under the Chávez administration significant shifts have occurred in Venezuelan media in relation to freedom of expression and of information, just as censorship and prior-censorship in news media have been increasingly experienced by many journalists.

It should be noted that when interviewees were asked about freedom and censorship in Venezuela's media, the vast majority of extended explanatory comments were offered by those who have been working in private media. Many said that this not only responded to their own experiences and to those of their close colleagues but that associations of professionals, civil society organisations and NGOs have reported that journalists in Venezuela have been facing restrictions and threats from the Chávez government and from some of its supporters<sup>100</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Some of the professional organisations and NGOs –as mentioned by critical journalists– that have denounced alleged threats to freedom of expression and harassment to journalists are Colegio Nacional de Periodistas (National Association of Journalists), Bloque de Prensa (Press Bloc), Sindicato de la Prensa (Press Workers Union), Cámara de la Industria de la Radiodifusión (Chamber of Broadcasting Industry), Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, Provea, Ipys, Somos Radio and Espacio Público. Various NGOs that work on human rights issues or on freedom of

#### 6.4.1. *The rhetoric of violence, and aggressions towards journalists*

Boon, Bravo, González and Zerpa, who work in the private media, express the view that the state has been the main agent in attempting to curb freedom of information and in imposing censorship. They also argue that private media owners have hardly been responsible for censorship of reporters and news workers whereas the President and government officials have exerted actions and established policies in an attempt to suppress or weaken dissident news media.

Uzcátegui, backing his opinions with data from local NGO Provea compiled in 2009-2010, says that the majority of hostile actions against journalists have been generated by government officials and by Chávez's sympathisers. Like many pro-opposition journalists and commentators, he argues that the President's "violent rhetoric against the private media" has stimulated these actions. In his view, the government has been responsible for around 45 per cent of the cases of aggression against private-media journalists, while oppositional parties and its sympathisers account for 13 per cent of the cases of aggression against official and state media workers. Police and army agents have been responsible for approximately ten percent, and the Chávez's own paramilitary forces for eight per cent. In around 20 per cent of the cases the aggressors have not been identified.

"It is evident that it is primarily the state and the public powers that violate the principles of free information and of expression in the media," argues Uzcátegui. Peñaloza says that in relation to attacks towards news media and journalists, during the decade nine per cent have been carried out against public and official media, and the rest – 91 per cent – has been against the private media. "The state openly and with total impunity promotes the aggression towards journalists of the critical media," maintains Peñaloza.

The majority of interviewees working in private media argue that, during the Chávez era, journalists and editors who have maintained critical postures towards the government have been the target of intimidation, aggression and assault by the government and its most radical followers. This was arguably summed up by Marcano: "In Venezuela there is a constant threat towards journalists, to one degree or another. One feels threatened in the streets by certain regime loyalists. There is a

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expression and protection of journalists have emerged during the second half of the 2000s.

confrontational and intimidating attitude towards journalists coming from the President and some regime officials.”

This situation, according to Marcano and seventeen other media professionals, was not the case prior to Chávez’s arrival to power. There existed during the previous democratically-elected governments, they argue, some levels of threat and censorship exerted from the state, but allegedly never in Venezuela’s democratic history had journalists and private-media owners experienced such high levels of personal threat from the government and some of its supporters. “The President ‘legitimised’ a confrontational and violent behaviour towards the critical media through his discourse – some of his more radical followers have turned his verbal attacks on some journalists into physical ones,” argues Guanipa.

Most dissident journalists agree that one of the ways in which the government has been trying to silence or intimidate critical journalists is through verbal and physical aggression. “Reporters had never felt less safe when reporting in the street than since Chávez took power and social confrontation began to increase,” says Mayorca. According to Weffer, before 2000 identifying oneself as a journalist was “something positive” and “people respected you”, but after that it “became almost a taboo, because some people see you as the bearer of a radical political position and are ready to insult you or harm you physically”. It has not been uncommon, argues Alonso, to find “Chávez’s sectarian loyalists attack workers of the private media even inside the news outlet’s buildings”. Like sixteen other interviewees, he says that he witnessed how state police and National Guard officers have been “illegally confiscating work-material and equipment from private media professionals, and have been preventing some journalists from carrying out their reporting.”

The majority of private media workers interviewed offered examples of direct aggressions towards them, allegedly led by government supporters and approved by some of the government’s most influential officials. Ruiz explains how in 2009 “a group of armed radical Chavistas attacked the Globovisión’s headquarters and threw tear gas shells and explosives – it was not the first time the television station had suffered these violent attacks”. Peñaloza mentions that there have been more violent cases, such as with pro-opposition newspaper *Qué Pasa*, in the city of Maracaibo, where a hand-grenade was thrown by pro-Chávez radicals and exploded in the interior of the building.

Scharfenberg explains that since the 2002-2003 period there have been episodes in

which violence and threats towards journalists have been less evident. Yet, he says that data from the NGO Ipys shows that aggressions to news media increased towards the end of the decade. He believes that this is a “sombre consequence” of the Chávez administration’s “clear promotion of an open war” against all media “that are critical or are not aligned with its political doctrine, ignoring basic principles of human rights and the country’s Constitution”. Scharfenberg argues that “in this context of continuous threat and persecution it has become very difficult for journalists to carry out their work and be able to check on the state and the powerful – much harder than before”. All the reporters working in the private media that were interviewed agree with Scharfenberg’s above-mentioned observations.

First-hand accounts of harassment, verbal and physical attacks, and death threats abound among private media journalists. An alarming sign, according to Alonso, Guanipa, Marcano, and Martín, is that most of society seems to have become used to media workers being threatened and harmed constantly by the state and its supporters. “This tragic situation brings to the foreground a violent and non-democratic facet of Chavismo”, says Weffer. Sixteen other interviewees mention that most of these cases of physical aggression, death threats, and intimidation towards journalists, as well as attacks on media installations, have been reported to various professional organisations, media workers’ unions, human-rights-related and media-related NGOs. According to these interviewees media workers and owners who have been victims of such violent behaviour, have for the most part not feared denouncing it to public institutions, as well as to NGOs and international organisations that deal with media issues and human rights.

Local NGOs and international institutions have, in turn, compiled significant and detailed data, and have sought to assist the victims and denounce the injustice done, according to López, Lugo-Galicia and Scharfenberg. Yet, many journalists and some observers suggested that, although these denouncements have reached both local public institutions and international organisations like Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and Human Rights Watch, the Venezuelan government disregards these organisations’ reports and recommendations. “We cannot rely on public institutions – these are under Chávez, and lack any autonomy–, so we resort to local and international NGOs, multi-state organisations and also to local journalists’ associations,” says Mayorca.

Twenty-five journalists expressed the view that the levels of physical aggression

towards them have risen to such levels in the street that, since 2000, many had to start employing bullet-proof vests and gas masks while covering certain gatherings and protests. When asked if such levels of violence towards some journalists had in any way acted as a deterrent to reporting certain topics or visiting certain environments, González, López, and Weffer express that in a few occasions editors have requested journalists of their respective outlets not to cover certain events, like anti-opposition street demonstrations, because they can potentially be attacked and risk their lives. “The lives of our journalists are a priority, so we’ve had the moral obligation to tell them not to go to certain places where they might get harmed while reporting,” says Medina. The majority of private-media journalists explained that having to use bullet-proof vests was indeed an undesirable novelty, but that this did not deter them from covering events that could be considered risky.

#### *6.4.2. Media regulations, state communications policies, and censorship*

In the opinion of most interviewees working in private media, since 2001 the Chávez administration began to elaborate a broad legal framework which has allegedly presented restrictions to freedom of expression and of information. In their view, a key component of this supposedly restrictive framework has been the Social Responsibility Law for Radio and Television (Resorte). “The Resorte is really a law to control and restrict content, much more than for promoting social responsibility in the media,” argues Bisbal.

Another set of laws that has brought about limitations for journalists – in the opinion of Bisbal and thirteen other interviewees – is the Penal Code. In its articles it is established that the President, government officials, members of the Supreme Court and other official representatives cannot be “disrespected” in the media and that their “honour” must be protected. Established in 2005, its implementation was followed by the Organic Law on Education, the Organic Law for the Protection of Children and Youngsters, the Organic Code of Military Justice, all of which have – according to Medina – “worked as instruments by which to restrict freedom in the media, and have been used arbitrarily against journalists and media owners”. In addition, the Organic Law against Organised Delinquency and Terrorism Financing has been set forth. In it, as expressed by Lozano and Zerpa, one of the notions of “terrorism” equates to “generating social commotion”. Mayorca says: “What exactly is ‘social commotion’? Well, in the regime’s interpretation it’s become any information that’s negative or antagonistic towards the government”. The set of laws are, in the opinion of the majority



of private media interviewees, elaborated in a very vague language, lending themselves to different interpretations. “The wording of these laws is purposely ample and vague, that way the government can use them discretionally, as it pleases,” argues Petkoff.

According to most of the private media journalists and to media observers like Bisbal, Scharfenberg and Uzcátegui, this legal framework, elaborated by the Chávez Administration and with the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) as a governing body, has had the most significant impact in limiting, restricting and censoring journalists, while also being utilised to establish administrative punitive measures towards private media. López, Lozano and Uzcátegui point out that Conatel had been officially working first as part of the Ministry of Infrastructure and then as a direct dependency of Venezuela’s Vice-Presidency. This is not only non-democratic, argues Lozano, but violates the Organic Law of Telecommunications, because a regulatory body for media and telecommunications “ought to operate autonomously, within an institutional framework”. “This is yet another example of the non-existence of separation of public powers in Venezuela,” says López.

A majority of dissident journalists agree with Prieto’s formulation that the legal framework has “certainly harmed freedom of expression and that Chávez’s government in many ways supervises the information agendas of certain private media”. The above-mentioned group of journalists say that the type and intensity of “criminalisation of, and judiciary harassment towards, the media” – to use Moleiro’s expression – had not been previously experienced in Venezuela’s democratic history.

Guanipa and Prieto argue that by means of this legal framework, Chávez’s government has been capable of selectively pressuring the private media politically or economically, or both. Most of the interviewees working in private media concur that the new regulations have presented more restrictions and limitations to the broadcast than the press and online mediums. In this sense and according to the same sources, private television outlets have suffered more than the radio ones. Bravo explains that when the government decided not to renew the broadcasting license of RCTV, in 2007, it sent an explicit message to other critical and pro-opposition media outlets. “If the government forced a media giant such as RCTV to end its transmissions, why would it not do the same with smaller critical outlets?,” argues López.

Amaya, López and Ruiz argue that, since 2000, television and radio outlets have had to make adjustments to their news and opinion programming, as a consequence of the

increasingly discretionary use of the media legal framework by the government. “Critical opinion spaces have been reduced, and in private radio pro-Chávez journalists have been incorporated as hosts or regular commentators as a result of governmental pressure. Also, strongly oppositional figures have been dismissed,” says López. Like Amaya and Peñaloza, she argues that there is a “judicial void” whereby the government employs laws and regulations to revoke broadcasting licences, transmission frequencies, and sponsorship. “There are direct government pressures on private broadcast and, unlike in any previous governments, the war against critical media is direct and open,” says Ruiz. In the opinion of most workers of private news outlets such a ‘media war’ has been so far won by the government, particularly in the way critical voices have been forcibly reduced and partially silenced.

#### *6.4.3. Censorship, auto-regulation, and self-censorship: perceptions in the private media*

As recounted by Bravo and Petkoff, after 34 private and independent radio outlets were closed down in 2009 by official orders, self-censorship and prior-censorship became more evident in private broadcasting outlets. “Both owners and reporters began avoiding denouncing certain wrongdoings of the government and started replacing critical news with entertainment and ‘light’ content,” says López. Fifteen interviewees agree with these claims and concur that this situation has been more noticeable in television than in radio.

During the second half of the 2000s the only television station to have maintained news coverage that checked on the government was Globovisión, according to the vast majority of journalists of the private media. “Being the only television station to cover some news that showed the government’s failings has had a high price for Globovisión: it has been penalised financially on many occasions and has a pending fine of nine million bolívars<sup>101</sup>,” explains Peñaloza. Ruiz argues that in official television the same rules do not seem to apply: “In (state-owned) VTV, hosts can swear all they want, but will never get fined for that; but if a Globovisión host does that, the authorities will make charges and fine the station.”

A significant majority of pro-opposition interviewees are very critical of the way most private broadcast outlets have decided to curtail news content and previously-existing

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<sup>101</sup> At the time, in 2009, this amount represented approximately 925,000 GB Pounds.

critical stances. However, they explain that they and most of their colleagues are aware of the government pressure towards critical news organisations, and most find that there is “hardly a way out” – to use Peñaloza’s words – for the outlets but to stay on air by narrowing down critical news. According to twenty-two interviewees, most of these outlets and their journalists remain, at their core, pro-opposition and some find alternative spaces for advocacy or adversarial journalism and commenting in the press, blogs and social media.

Even though the significant majority of private-media journalists do not agree with most of the content and wording of the media laws the Chávez administration installed, many argue that certain forms of journalistic auto-regulation should exist. It emanated from their opinions that many consider Venezuelan journalists should evaluate more carefully declarations and information that can potentially promote violence and radical confrontation, or that can lead to morally or physically harming a person, or cause unnecessary negative exposure of minors, or damage the well-being of sources that need to be protected, or negatively affect national security, among others aspects.

Boon comments that the new legal framework and a sense of auto-regulation have stimulated among journalists in the private media a need “to watch their own backs and to be more professional when doing their work”. Zerpa concurs: “Many journalists in the private media have been forced to work extra carefully in part because of the new legislation, so in order to avoid sanctions by the authorities – which tend to be very arbitrary – we are taking great care of content, form and verification of data and sources”. Weffer argues that such an ‘effect’ is only visible in a reduced group of news media, and that it is the result of an effort set primarily by the journalist, which has permeated some part of the newsrooms and editorial boards. However, she says that during the Chávez era it has become more risky to report news which offer a negative portrayal of the government, so opinion pieces have grown significantly in detriment of news. The new media laws and aspects of the local journalistic culture seem to allow for a degree of dissident opinion in most of the private print media – much less so in private broadcast outlets –, but the news pieces in print are valued in a different light by regime authorities when compared to comments since the former are related to aspects of veracity and accuracy, according to Febres, Scharfenberg and Weffer.

Judicial hostility towards dissent and critique in the private media became rife in the 2000s, according to the majority of private media workers. Not only have media professionals been prosecuted and sanctioned in an alleged arbitrary manner, but this

situation represents a constant threat for journalistic practice, according to Alonso and Scharfenberg. “Most of these legal proceedings have been initiated by the government institutions, yet some have also been pursued by the private sector”, says Scharfenberg. Naturally, the majority of pro-opposition journalists consider that a direct effect of these judicial proceedings has been the strengthening of legal censorship and of self-censorship.

According to Alonso, “even though it is true that no journalist has been imprisoned under the Chávez administration, it is no less true that never had so many journalists had to undergo such arbitrary trials”. He and Weffer explain that between 2002 and 2009 there have been over 150 judicial actions against active journalists – the vast majority of whom have been investigated for informing or expressing news unfavourable to the government. Alonso, Guanipa and Lozano argue that legal hostility and trials against journalists augmented significantly since the Penal Code was reformed in 2005, and that this augmented sanctions for ‘disrespecting’ government officials while broadening the list of functionaries that could not be ‘disrespected’ – particularly members of the High Military Command.

Boon and Zerpa argue that the possibility of certain private-media journalists being objects of unfair judicial manoeuvring has led many of them to change the way they had been carrying out news reporting and writing. “Now we can hardly write versions of anonymous and off-the-record sources, when elaborating denouncement that involves the government because of the new media laws,” says Boon. According to Lugo-Galicia, this has turned watchdog news production into a more difficult craft, and there is growing fear among some journalists that cover potentially delicate government issues. Additionally, he says that journalists have “suffered emotionally and economically” from these arbitrary proceedings, “at times having to pay lawyers for months or years, their families suffering immensely – it is not surprising that the output of their work becomes less productive, they live in a situation of anxiety and fear”. Fourteen interviewees agree that these types of judicial actions against journalists have affected negatively their approach to news gathering and production, and argue that the government’s use of the new media regulations has been successful in diminishing certain critical voices in the media.

#### 6.4.4. *Financial constraints and judicial limitations in the private media*

According to almost all private media professionals interviewed, another significant

impact the new media regulations have had in the private, pro-opposition media relates to the financial and administrative restrictions the former have imposed to the latter. They contend that Conatel, the Ministry of Communication and Information, and the National Integrated Service for the Administration of Customs and Taxes (Seniat) are the public institutions that most noticeably engage in financially and administratively sanctioning the critical, private media. These have allegedly worked together to penalise and bring about the closing down of critical private media. Eight journalists mentioned that arbitrary and discretionary measures have been carried out by Seniat to financially sanction or revoke the transmitting licence of some private media because of them making minor administration mistakes. Lozano explains that the financial penalisation is “outrageously disproportionate to the nature of the irregularities”, and that these proceedings “essentially target critical and dissident media”. The same group of journalists argue that the purpose of the fines is to intimidate owners and journalists of private critical media, as part of the broad government strategy.

Also, as explained by Alonso, Bravo, López and Lozano, various private news outlets have been fined for containing advertisement that is considered offensive according to the newly-established media laws. There have been cases – particularly within the broadcasting spectrum – in which the news outlets have been fined “exaggerated amounts of money” for transmitting or printing advertisements “that the regime feels are critical towards or contrary to its political project,” argues Alonso.

The above-mentioned administrative and financial proceedings have had a negative impact on journalistic practice, according to most interviewees working in private or pro-opposition media. “These are measures that, on first impression, seem only destined to affect media owners, but they affect journalists significantly,” says Zerpa. Bisbal, Bravo, Medina and Scharfenberg point out that these arbitrary and restrictive mechanisms of penalisation have intensified censorship and self-censorship in news media. “When investigating cases that reflect failed government policies and actions, many reporters fear they could be prosecuted and the news organisation fined millions,” explains Bravo.

Whereas Scharfenberg argues that, according to NGO Ipys, during the period 2009-2010 reported cases of harassment and violence towards journalists and private media workers increased compared to any year since 2002, Uzcátegui maintains that, during 2009 and 2010, fewer cases of harassment to journalists and violations to freedom of expression were reported to NGO Provea. Like Bisbal, Uzcátegui finds that this is not necessarily a healthy indicator for news media. The reduction of cases in the 2009-

2010 period reported by journalists for abuses, threats and attacks as well as the diminution of legal and administrative proceedings against media – compared to 2004, 2005 and 2006 – can be a consequence of the growing presence of self-censorship within the news media, argues Uzcátegui. “Media that presented critical views of the government have become scarce, particularly along the broadcast spectrum. It’s evidently a partial result of the restrictive character of the regime,” argues Coscojuela. Yet, Petkoff says that some news outlets have defied “the state bullying” by, for example, resorting to its collaborators and general public to “raise the money in order to pay a fine arbitrarily imposed by the government.”

A majority of pro-opposition interviewees agreed that, even though there are significant limitations for journalists, many media workers of dissident views consider that political confrontation and hardship can help them find alternative ways to inform and to debate more creatively. Yet, there is consensus among private-media journalists that fear of the government’s actions and of its most fervent followers against them has become very entrenched, and self-regulating has gradually grown into selective self-censorship in much of the media. “For the private media, caution in journalistic practice under Chávez began to turn into fearing for their lives,” says López. Most of these journalists feel that attacks directed to them and their criminalisation by the Chávez administration might gain further strength overtime, and that its effects – particularly censorship and self-censorship – might increasingly restrict their journalistic practice.

#### *6.4.5. Aggressions towards journalists: opinions from the state/official media*

Among the majority of pro-government interviewees the dominant opinion is – as in the case of pro-opposition journalists – that violence towards journalists and media workers increased during the 2000s. However, according to their estimation these actions have not been primarily targeted to the private, dissident media. Rather, the prevailing opinion among pro-government media workers is that the verbal and physical aggressions, threats and assaults, have been the result of a highly-polarised political environment in which the opposition and its allied media have had much of the responsibility. Also, most of them concur that officialist and pro-government journalists have been objects of aggression in equal measure as private-media journalists.

Rodríguez argues that members and sympathisers of oppositional political parties, and also some local police forces – mainly those in constituencies run by opposition leaders – have established a “strategy of apartheid” through which officialist reporters have

been harassed and excluded from most events organised by opposition forces. “Many journalists of the official media, especially of VTV, are systematically attacked by right-wing mobs and by security personnel of opposition leaders,” explains Rodríguez. According to Caraballo and Colina, during the late-2000s such attacks spread to various communitarian radio outlets in the interior part of the country.

According to Chacín, Marco Hernández and Sartori most of the denouncements of attacks, threats and intimidation to journalists are formulated by those working in the private media. They consider that this does not reflect the reality of the violence towards journalists but is, instead, part of a concerted strategy of media owners and the political opposition aimed at discrediting the government and its followers. “Because their media strategies haven’t been able to overthrow Chávez, they (journalists and owners of private media) resort to exaggerating or making up stories of attacks,” argues Sartori. “The government has not banned or sent to jail one single journalist – there is definitely freedom of expression in Venezuela, but the private media want freedom to conspire against the government,” says Chacín.

Eight interviewees argued that the NGOs and international organisations to which the private media formulate being victims of attacks lack credibility and predominantly hold an “ultra-liberal or right-wing agenda” – to use Marco Hernández’s words. Five other journalists agree with this view.

Most of the interviewees working in pro-government media argue that the time they felt most threatened while carrying out news-reporting was during 2002 and 2003, particularly when the April 2002 coup d’état took place, during its aftermath, and while the 2002-2003 general strike or “industrial sabotage” lasted. “The social and political confrontation was such then that many journalists who backed the revolutionary process feared for their lives,” says Canorea. Even though many pro-Chávez journalists argue that physical attacks towards officialist reporters by opposition forces had diminished since 2003, these were still present throughout the rest of the decade.

#### 6.4.6. *Media regulations, censorship, self-censorship: pro-government views*

Most of the professionals working in state-owned media maintain that the new telecommunication laws were a necessary step in both pluralising the media spectrum and curbing the power of the private media. Very importantly, the majority of them argue that the legal framework for the media set forth by Chávez has not limited

freedom to inform nor prompted censorship or self-censorship. On the contrary, they argue that the Resorte law and the various reforms to legal Organic Codes have enhanced social responsibility and development for the country's population, while offering a normative framework by which media and journalistic practice can be improved.

Marco Hernández explains that the legal framework for media and telecommunications is part of a new inclusive communicational model, which seeks to democratise the media, broaden citizen participation and improve journalistic standards. "Before, journalists reported on what the media owners wanted; now these laws function as a counterbalance against the media oligopoly and allow the community to become active and critical in the media," he argues. Caballero, Chacín, Pérez and Revette argue that the new laws have aligned journalistic standards with the nation's interests and with those of its popular sectors, while also strengthening independent news production.

None of the pro-government interviewees said that any of the new laws for the media have negatively affected their work, or set restrictions to their journalistic practice. "These sets of laws allow us journalists to be more critical and responsible about our work, but they do not censor us by any means," argues Ameliut Hernández.

The vast majority of journalists who work in pro-government media say that in their experience state censorship in the news outlets is non-existent. However, Clodovaldo Hernández, Rodríguez and Saldivia claim that, like in the pro-opposition media, they have known cases of censorship within the state media. "Certain news material has been omitted in my presence because it could jeopardise some revolutionary policies," says Saldivia. Clodovaldo Hernández explains that he has not suffered restrictions or censorship while working in either pro-Chávez or opposition media, but that partisanship has "forced journalists and editors never to do the 'other side' a favour in news coverage". In this sense, he argues, the predominant type of journalism that has emerged in Venezuela is similar to that which existed in the country during the nineteenth century – highly partisan.

Although Saldivia says that there is evidence of censorship in both state and private media, he argues that the news project he helped built and works for – newspaper *Ciudad Caracas* – represents a good example of officialist-media journalists carrying out news coverage and checking on the government without any sort of censorship or



prior-censorship<sup>102</sup>. However, Ameliut Hernández and Sartori express that, as reporters of state-owned VTV, they would wish to rely less on an information agenda defined by the Ministry of Information, and to check on the public sector when it is of public interest.

Even though a majority of pro-Chávez interviewees claim that there is no censorship or prior-censorship in state and pro-government media, many explain that self-censorship represents a different matter. In this sense, Saldivia says: “self-censorship is by definition an obscure and elusive term – it is difficult to establish if there is political and ideological self-censorship”. In Pérez’s view self-censorship in media is subjective and “varies according to the values of each person”. He was the only pro-government journalist among those interviewed that, when asked, admitted he had occasionally experienced self-censorship because he is “a political person and a political journalist, who is defending a revolutionary process – so defending the values of a revolution becomes a priority, and not criticising revolutionary officials,” argues Pérez.

In conclusion, this theme highlights the increasing intimidation of, threats to, and attacks on, journalists during the 2000s in Venezuela. The violence experienced by reporters and media workers – a partial result of the country’s polarised social scheme – is considered a crucial limitation for free and independent journalistic practice. Many consider that President Chávez’s confrontational rhetoric towards the private media has fuelled the attacks carried out by some of his supporters on pro-opposition journalists. Yet, pro-government reporters have been victims of attacks from anti-Chávez groups. The general climate of violence towards much of the news outlets and their workers has been a key cause for censorship and self-censorship, in the opinion of most interviewees. The set of new media laws, prompted by the government, has also had a significant impact on the intensification of censorship, according to the majority of pro-opposition interviewees.

### **6.5. Gatekeeping, journalistic autonomy and ‘internal’ censorship**

Journalistic independence and autonomy are widely understood as guiding principles for the media to effectively contribute to plural civic debate and overall democratic practice (Keane 1991, Schudson 2003, McQuail 2005, Cañizalez 2009b and 2011,

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<sup>102</sup> *Ciudad Caracas* is, since its foundation in 2008, financed by the Mayor of Caracas’ Municipality of Libertador and member of government party PSUV, and who previously was Vice-President of Venezuela and Director of the Electoral body, CNE.

Waisbord 2013). Independence in news-media production is desirable for most practitioners irrespective of their political-ideological standings and occupational ideals, as can be gathered from this section of the study. Autonomy in journalistic practice can be evaluated by the manner and dynamics in decision-making within newsrooms, selection of news material or gatekeeping, influence of actors that are external to news organisations, levels of anti-normative pressures within the newsrooms, and general respect for journalistic sovereignty within reasonable parameters.

#### 6.5.1. *News-production and gatekeeping in private outlets*

From the accounts of the majority of interviewees, in private news media a hierarchical and traditional pattern of decision-making in the selection of news material and in news-making has been somewhat loosened during the 2000s in Venezuela compared to previous decades. However, in most cases of the private news media the owners and editors have been the main protagonists in defining the type of news agenda and general content. Yet, with the exception of four journalists, all of those interviewed who worked in private media concur that, during the 2000s, decision-making in news production and gatekeeping became more plural and participative, thus involving reporters and other media workers more actively than before.

Moleiro argues that in “private broadcast media the news and opinion programmes are more closely supervised by the owners”, and that “broadcast reporters and commentators in private television, broadly speaking, have lost some autonomy in relation to the themes and topics they can critically talk about”. López explains that, although some private broadcast media have occasionally been biased while reporting on political issues, their professionals “are one step from silencing themselves” because of “pressure and coercion exerted by the government”. In the press, however, these pressures are – according to the majority of these interviewees – not as intense and print outlets have maintained, as a whole, a more critical and watchdog stance towards the government than most broadcast organisations. Most of these interviewees explain that this has contributed to the configuration of a less hierarchical dynamic when discussing gatekeeping, news-making and overall news production in the private press; but that political, ideological and managerial factors have been just as important in the recent shifts in newsroom decision-making.

Weffer, who has worked in radio and in three of the country’s most influential newspapers, says that the relation between reporters and owners/editors when

determining what news are to be produced varies slightly from one private outlet to the other and that, in broad terms, in the private press reporters have gained some ground in terms of the influence their opinions have in defining specific news content. In this sense, González, who has also worked in three of Venezuela's main print outlets, says that even in a daily such as *El Universal*, which is considered rather traditionalist, "there is active participation by most reporters, and the majority of news themes are proposed by them."

Nine interviewees working in private print media defined the nature of decision-making in relation to news production as "multidirectional". This has also been the case in some private broadcast outlets, in which reporters, hosts and producers have been gaining a more active presence in news-production decisions – according to Bravo, López and Ruiz.

Scharfenberg, López and Medina find that important attempts have been made by some leading private media to integrate more of the personnel working in a newsroom. There has also been a degree of multimedia convergence in most of the private media. "Sometimes newspaper sections competed against each other within the same outlet, rather than cooperating between themselves; but this has been gradually changing and there is growing integration among newsroom sections," explains Scharfenberg. Similarly, in Weffer's opinion, during the 2000s there has been a growing trend in the country's news media by which the information sections have become more integrated between themselves, and convergence between different media platforms is sought by certain media owners and journalists. This, according to her, Moleiro, Ruiz and Zerpa has contributed to create a less vertical and hierarchical working dynamic within private news organisations.

#### 6.5.2. *Journalistic autonomy and 'internal' censorship in the private media*

According to Díaz Rangel, there have been "progressive-minded" managerial changes in some private media, and newsrooms have generally allowed more participation, but only to a degree. In his view, although in various news outlets some gains have been made in achieving some participation from both journalists and readers, ultimately reporters have scant participation in gatekeeping, news-making and editorial decisions. He argues that mainstream media in Venezuela "hardly work as a democracy", but that some advancement has been made "in turning news-production and gatekeeping into a more plural and participatory process". Yet, according to him, "the last word in a

Venezuelan news outlet is still that of its (private) owner.”

Coscojuela, Boon and Medina do not entirely agree with Díaz Rangel's view. In their opinion some outlets have been able to work more independently than others, and it is precisely within these that reporters have had more autonomy and where discussion has been more dynamic between owners, editors and reporters. The size of the news outlet, in their opinion, plays a key part in this, as does the extent in which the news organisation is publicity-driven.

The alleged lack of political diversity in media newsrooms is not what has determined at core the increasing autonomy among journalists, according to most interviewees working in the private sector. “In the private media, but especially in the press, reporters have been able to work, broadly speaking, with more autonomy than in the past decades,” says Marcano. According to Peñaloza there is a “good degree” of autonomy for journalists in most of the private press and the private broadcast stations. Zerpa claims that reporters who are “more proactive in news proposals and news production are those who demonstrate having more autonomy”. The opinions of Marcano, Peñaloza and Zerpa are echoed by fifteen other interviewees.

In Petkoff's view, the idea of professional autonomy is different between critical journalists and those that are pro-government. Referring to the state and officialist media he asks: “How can you have autonomy when you must always do whatever Chávez says?”. He argues that reporters in an independent newspaper “are heard by their colleagues and editors, and there is discussion about news-making”; whereas in the official media “they only hear what the government party says and transform it as news”. Discussing the private broadcast media, López and Ruiz say that reporters at both Unión Radio and Globovisión TV have felt that their autonomy is respected by the outlet's directors, but is undermined by the lack of access they have to government sources and the harassment most journalists suffer from pro-government forces while reporting.

Although a majority of journalists in the private media claim to work with significant levels of autonomy in the newsrooms, six of these mentioned having directly experienced some incidents of restrictions and censorship within the news institution, or as many of them define it: “internal” censorship. Lugo-Galicia offers the example of how a news story he wrote in 2004 about the parliamentary approval of bonuses for congress members was censored by editors of *El Nacional*. Mayorca uses the word

“punishment” when describing the consequences of having had strong disagreements with his then editors about a news story. “I had covered the military for years, but then I had professional differences with my editor; for that I was ‘punished’ by ceasing to be the section’s main reporter and having to cover crime stories,” says Mayorca.

Bisbal, Moleiro, Scharfenberg and Weffer argue that most of the internally-produced restrictions and newsroom censorship in the private media tends to occur in the finance and economy news sections. This, according to Scharfenberg, was quite noticeable prior to Chávez’s arrival to power, and it has been prevalent in most of the private media. “There are still some vestiges of economic patronage between some sponsors and news outlets; and in most of the private media the largest patrons or advertisers are mainly banking and financial groups,” explains Weffer.

Guanipa says that the private media heavily relies on the sponsorship of, and the advertisement spaces bought by, the banking and financial sectors and that, as a result, many outlets have experienced self-censorship or internal censorship when dealing with sensitive information about financial institutions, or indeed about corruption cases of those that sponsor a specific news outlet. “Before the arrival of Chávez, the private media relied to a significant degree on governmental advertisement, but not anymore; they depend more on private financial organisations – it’s a very difficult situation and some finance news-stories have been censored within newsrooms,” explains Bisbal.

In smaller news outlets of the Venezuelan province, according to the majority of private media journalists, internal censorship in the economic and finance news sections is more common. Even though the private news media grew significantly in the Venezuelan province during the early 2000s, these have worked under increasing economic constraints, particularly because of their dependency on a reduced number of large sponsors, as argued by Bisbal, Guanipa and Ruiz.

Some journalists working in private media explain that the state-owned and pro-government media generally have less economic constraints than the private outlets – unless the latter are politically aligned with the government. This group of interviewees argues that these news outlets in their denouncements target the private financial sector, particularly if the owners of the businesses are sympathisers of the political opposition. Yet, according to these opinions, journalists working in the state, pro-government and most of the communitarian media do not check on the government, and operate with less autonomy than the average reporter of a private outlet.

The relationship of most of the community media with the state is one of dependence and a significant degree of subordination, according to the majority of interviewees working in the private sector. Uzcátegui argues that the “journalistic conduction” of the community media is the same as that which prevails in traditional private media. “The relations between editors and journalists in state media are even more hierarchical than in the corporatist or family-run media; and a very similar vertical pattern is visible in communitarian media between the state and the community,” suggests Uzcátegui. Even though the Chávez administration has empowered community media and the amount of outlets of this nature are by far the largest in the country’s history, according to Amaya, these “lack autonomy, and if they don’t operate as para-state media they won’t survive.”

### 6.5.3. *News-production and autonomy in official and communitarian media*

The majority of pro-government journalists argue that participation in the gathering and production of news is encouraged in the news outlets they work at. Moreover, as Caraballo says, the communitarian media in particular aim to provide a platform for plural participation, in which both non-professional and professional reporters play an active role. Marco Hernández argues that the official or state-owned media must operate as a counterweight to the “neo-liberal and right-wing agenda” of the private media, and that communitarian media have organised themselves so as to provide “a voice for the disenfranchised”. In this sense, he and Sartori argue that those working in state-owned media are conscious of the need to offer the public a different view of reality to the one offered by the private and dissident media. Also, Colina argues that “in communitarian media journalists and participants have a great sense of autonomy and spontaneity.”

Most pro-government interviewees argue that pro-opposition journalists work – with few exceptions – according to the interest of media owners, all of whom have a specific political agenda. Most of the former define this agenda as “bourgeois”, “right-wing”, “anti-revolutionary” and “pro-imperialist”. In their opinion, both the state-owned and the communitarian media have contributed to socialising the right to be informed. Yet, most of them argue that the working dynamics, the organisation of newsrooms, and decision-making in news can be different between the state-owned media and the communitarian outlets.

Canorea, Rodríguez and Saldivia argue that, in official or state-owned media, working dynamics and relations among professionals of different positions is not too different to those of traditional private media. Clodovaldo Hernández and Bolívar also express that internal decision-making and news production, as well as interpersonal dynamics in the newsroom, is not very different between the private and the state or official media. Clodovaldo Hernández says that in both types of media – the state-owned and the private – the majority of workers are professionals who have graduated from similar schools of journalism and that, regardless of the type of ownership, newsroom dynamics have in general become more open and participative in the country when compared to previous decades.

Chacín, Colina, Saldivia and Clodovaldo Hernández maintain that in pro-government, official, and community media there is a significantly higher percentage of workers directly linked to local communities. Information and news decisions “are taken keeping the communities and the revolutionary movement as priorities,” says Chacín. This “sense of responsibility towards the community”, as argued by Saldivia, has contributed in re-shaping to some degree the relations within certain newsrooms: many non-professional media workers, in their role as members of a community, are “able to express their viewpoints and report events that directly affect them in the official and pro-government media”. As Revette explains: “with the media dynamics set forth by the revolution, media professionals have become used to working with reporters that do not have a formal journalistic training – we respect them and are conscious of their importance in news production.”

According to Caballero, Díaz Rangel and Clodovaldo Hernández, community participation has grown and communities have contributed to defining the news agenda, albeit very partially. They argue that political factors and counterweighting the political opponents’ views are what mostly determine gatekeeping and news elaboration in political, social, and economic issues. “Most private media try to highlight only negative aspects of the government, so the pro-Chávez media have set their news agenda in a defensive manner, and sometimes in an offensive one,” says Clodovaldo Hernández. Most of the time, according to him and to Díaz Rangel, gatekeeping and the newsroom agenda in both pro-government and pro-opposition media are determined by stressing the positive aspects of the political actors the news outlet has affinity with or openly backs, and underlining the negative of the opposite political strand.

Eleven interviewees maintain that the news and opinion content of these two

organisations – VTV and Globovisión TV – have entailed the most polarised takes on the country's social and political reality, and that the news agendas of some other broadcasting outlets are determined to a degree by the content of these two media. Bolívar says that in the officialist media, informative agendas vary according to the medium and the audience, but that all tend to confront “the attempts of the right-wing media in destabilising the country and delegitimising the government”. Ameliut Hernández highlights that “when there is manipulation in the news by the right-wing media, at VTV we act quickly and accurately, gather reliable sources, and elaborate a contrasting story.”

Many journalists and editors in pro-government media say that, in the process of newsmaking, reporters confirm with official sources when dealing with “sensible issues” involving government members or influential Chávez loyalists. “We are very careful with information regarding the Cabinet members, revolutionary members of the National Assembly, government figures and public spokespersons – we do not want to elaborate news based on rumours, so we mainly resort to official sources,” explains Sartori. She and fourteen other interviewees concur that in state-owned media, reporters tend to contact government spokespersons and sources so that these might confirm or not a given piece of information.

#### 6.5.4. *Issues of censorship and self-censorship in pro-government media*

The majority of the interviewees operating in official and pro-government media argue that they have felt no pressures or restrictions within the newsroom. Internal censorship is, according to these opinions, very rare in state-owned and communitarian media. Caballero and Chacín claim that the large majority of reporters in pro-government media are aware of what is newsworthy and of public interest. “I have not seen censorship in the revolutionary media, nothing is imposed on the reporters other than to work within the legal structure and with a sense of commitment to the people,” explains Chacín. “The official or revolutionary media do not rely on corporate advertisement and market interests, they are socially responsible and there are no commercial sponsors trying to impose their will in media contents; we're not censored by advertisers or any elite,” argues Saldivia.

However, Clodovaldo Hernández believes there are some levels of internal censorship and self-censorship within all media in Venezuela – including the state-owned, communitarian, and pro-government. He says he has “heard of cases of internal



editorial decision-making and witnessed self-censorship in both pro-government and pro-opposition media”. Contrary to most pro-government interviewees, Clodovaldo Hernández argues that journalists and editors working in such a politically-polarised environment as that of Venezuela during the 2000s tend to produce news content that is supportive of a political standing, favourable to them both at personal and organisational levels. It is within this logic, he argues – as do twelve other interviewees – that some journalists incur into self-censorship.

In conclusion, and according to most accounts, during the Chávez era gatekeeping and decision-making within newsrooms have shifted towards a more participative and less hierarchical model. This seemingly applies mainly to the private media, and to some degree to the state-owned and communitarian, according to contrasting views obtained. Overall, reporters argue having active participation in editorial decision-making, even though there is evidence of varying levels of ‘internal’ censorship, depending on the specific working dynamics and political bent of each news outlet.

## **6.6. Presidential/official messages and agenda-setting**

As explained in previous chapters of this study, Chávez’s political project and his persona have been characterised as authoritarian, militarist, and *caudillista* by some critical observers; and anti-neo-liberal, revolutionary and anti-oligarchic by others (Lander 2008, Bisbal 2009, Caballero 2010, Parra 2010). However, there is consensus among rivalling views that the President has utilised the media very strategically as a key instrument in seeking popular participation and mobilisation, and for conveying his personal messages. Almost every interviewee, when asked about the nature of the President’s use of the national media, expressed the view that no Venezuelan head of government had utilised the media for political and ideological purposes so intensely and skillfully as Chávez. This theme discusses the way the President’s overwhelming presence in the media, and the content of his official broadcast messages, are handled by the country’s news media, the effect they have in journalistic practice, and the degrees to which Chávez’s speeches define the national information agenda.

Thirty-one interviewees defined Chávez as a “highly-mediatic leader”. Fourteen referred to him as a “great communicator”, while nearly as many said he is “a great orator”. Others – a dozen – characterised him as a “media showman”, and a similar amount said he was a “television clown”. Nineteen commented that the way the President used the media underlined his traits as a “populist” or as a “*caudillo*”. Some were of the

opinion that Chávez allegedly “governs from the media”, particularly by using a regular broadcast space of Presidential allocutions and blanket broadcasts which are of mandatory national transmission (*cadena*) for all national media outlets.

#### 6.6.1. “*Aló Presidente*” and its communication impact on pro-government forces

The valuation of Chávez’s media persona among news media workers is varied, and seems predominantly constructed within a binary scheme, yet the vast majority concur that Venezuela’s President has been an effective strategist in personally using the media – particularly broadcasting – to mobilise his political supporters, convey important political messages to the public, deepen the reach of his ideals, and portray himself as a popular leader. Villegas claims that Chávez’s personality and charisma do not belong to any traditional political archetype; hence the ways of expressing himself in and through the media are just as unique.

Admittedly, Chávez’s most effective tool for communicating with the public and for mobilising supporters has been the broadcast programme *Aló Presidente* (“*Hello, President*”). Its first transmission was in May 1999 and it has continued its live transmissions in the majority of official television and radio stations almost every Sunday. Its format is that of a talk-show in which the President himself converses for an average of four hours (sometimes for over eight hours) – according to most interviewees – about his ideas and political plans, his personal agenda and solutions for the country’s problems, selectively answers questions from the public present and receives phone calls, while often resorting to personal anecdotes, all in an informal manner. The practice of receiving calls and answering to the caller’s comments and petitions – hence the name of the programme – gradually decreased, and overtime it has become less dialogical and Chávez has acquired almost exclusive protagonism, in the opinion of most journalists.

Clodovaldo Hernández describes *Aló Presidente* as “a unique phenomenon” in terms of its format and the “impressive communicational power” it entails. Revette argues that Chávez’s Sunday broadcast introduced a media format by which the leader of a revolutionary process could have a “permanent dialogue with the people”, particularly with “those that had been neglected by the previous governing elites and had become socially invisible”. In Rodríguez’s view, the programme has been a “direct way for the President to communicate with the people, and offers an authentic exchange of progressive dialogue”. 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 concur that it has been an asset for democratic exchange and popular participation, and that it has been a crucial media tool by which Chávez has been able to deepen popular empowerment and to combat oppositional political forces.

Many pro-government journalists consider that in his broadcast programme Chávez should not only impart his personal experiences and political views, but also communicate any wrongdoings by public officials, and more importantly, in the view of these interviewees, the wrongdoings of opposition leaders and pro-oppositional media. Indeed, Chávez has used his broadcasts to criticise alleged unlawful activities of some of his political rivals and media dissidents. It has been through these types of denunciations in his broadcast talkshow that Chávez began to dismantle the previously-held power of certain private media, in the opinion of Canorea, De García, Revette and Saldivia.

#### 6.6.2. *Critiques to Chávez's media presence as "broadcast caudillismo"*

Among critical, pro-opposition interviewees the dominant trend of opinions regarding Chávez's *Aló Presidente*, its type of messages and rhetoric, is that it has been negative for the country's institutionalism and democracy. Petkoff's words arguably condense what many of this group of interviewees express: "*Aló Presidente* represents Chávez's wish to somehow be omnipresent in every home and to impose his personalist regime, through an incendiary and divisive rhetoric that has a lot in common with *caudillos* of the past". Many of these interviewees also agree with Petkoff's view that, with *Aló Presidente*, the head of government "has been by-passing the Constitution by accusing and harassing persons that are critical of his government, and has done so without allowing a trial of any sort for the accused person."

According to Alonso, Bravo and Febres these types of denouncements made by Chávez in his Sunday programme have led the way for mobilising government loyalists against the persons who the President accuses – sometimes with very violent results. "In his (broadcast) programme, Chávez has given immediate orders to close down a particular media, confiscate private property, and even sent judges to jail without any trial whatsoever," explains Febres. "Hard-core loyalists find inspiration for their violent attacks on journalists or on dissents in Chávez's *Aló Presidente*," says Amaya. Petkoff says that *Aló Presidente* represents "yet another clear example of the way Chávez is trying to asphyxiate all forms of dissidence."

López argues that, although there is no doubt about the populist linkage between Chávez and the majority of a popular sector, “it is not true that *Aló Presidente* represents a two-way communication pattern between the people and the leader – it is about Chávez’s relentless monologue, with his militarist and authoritarian pitch, constantly referring to himself.”

According to Bravo, Lugo-Galicia and Ruiz it is very common for Chávez in *Aló Presidente* to refer to the private media, but especially to RCTV, Globovisión or *El Nacional*, as ‘the right-wing, fascist, putschist media’”. Importantly, as Medina alleges, he called the four largest private television outlets of the country “the four horsemen of the Apocalypse” in at least two of his allocutions. According to most pro-opposition interviewees, Chávez’s recurrent insults to dissidents in his broadcasts set a very negative example to members of government, his followers, and the media.

### 6.6.3. *Presidential messages and their effect on the media and on news agenda*

A significant majority of interviewees agree that through *Aló Presidente* Chávez has been able to establish an important portion of the news agenda for the national media, and to some degree for the foreign ones. There is consensus among interviewees that the majority of the content of *Aló Presidente* refers to themes of politics, followed by those of social issues, trailed by economical ones.

Yet, as argued by Saldivia, with the broadcast programme Chávez has not only managed to establish the themes for news media agendas, but also most of the themes to be talked about and debated in society. “*Aló Presidente* is both informative and educational, and it establishes the news agenda for all the media – only that the private media seek to use it to further antagonise Chávez, while the people highlight the progress made by the revolution,” says Clodovaldo Hernández. Like Revette, Rodríguez and Saldivia, he argues that the news media found an “atypical communicational product” in *Aló Presidente* and that, because of its informative importance, most of the Venezuelan media sought ways to create informative spaces related to Chávez’s talk-show. “The vast amount of opinions and data produced by Chávez in *Aló Presidente* forced the news media to rethink the Presidential news source,” says Caballero.

Amaya, Febres, López and Peñaloza argue that the private media has maintained, with

very few exceptions, a rather passive role towards what the President has said in his broadcast programme. “Most private news media barely confirm with the adequate sources on the same day what Chávez has said in *Aló Presidente*,” says Amaya. This can be related, as explained by Marcano and Weffer, to the increasing lack of access for private-media journalists to official news sources and spokespersons. Such a situation has meant that *Aló Presidente* has become one of the few official sources for some private media outlets when elaborating news content on national policies.

Febres agrees that *Aló Presidente* sets the news agenda to a significant degree for all media, but maintains that it has reflected “a kind of apartheid on behalf of the President and the government” towards the dissident media. Many journalists working in the private media point out that the last time Chávez held a press conference with Venezuelan journalists was in 2004. Mayorca, like twelve other media workers, evaluates this decision by Chávez as “undemocratic”, while also expressing that he finds it striking that “Venezuelan journalists, particularly those of the private media, have not protested sufficiently against this decision of the President.”

Practically all news outlets in Venezuela assign one or various reporters to cover *Aló Presidente* during Sundays. As López says, this sometimes means “listening during six or seven hours to what the President had to say, often including long hours of irrelevant personal anecdotes”. She argues that news radio outlets transmit either selected parts of the programme or the whole of it, and afterwards the most important messages of the President tend to be highlighted as part of the news segments. According to most interviewees, the press have offered more analysis on *Aló Presidente* than the broadcast media, among private outlets.

In a critical tone, Coscojuela, Peñaloza and Zerpa argue that many private news outlets have fallen into a “comfort zone” when covering and reviewing *Aló Presidente*. “A lot of news media could at times propose a more creative selection of news for Monday and beyond, but instead they decide to go along with whatever Chávez said on his Sunday broadcast programme, regardless of its quality and newsworthiness,” says Coscojuela.

When compared to the private, critical news outlets, the official and pro-government media seek to actively echo and amplify much more what Chávez says in *Aló Presidente* as part of their news agenda. Nine of the journalists working in state or pro-government news media described their reliance on covering the President's broadcast programme as both “positive” and “necessary” for elaborating a significant part of their

news content, particularly during the first days of the week.

Additionally, Bolívar argues that “by broadcasting *Aló Presidente* we are responding to the demands of the communities, because its members become social protagonists in the word of Chávez”. Moreover, Villegas maintains that with his Sunday broadcast programme, Chávez has introduced not only a new communication strategy, but “a new language, which is emancipatory in nature and aims to empower the people.”

The communication linkage between the President and the communities by means of *Aló Presidente* is acknowledged by some private-media journalists, but these emphasise that in their opinion the main aim of the broadcast programme is for Chávez to try to impose his views on the general national news agenda, and for him to become as ubiquitous as possible in the media. In this sense and according to most private-media journalists, another key media tool which Chávez’s government has used in order to combat the political opposition and the pro-opposition media are the use of national blanket Presidential or official broadcasts or *cadena*s.

#### 6.6.4. *Official blanket broadcasts and their effects: pro-opposition views*

With the exception of cable or satellite television stations, all broadcasting outlets in the country are under the legal obligation to transmit the Presidential/official blanket broadcasts. This means, as pointed out by various interviewees, that regular programming in all television and radio outlets must be interrupted when any one of these official messages is transmitted. In the opinion of all interviewees working in the pro-opposition media, the government has transmitted this type of messages, or *cadena*s, abusively. It is this broad group of interviewees which emitted very critical opinions about what they argue has been a systematic interruption of regular programming and curbing of freedom in the media because of the transmittal of these blanket messages<sup>103</sup>.

Petkoff argues that the *cadena*s have become an “Orwellian way” for Chávez to try “to impose his presence in every home via radio or television, and show his contempt towards anyone who does not follow his ideas”. Scharfenberg says that the *cadena*s “continuously interrupt” regular programming in all national broadcasts “almost on a

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<sup>103</sup> It is estimated that between 2000 and 2010, there have been national blanket broadcasts an average of 32 minutes per day, according to nine interviewees, accounting for just over 1,400 hours. Such an estimate (1,400-hours) does not include *Aló Presidente*, for the latter is not of mandatory transmittal for all national broadcast outlets, as established in the communication laws (Ipys 2010, Cañizalez 2011).

daily basis”, and that this “violates elemental norms of freedom of expression” in the media. The majority of interviewees working in the private, critical media concur with Petkoff’s and Scharfenberg’s comments.

In López’s opinion, *cadena*s represent “probably the government’s most perverse media excess – it shows to what degree the regime wants to impose its own message regardless of any notion of balance in information”. “The authoritarian quality and quantity of *cadena*s have no parallel in the history of Latin America,” says Bravo. The content of the *cadena*s – in the opinion of López, Mayorca, Medina and Uzcátegui – respond more to a propaganda strategy than to an informational one. Very importantly, this group argue that the Presidential/official blanket broadcasts are also aimed at weakening the presence of criticisms and denouncements in radio and television, and in the press to a lesser degree.

It is evident, as gathered from the opinion of most private-media workers interviewed that broadcast media have been significantly more affected by *cadena*s than the press. The telecommunications laws are explicit about the obligation of all national broadcast outlets to carry out the live transmission of every one of the national Presidential/official broadcasts. And, as explains Bisbal, for the government it is “more feasible to become omnipresent through television and radio, than it is through the press – the broadcast media have a larger audience than the press, and the press is more difficult to regulate.”

Yet, according to Bisbal, for all their systematic and mandatory transmissions *cadena*s, like *Aló Presidente*, have “quite a reduced audience: five per cent of the audience share in a good day for the President – evidently, people are not too interested in these official messages and in their ideological content”. This, in the opinion of Amaya, Bisbal, Bravo and López has led to a “migration” of part of the audience to cable or satellite television. Presidential/official blanket broadcasts are set about without previous announcement for all national broadcast media outlets, and they tend to coincide with information content previously programmed by each news media organisation. “It is no coincidence that many *cadena*s are initiated when there are important news which may seem favourable to an oppositional leader or when a case involving the government is being scrutinised by the private media,” says Ruiz.

Very importantly, mandatory blanket broadcasts increased during election periods, as expressed by the majority of interviewees working in private media. According to

information provided by Bisbal, the NGO Reporters Without Borders estimated that between 1999 and 2008 Chávez talked in obligatory blanket broadcasts for 1,200 hours – the equivalent of 50 days –, and almost half of these were during elections or referenda processes. In the opinion of most of this group of interviewees, escalation of *cadena*s during election periods is the result of Chávez's efforts to boost his own candidacy or that of his chosen local candidates. Petkoff argues that the Presidential blanket broadcasts "evidently seek to have an impact in elections in favour of the regime", and that they entail "only militant and proselytising content". Fourteen other interviewees find these broadcasts "abusive", "coercing" and "anti-democratic."

The high quantity of on-air time of these blanket broadcasts represents, as the majority of pro-opposition journalists argue, not only the alleged interruption of many news and non-news contents the Chávez administration seem interested in minimising or impeding, but also a financial loss for most of the private media. "Many commercial clients do not pay the media if their publicity advertisements are not broadcast during the agreed time schedule," explains Amaya.

As a way of resuming these broad and critical perceptions of *cadena*s, Ruiz formulates that they constitute "not only another tribune for the President to insult and intimidate dissidents", but "a loss of money for the private media, the impossibility of an ample and balanced transmission of news, the curbing of dissenting contents, and the imposition of government propaganda."

#### 6.6.5. *Blanket broadcasts as revolutionary communication*

Contrastingly, pro-Chávez journalists and editors tend to express their support for the Presidential/official blanket broadcasts. Revette says that *cadena*s represent "an ideal way to inform all Venezuelan citizens about the decisions, actions and policies of the government". "Because the private media still have a larger portion of the audience, *cadena*s are a necessary means to present the version of things in the view of Chávez and his supporters – who represent the majority of the country," argues Bolívar. Eleven other interviewees argue, like Bolívar, that the President has a Constitutional right to carry out this type of blanket broadcasts for they entail "both a formative and informative character for all citizens about relevant information."

In official, pro-government and most of the communitarian media Presidential/official broadcasts define the news agenda to an important degree, according to most



interviewees. Once these official messages are broadcast, relevant aspects of them are covered as news in all of the official and pro-government outlets, including the communitarian media, according to Colina. Yet, in comparison to mainstream pro-government media, communitarian outlets rely less in *cadena*s for news elaboration. Caraballo says that the information provided in official blanket broadcasts tends to form part of the news segments in most of the communitarian radio and television stations, but that many spaces in the programme schedule destined to specific community groups may not comment on them.

For journalists working in private radio and television outlets, the Presidential/official mandatory broadcasts represent more an interruption of regular programming based in state propaganda content than spaces for relevant news content, according to nineteen interviewees. Most of this group of interviewees agree with Zerpa's observation that "*Aló Presidente* broadcasts tend to provide more newsworthy content, particularly because they last a lot longer than most *cadena*s". Importantly, many echo Alonso's opinion that "*cadena*s work more as a governmental tactic to weaken and intimidate the private media, so their content isn't always newsworthy – when this occurs it is rare to find news in the critical media based on them."

It should be highlighted, in concluding this theme, that almost all interviewees agree that no head of government in the country's history has had the media exposure that Chávez has had, thanks to state transmissions of *Aló Presidente* and to his mandatory blanket broadcasts. By early 2010, Chávez had presented 2,000 editions of official blanket broadcasts. A survey submitted by four interviewees, elaborated by Reporters Without Borders, found that between 1999 and 2008 Chávez addressed fellow Venezuelans through the media during 2,370 hours through *Aló Presidente* and in Presidential/official blanket broadcasts – excluding special transmissions in news and opinion spaces. This phenomenon has shaped news production and agenda-setting in Venezuelan media as well as in the public opinion. The majority of interviewees working in pro-government media believe that the President's presence in the media and his broadcast messages contribute to strengthening a popular, radical democracy. The majority of pro-opposition interviewees believe that, conversely, the nature of the President's presence in the media represents an arbitrary means to try to impose the news agenda and does not contribute to enhancing democratic practice.

## 6.7. Community, democratic participation and coverage of elections

The news media play a fundamental role in underpinning community identity and self-expression, and in informing citizens for democratic discussion and deliberation, particularly during electoral periods (Bolaño 1999, Sampedro 2000, McQuail 2005). In Venezuela and according to most opinions of this study's interviewees, the Chávez-led political project has sought to stimulate a new form of politicisation within society, intensify processes of referenda and of elections of people's representatives, and use the media for political participation and mobilisation of the popular and poorer sectors of society (Bisbal 2008a and 2009, Parra 2010). These aspects have determined, to significant degrees, the function of the news media in Venezuela during the 2000s, the re-shaping of its media landscape, and the role of journalists as professionals and citizens.

### 6.7.1. *Community and the media: pro-government perceptions*

The majority of interviewees claim that under the Chávez administration the disenfranchised sectors of Venezuelan society have gained visibility as politically-active citizens, and have become empowered through an array of state-founded social programmes and the discourse of President Chávez. According to Caballero, "state intervention has been essentially about empowering the people, those who before were socially excluded". Such has been the degree of participation and interaction among the local communities that, in the opinions of De García, Rodríguez and Saldivia, social and political debate has grown exponentially, and a "new political consciousness" has emerged, particularly among the poorer Venezuelans. "The opposition accuses the emerging communal councils<sup>104</sup> of being an appendix of the regime; but this is not so – the vast majority of the communal councils are pro-Chávez just like the majority of the nation is pro-Chávez," argues Saldivia.

All interviewees who are pro-government argue that the Chávez administration has empowered popular and poor communities by creating a system of communitarian or 'alternative' media<sup>105</sup>. Very importantly, they also argue that the government has

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<sup>104</sup> Communal councils are neighbourhood-based councils for "popular empowerment", which are elected and act as guiding groups for community organisation, decision-making, local security and political mobilisation, according to pro-government interviewees. The Chávez administration passed the Organic Law of Communal Councils in 2006 and it is estimated that by 2010 there were over 25,000 councils.

<sup>105</sup> Although the government decreed that the terms "communitarian" and "alternative" are used to

configured a network of state-funded official media as a way to support those sectors of society<sup>106</sup>. Many journalists working in state-owned or communitarian media argue that the Presidential request for the elaboration of a legal framework for communitarian media is one of the most salient projects of Chávez's government in terms of democratising the production and flow of information, as well as for the social mobilisation of the poorer sectors of the population.

The majority of pro-government interviewees maintain that the information outlets that pay more attention to communitarian issues are, indeed, the communitarian media. Yet, many of these observers are of the opinion that mainstream media – particularly those that are pro-government or official – have been increasingly covering events related to the local communities. Moreover, this group of interviewees argues that the mobilisation of communities and of the popular sector, fomented by Chávez's discourse, has had an increasing influence on the mainstream media.

In this sense, Revette argues that “all media that is pro-Chávez and revolutionary has created a strong and direct link with the communities”. He exemplifies this by explaining how in ANTV various programmes broadcasted have reflected “street parliamentarism”, where “people gather and openly discuss local and national issues”. Yet, according to Saldivia, some pro-Chávez media “are more revolutionary than others”. In this sense, Bolívar explains that, for example, outlets such as TeleSur and *Correo del Orinoco* “relate with the community in a more traditional way”, whereas more local outlets such as Catia TV or daily *Ciudad Caracas*, “due to the nature of their informative role, have a more direct connection to local communities and these are participative in the confection of some news.”

In general, many believe that thanks to the pro-government and the communitarian media, the disenfranchised have become positively politicised. Marco Hernández explains that “whereas the oppositional media have politicised society negatively, Chavista and communitarian media have politicised people favourably – the common people know they now have a voice in our media.”

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designate the same type of media structure or outlets, their synonymous use has been problematic. Most interviewees agree that they are not equivalent concepts in the Venezuelan context.

<sup>106</sup> According to Conatel, in 2010 there existed officially over 320 communitarian media outlets in the country –more, per capita, than in any other nation of the Americas. Other estimates indicate that by 2010 there were over 400 of such outlets nationwide. These are funded to a significant degree by the Venezuelan state, but also by contributions from community members and government-related organisations.

Bolívar, Chacín, Colina and Ravette argue that, during the 2000s, they have witnessed the manner in which both professional journalists and those non-professionals working in communitarian media have been gradually accepting each other and collaborating towards the same goal. “At the beginning of the revolutionary process there was some tension between the two groups, and professional and formally-trained reporters showed certain rejection towards communitarian media workers, but that has changed immensely,” explains Bolívar. “Under the revolution, a sort of brotherhood has emerged between the community media and the professional one,” says Sartori. “The bridges that have been established between professional journalists and self-taught journalists in both official and communitarian media is another important facet of the success of the revolution’s communication strategies,” says Rodríguez.

Contrary to most opinions of pro-government interviewees, Revette and Rodríguez argue that, albeit the official definitions, communitarian media and ‘alternative’ media should not be understood as the same in Venezuela. An alternative media, in their view, should be characterised by its use of non-conventional technical tools – not too different to some employed in most of the private media – and its alternative information strategies; whereas the communitarian media should rely on an operational structure that depends exclusively on the members of a local community, with an information agenda centred on community issues. Very importantly, Revette says that communitarian media “should not respond to the criteria of a political doctrine or a party’s guidelines, as is generally the case in Venezuela – this is a mistake, for these media should be politically plural and focused essentially in helping solve community problems”. Caraballo contends that community media “should indeed support the revolution and its leader, yet should not be propagandist.”

There is also moderate debate, from opinions gathered from pro-government interviewees, in relation to the ways in which communitarian or ‘alternative’ media should be supported financially. Some argue that they find adequate that these seek resources and money, if needed, in the private sector. The majority, however, disagree with community media becoming partially or fully commercial, yet concur that some state-funding or support is required. Like Caraballo, Pérez and Sartori, Revette believes that community media “should not operate as do private outlets, which are concerned about publicity – human resources and financial support should come from within the community.”

Colina explains that about fifty percent of the “infrastructure” of most communitarian

media is financed by the state, regional government, or Conatel. He, like the majority of this group of interviewees, agrees with state support of communitarian media on the one hand, and with voluntary work within the outlets, on the other. “A truly revolutionary scheme within community media would mean self-sufficiency and total independence for them – for now though, the state must assist them with some funding; a next phase would be self-sustainability,” argues Ravette.

When asked about the extent in which state funding might dictate the nature of news agenda confection and overall journalistic practice in communitarian media, the majority of pro-government interviewees argue that these outlets essentially voice information and opinions from the perspective of community members, and that the vast majority of them openly back Chávez’s revolutionary project, regardless of the fact that his government has promoted and financed them to various degrees.

Journalists working in official media, such as Saldivia and Clodovaldo Hernández, believe that such has been the empowerment acquired by the popular and poor communities thanks to Chávez’s leadership, that much of the private media have reacted by making efforts to represent local communities and their social issues more intensely and fittingly. “A notable gain for the communities, as part of Chávez’s legacy, is the way in which they have become relevant for much of the private media,” says Clodovaldo Hernández. Yet, some pro-government journalists disagree. “The private media only operate as ‘resonance boxes’ of the old establishment, and hardly find any relevance in informing about and to the communities,” argues Bolívar. Nine other interviewees agree with his opinion.

#### *6.7.2. Community media and popular representation: critical views*

Many pro-opposition interviewees acknowledge that Chávez’s policies have provided a significant impulse to popular sectors of society by promoting a system of communitarian media and a more participative role of local communities in news-making, cultural production and political activity. Also, this group of professionals considers that such underpinning of community and popular power has, to varying degrees, permeated most of the media. “The private media has certainly become aware of the importance of creating information and communication links with the local communities, and most are doing so in their news coverage and media representation more than before,” explains Bisbal.

There are, however, strong criticisms from the majority of private-media journalists and pro-opposition commentators about the strategic nature of the government policies in supporting community media, and also in relation to ethical aspects in the way these outlets operate.

Seventeen interviewees formulate that, though participative in theory, most communitarian media do not promote autonomy and plurality within local communities or within the Venezuelan journalistic culture. “We have learnt of many cases within community media where there have been ‘witch hunts’ towards those community members that have expressed critical views about the government,” says Peñaloza. Uzcátegui explains that a salient example of this was the case of revolutionary news and comment website Aporrea<sup>107</sup>, which “expelled some of its contributors from trade unions and those of Trotskyite leanings because they did not fully agree with some government party policies”. Moreover, and according to him, “these media should hardly be called ‘alternative’ or ‘communitarian’ for they are essentially ‘para-governmental’ or ‘para-state’, dedicated primarily to the distribution of state propaganda”. Similarly, Lugo-Galicia says that “whatever journalistic independence community media once had, most of it has been ‘kidnapped’ by Chávez”, and that “any sense of alternative journalistic practice only exists outside the Chavista dogma.”

Some interviewees who are critical towards the Chávez’s administration argue that various members of local communities and citizens in general have been gradually turning to the private media, instead of to the communitarian media, seeking to obtain information about specific problems in their respective vicinities. Mayorca argues that this occurs because “many have realized that the so-called communitarian media have become, to a significant degree, state-propaganda tools and forbid criticisms towards Chavismo”. Like eight other interviewees, Mayorca says that many community members outside of Chavismo find that “the private media is much more receptive to their problems and their struggles than official and communitarian outlets”. Also, as explained by Bisbal, many community organisations and civilian groups “who have become discontent with aspects of Chavismo often resort to the private media so that these offer diffusion of their information.”

### 6.7.3. *Citizen participation and media coverage in elections*

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<sup>107</sup> Aporrea ([www.aporrea.org](http://www.aporrea.org)) is a pro-Chávez digital news site, founded in 2002. Its name stands for “Asamblea popular revolucionaria americana” (or “Popular Revolutionary Assembly of the Americas”).

Most interviewees consider that it is crucial that the electorate obtain from the media valuable and socially-responsible information so as to be able to elaborate political ideas and electoral choices. This majority group also finds that the news media are the most instrumental organisations for informing the communities about political representatives and candidates during electoral periods. However, and according to some interviewees of both pro-government and pro-opposition standings, the balance, transparency and accessibility in news for assisting the electorate in elaborating individual ideas and choices during elections has been increasingly deficient in Venezuela. “Although there has been an important surge in popular participation in electoral processes, the quality of news coverage during elections and referenda processes has been very poor,” argues Febres. Clodovaldo Hernández and Prieto argue that during electoral processes the majority of news organisations and many journalists tend to become further radicalised in an already highly-polarised political environment.

According to Boon and Prieto, the extreme electoral pulse between opposing political forces in the media was notably evident during the August 2004 referendum when Venezuelans voted for President Chávez to be recalled or not from office. Nine interviewees agree with Boon and Prieto that the 2004 referendum represented an evident case of overtly advocate and partisan media electoral coverage, which would in the successive years escalate. Prieto claims that after that event “all elections were presented by the media to the public as plebiscites, with the state media apparatus becoming ruthlessly militant”. Ruiz argues that the official media and most of the communitarian media “become even more servile to the regime during electoral process, and more violent towards the opposition.”

Lugo-Galicia claims that during the fourteen different electoral events he has covered since Chávez took power, the officialist media “have not even been minimally critical about any aspect of the government and its candidates, whereas the private media have provided some critiques towards opposition leaders”. Amaya, Bisbal, Guanipa and López explain that in the official and communitarian media there is no coverage of oppositional candidates during electoral processes, unless it is under a highly-negative light. Most of the interviewees working in private media concur with these opinions.

Some dissident journalists are also critical about the manner in which most private media have been covering electoral processes and that many journalists have acted as

political militants in news production. “Most of the private media has not maintained equilibria in accessing and showing the opinions of the electoral candidates,” explains Boon. “Just as official and pro-government outlets have lacked any balance during election coverage so have to, a significant degree, private outlets like RCTV and Globovisión, as well as some dailies,” says Bisbal. According to Moleiro, during the first years of the Chávez administration most of the private media covered elections and referenda “arrogantly, erratically, and without much ethical concern, attempting to weaken the government”. Yet, all three interviewees point out that during the second half of the 2000s, news production by the vast majority of private-media reporters during elections became more balanced.

Few pro-government interviewees are critical about the news coverage carried out by pro-Chávez media outlets during elections. However, Bolívar, Clodovaldo Hernández and Rodríguez express that these media have operated with a strong bias towards Chávez and his supporters during elections. But the posture of the majority of pro-government commentators is arguably best summed up in Saldivia’s words: “Chavista media wants to encourage political participation and defend revolutionary values; the private media, however, do not regard our citizens as a political-thinking collective, but as consumers – so we must use our media to fight neo-liberal ideals, especially during elections.”

In the foregoing section opinions offered by most interviewees reveal an overall awareness of Chávez’s popular and participatory social policies, and the manner in which these have increasingly resonated in the media at large – particularly thanks to the surge of communitarian media. There are, however, very divergent opinions regarding the nature and function of communitarian outlets. In the nation’s clash between two very different political projects, the communitarian media have arguably been playing an active advocate role of governmental leaning. The highly-politicised confrontation in Venezuelan society and its media has, according to almost every account, become increasingly militant and belligerent during election and referenda processes.

#### **6.8. Sources, access to information and the idea of news balance**

In journalistic practice, excessive and arbitrary limitations to accessing key sources of information and institutional data can significantly weaken a fair, well-contextualised and balanced elaboration of news content (Schudson 2003, Bisbal 2009, Dahlgren 2009). Very importantly, valuable scrutinising on the government and on the socio-



economic elites can be affected negatively (Curran 2002).

In the context of Venezuelan news media, when assessing the above-mentioned issues during the Chávez era, a significant majority of interviewees are of the opinion that, for reinforcing democratic practice, it is most important that both state and non-governmental institutions offer the media information of social interest, in a transparent and timely manner, and that the former allow access for journalists to pertinent sources of information.

Moreover, there was general agreement among this majoritarian group of interviewees that access to institutional information is an important right for Venezuelans, and that it underpins the defence of other civil rights. Yet, most of the private-media journalists and media analysts consulted expressed their critical concern in relation to the increasingly lack of access journalists have to official data and to public officials.

#### 6.8.1. *Information accessibility for the private media*

Together with the rising harassment and violence towards journalists, the increasing absence of access to information sources and to official data is highlighted by many interviewees as the main negative aspect to have emerged within news media during the Chávez administration. Twenty-one interviewees expressed that the lack of access to public information has become one of the key problems in news elaboration and in enhancing the news media as a democratic force. Prieto argues that “the accessibility to government information which is of public interest has become almost non-existent, so there’s almost-zero degree of transparency, which is very dangerous for any democracy.”

Similarly, Bravo, Mayorca and Zerpa claim that access to official statistics or documents has been alarmingly diminishing for the private media. Zerpa argues that the Chávez administration’s “annulment of access to statistics and data on most key public issues, such as homicide rate, military spending, public health service data, costs of *misiones*, salaries of Cabinet members, and so on, represents a real tragedy”. Mayorca argues that democracy should generate “a culture in which the norm is that a public servant receives and talks to a professional journalist, so that the people can be informed – this situation has become very rare in Venezuela.”

Many journalists also highlight other negative repercussions of the absence of access

to government sources and data. Febres argues that the “poor access to information has contributed to the growth of opinion over news; there is less rational interpretation and less veracity in the news”. “It has become extremely difficult to contrast information regarding the government when none of its spokespersons are willing to declare to the private media, so there is a lack of balance, and an impossibility to check on the politically powerful,” says Coscojuela. Marcano argues that “with such lack of transparency in Venezuela, reality is no longer reflected in the media – there is a media reality for the regime and a different one for the opposition”. Guanipa, Lugo-Galicia, Scharfenberg, and Zerpa strongly believe that this phenomenon is not only the result of political polarisation, but a strategic media policy of the state, which has been gradual and steady.

In Zerpa’s word, the Chávez administration “retains a clear and centralised policy of not being transparent in its handling of information. The way it operates, concealing so much information, is also a result of its project of ‘ideologisation’, and to diminish open, rational debate”. Such has been the escalation of this alleged state strategy elaborated for the media that, according to Moleiro, the government had by the mid-2000s become “something totally encrypted for the private media”. These high levels of secrecy, lack of accessibility and of transparency had been unknown to Venezuelan journalists in the nation’s democratic history, as argued by twenty-two interviewees.

#### *6.8.2. Concealed state information and news sources in the private media*

Lugo-Galicia considers that the “government’s information opaqueness” is best exemplified by the way Chávez eliminated the press office at the Presidential Headquarters (Miraflores Palace), thus “sending a message to the private media about its refusal for transparency and accessibility”. “Before, during previous governments, thanks to the access to the Presidential Palace some important cases of corruption were dismantled. Today we have no access at all there,” explains Zerpa. This, concur Petkoff, Scharfenberg and Uzcátegui, represents a setback in any struggle to reporting cases of corruption.

Coscojuela and Scharbenbeg, albeit criticising the government’s alleged corruption, secrecy and lack of transparency on public matters, also question the increasing lack of interest in some journalists to find alternative sources and elaborate news pieces that check on the government. “I’ve witnessed how certain private-media journalists have become used to this concealment of official information and have found in this situation

an excuse for not obtaining official data and proper sources,” says Coscojuela. “These journalists have become passively accustomed to the secrecy of the state, hardly seeking sources or verifying information,” says Scharbenberg, and indicates that this “disregard for veracity and balance” in news is “justified in some media under the pretext that we are living an ‘exceptional historical’ moment under the Chávez regime.”

Boon, López and Weffer contend that the above described situation has been the case of a minority of reporters working in the private, critical news media, and that most have worked against the odds in order to obtain accurate and balanced information. “Many journalists actually challenge most of the polarised audience that wants biased, one-sided information; and within the private media keep striving for accessing public sources,” says Boon. In the view of Alonso, even though lack of accessibility has been the “biggest hurdle in elaborating balanced news” for reporters, some of them have developed resourceful ways to obtain statements from the official sector.

Even those few interviewees claiming that there has existed some ways of ‘negotiating’ access to official information and obtaining statements from public functionaries and government figures, argue that some official sources have become more secretive or inaccessible than others. In this sense, Lugo-Galicia argues that in his coverage of national politics, government representatives have turned “increasingly hermetic,” but that “public servants working in the military and police forces, the oil industry and economic sector are the most difficult to obtain information from”. Fourteen other interviewees agree with this opinion. Mayorca says that there are hardly any possibilities to ask questions to the police and the military. Other than very rare invitations to press conferences, he explains he practically has no access to sources of the police or the military. “Chávez’s regime is essentially a military one, so the military source is most relevant, yet it’s one of the most impenetrable,” says Marcano.

Very importantly, as expressed by González, Lugo-Galicia, Mayorca and Zerpa, Venezuela has one of the highest murder rates in the world, and the government has forbidden homicide indexes to be broadcasted or published. “The regime knows that the murder rates are rocket-high and that this significantly affects the whole population; so not allowing the problem to be researched and informed about is another example of how government actions go against journalistic values,” argues Mayorca.

Lugo-Galicia, Boon, Coscojuela and Medina argue that information of the state-owned oil industry and of the public economic sector has become just as sealed as that of the

military and the police. “Oil giant PDVSA has become the money-provider for the state; prior to the arrival of Chávez to power some of its data was of open access; now it’s a complete secret,” says Coscojuela. “If Venezuelans knew the reality of the (state-owned) oil industry and of its financial planning, everybody would be on red alert: the country is falling apart economically and this is precisely why the government has become completely secret about its economic information,” formulates Petkoff. According to this group of interviewees, there has been a significant decline in state financial accountability in the media mainly because of lack of access to accurate official data.

There have been many instances in which journalists and private news outlets have resorted to NGOs and unions after facing systematic refusal of access to official institutions and information. As Lozano explains, “most reporters have become very aware of the laws that are there to protect them, but the government does not comply with these laws”. “Article 5 of the Constitution establishes that a public functionary must inform citizens about issues related to her or his public work, but the official sector has become expert in outmanoeuvring laws,” argues Alonso. Petkoff says: “Being informed in a timely and truthful way is a right for all Venezuelans – it’s in article 57 of the Constitution –, but the government bypasses all laws, discretionally.”

Sometimes, as argued by Amaya, González, López and Zerpa the only way to obtain access to official or public information is through state-owned news agency AVN or other state-run or pro-government broadcast outlets – particularly VTV –, yet it has become very difficult to corroborate the information these outlets elaborate, according to the four interviewees. López, echoing the opinion of fifteen journalists, explains that most of the time “the only way to obtain official information is by monitoring and partially repeating messages coming from the official media”. Yet, as Zerpa argues, “the official or state information is of poor quality and data tends to be manipulated, propagandist or simply made up.”

### 6.8.3. *The construction of balance, the dilemma of the scoop*

The vast majority of journalists working in the private media argue that the absence of adequate access to official sources and data has had major consequences in balanced elaboration of news pieces. Some of them argue that the notion of journalistic ‘balance’ has shifted during the Chávez era. This group claim that journalistic ‘balance’ has become framed almost exclusively under a binary scheme, leaving no room for

nuances or “grey areas”, to use Prieto’s expression. “Having an official spokesperson and one from the opposition as sources in a news piece does not necessarily mean journalistic balance – news balance is about the quality of the news story, about the rigour of news-gathering and of scrutiny,” argues López.

Prieto argues that balance “should not only be about having the opinion of polarised rivals; it should entail context, transparency and fairness – and we’re increasingly losing those”. Like Petkoff and Zerpa, he claims that the idea of balance has gradually excluded those who have moderate views, while highlighting those that are at both ends of the polarised political and ideological spectrum. Before polarisation became entrenched within Venezuelan society, the sources “that one would find in the media were much more varied and diverse,” says Coscojuela.

According to twenty-two interviewees, before the Chávez era the scoop was a key component of the news agenda, but not anymore. Boon argues that this is in part a consequence of the government’s concealment of information and the lack of access to public sources. “Before, one could see strong competition among private outlets to be the first to get an important news story out – now it’s hardly the case,” says Weffer.

Some journalists contend that the scoop has maintained some relevance as an element of news-making, but that secrecy among official sources has made it very difficult to elaborate scoops that scrutinise the government.

Many interviewees working in state-owned and pro-government media also argue that within the newsroom culture during the Chávez era, the previously-held importance of the scoop has dissipated. Pérez says that “practically all revolutionary media prefer consulting official versions of events before broadcasting or publishing news”. In Canorea’s opinion “there should be no competition between revolutionary media, no fights for scoops”. Nine interviewees working in state and community media agree that the pro-government news outlets tend to operate by sharing information among themselves and at times arranging information campaigns defined by Chávez, without offering much importance to scoops.

#### 6.8.4. *Sources and access to information: pro-government views*

Most journalists and editors of pro-government media argue that access to public information and government functionaries has been steadily maintained, but that

political figures and spokespersons of the political opposition have become increasingly unapproachable for them. “There had been bridges between some oppositional politicians and journalists of the Chavista media that previously worked in private media, but because of the collapse in national dialogue and the polarisation, these have become more broken,” argues Rodríguez. Marco Hernández defines the lack of accessibility to information of the private sector for the official media as “critical” and “grave”. Nine other interviewees agree with his observation.

When asked about issues related to access to information and use of news sources, the majority of official and pro-government interviewees spoke very critically about the ways the private media have been handling sources and carrying out news-gathering. “The private media do not mention sources on many occasions, which underpins their lack of accuracy,” argues Bolívar. “In the opposition media one often sees that quotes, especially those from official sources, are accompanied by anti-Chávez commentaries from the reporter – this is another weakness of these media outlets,” explains Chacín.

In Clodovaldo Hernández’s view, however, the pervasive ‘comment’ in the private media can be partially attributed to the efforts of some journalists in explaining to the public that official or government sources could not be obtained. “For the private media, access to public information has become very complicated, and some of their journalists do the best they can; but the public sector has the impression that the private media are there to destroy the revolution and, as a reaction, has closed off access to private outlets,” argues Clodovaldo Hernández.

Twelve pro-government interviewees maintain that certain types of information should not be made accessible to the media, because of the social and political confrontation that the country has been going through since 1999. Yet, a minority of pro-Chávez interviewees hold a different opinion. Clodovaldo Hernández argues that the public sector should be more open and its data more accessible. He and Saldivia concede that closure of information is evident in the official sector, and that this has detrimental consequences. “The official sector should be more transparent in its information; and the National Assembly, the government and public functionaries should be checked by responsible media,” argues Clodovaldo Hernández. He maintains that such inaccessibility and curbing of information has led to a very negative habit: journalists of the private media cover the private sector, and those of the state or official media cover the public sector. Saldivia finds that “such concealment of information is not correct”, but that it “needs to be interpreted as part of the process of revolutionary change; soon

enough, when the revolution has fully evolved, the state and its representatives will be more transparent.”

This thematic section has found that, overall, the considerable difficulties that journalists and news outlets – particularly private, critical ones – experience in their search for certain sources has been defined by most journalists as a grave problem. They also argue that this has a direct and negative impact on Venezuela’s public democratic debate. Furthermore, many accounts emphasise that such lack of access to official, state information has been increasing during the Chávez administration. However, some pro-government interviewees support the concealment of certain information by the governing bodies and agree with the latter selectively restricting access to pro-opposition news outlets.

### **6.9. Credibility, watchdog role and investigative journalism**

It has been widely argued that within liberal, normative ideals it is expected that the media scrutinise authorities and carry out a watchdog role as a key part of its democratising role (Keane 1991, Waisbord 2000a and 2013, Curran 2002, Bisbal 2009). Also, non-liberal trends of thought emphasise the need for the media to check on the market-driven social and economic elite, as well as the power structures within the media (McChesney 2000, McQuail 2005, Mosco 2006). One desirable way for the news media to carry out watchdog and scrutinising functions on the powerful and the official sector is accurate and balanced investigative journalism. This form of journalism ought to contrast with advocacate, militant reporting.

To assess journalistic production in Venezuela’s increasingly politicised newsrooms, it is important to evaluate the way in which reporters, editors, and media commentators understand the investigative role of journalists and to what degree they have been producing – or not – watchdog news that check on the official sector and the elites. Within the existing clashing ideological and normative perspectives among Venezuelan media workers, it is equally relevant to discuss their perceptions of how credibility ought to be understood and articulated through their journalistic practices.

Taken together, most of the interviewees’ opinions give an idea that the print media in Venezuela has been the most trustworthy of all news mediums. It is also, according to most accounts, the type of media that employs most professional journalists and dedicates most overall content to news stories and political opinion pieces. However, as

in most of Latin America, it is television that has the largest audience and the highest penetration in homes, as agreed by most interviewees. According to Marco Hernández, the press in Venezuela “has traditionally been the most influential media because it has been shaping public opinion like no other”. “The Venezuelan press is still more respected and credible than television and radio, even though these have a more massive reach,” says Amaya. Twenty-three other interviewees agree with Amaya’s and Hernández’s views.

#### 6.9.1. *Credibility and media radicalisation*

Even though the press is esteemed by most interviewees as the traditional medium that sets the news agenda more pervasively, some journalists argue that all types of media – printed, radio, television, and online – have been increasingly feeding on each other for news coverage and production in Venezuela, and that during the 2000s all have gathered similar levels of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness in the country.

Peñaloza and Prieto argue that, paradoxically, the most credible journalistic individuals for the mass audiences belong to the broadcast media, yet these journalists or commentators feed very much on the press and to some degree on social media. These “credible figures”, says Peñaloza, tend to be politically polarised in their comments.

Since 2002, according to the majority of accounts, journalism and news media in general suffered the first significant decline in their credibility vis-à-vis the public. The media mirrored – and in many ways promoted – a conflicting polarisation between pro-government and pro-opposition forces.

The reaction of both the private media and the pro-Chávez news outlets to the April 2002 coup d’état highlighted the militant nature of many practicing journalists. Bolívar, De García and Rodríguez argue that after the private media’s “information blackout”, during and following the April 2002 coup, the majority of Venezuelans began to distrust the private news organisations as an overall ethical and credible institution, and perceived them as deceitful political actors. Chacín defines the events of 2002-2003 as a “breaking point” in which most Venezuelan journalists stopped being perceived by the public as “defenders of the truth or as responsible social actors.”

Many interviewees of pro-opposition standings partially agree with the above



observations. The high levels of political conflict and confrontation, argue Marcano, Moleiro and Zerpa, led the private media to incur into errors in their news coverage during the early-2000s which had very negative consequences for the public's perception of journalists' work.

According to Marcano, during the early period of the 2000s, "much of the private media lost focus of what was normative journalism; by becoming fervent political agents they started forsaking veracity, and much of the population – especially the sectors of Chavismo – found that whatever trust had existed had now broken down". "Until 2004 it was mainly the private media which made the bigger mistakes by tacitly or covertly backing the April 2002 coup and the general strike in early 2003; this was perceived as deceitful by many and the news media lost a lot of its credibility," explains Moleiro. Yet, he and twelve other interviewees also claim that after 2004 the private, critical media – with few exceptions – made meaningful attempts to correct the lack of veracity and transparency shown during the 2002-2003 period by returning to more ethical and normative forms of journalism.

Many interviewees agree that there has been a significant shift in what the public perceive as credibility in relation to news media. In this sense, Bisbal critically explains that within the "polarised battlefield" that has become the Venezuelan media the most radical and polarised news organisations are very often perceived by an equally polarised public as the most trustworthy or credible.

According to Prieto, "credibility has become increasingly related to the empathy that exists between the journalists' comments and those of their audiences or readers – this represents a terrible risk for good journalism and reveals how irresponsible certain journalists have become". Some reporters working in the private media agree with such a view, also arguing that the audience's values have changed in regards to what is trustworthy and credible in news, and that the values of some reporters and editors have shifted correspondingly.

#### 6.9.2. *Watchdog role and denunciation*

The majority of interviewees agree that a fundamental role of the media is to systematically check on the government and the power elites, and to carry forth ethical and responsible scrutiny of authorities in both news and opinion pieces. However, opinions are divergent among interviewees – depending on their political and ideological standings – in relation to the nature of watchdog journalism in Venezuela

and the ways it should be employed in news media.

Caraballo, Colina and Marco Hernández argue that both the official and the communitarian media should place emphasis in checking on the traditional economic elites rather than the government, because the former have allegedly orchestrated attempts to weaken and overthrow the Chávez administration. “In community radios we make special efforts to scrutinise speculators, people who violate the laws, but just as importantly, the right-wing media and the anti-revolutionary forces,” says Caraballo. The majority of pro-government interviewees argue that the pro-Chávez media should hold accountable the private media and the political opposition in their alleged destabilising efforts against the government.

A significant majority of pro-opposition interviewees contend that neither the official nor the communitarian media carry out serious monitoring or any sort of scrutiny of the government’s improprieties. Lugo-Galicia argues that whereas “practically all officialist media are incapable of even acknowledging information about government corruption or infringement,” the private media has tried to maintain “a watchdog role on a government that has been increasingly arbitrary, secretive and authoritarian”. He, Alonso and Zerpa claim that the private, critical media have become the principal institution in trying to monitor the government and trying to inform the public about corruption and illegalities among state representatives.

However, according to these interviewees it has been increasingly difficult to carry out watchdog reporting for the private, critical media. They argue that the Chávez administration has manoeuvred strategically so as to cut access to official information of public interest, has promoted a very hostile behaviour towards most private news organisations, and has installed what this group of interviewees consider a restrictive set of media laws. These aspects – all of which have been described in previous themes – have turned watchdog and investigative reporting into activities that are very difficult and risky for independent journalists, editors and news outlet owners.

### 6.9.3. *Investigative journalism, non-advocacy initiatives*

There exists scant tradition of investigative journalism in Venezuela, according to Boon, Scharfenberg, Uzcátegui and Villegas. Scharfenberg, who has dedicated significant effort to promoting normative investigate journalism, says that among Venezuelans there is “still a lot of confusion between journalism of denouncement (*denuncismo*) and that of investigation – efforts have been made in the past to do investigative reporting,

but it has ended in brief denouncement.”

Boon, Scharfenberg and Zerpa explain that during the late 2000s some news media workers – particularly those in the press – have become aware of the normative elements and mechanisms of investigative reporting: “After 2007, some owners and many editors and reporters became aware of the relevance of the features of this type of journalism for watchdog and accountability purposes, and of the urgency to incorporate it to newspapers in a definite way,” says Zerpa. Seven other interviewees agree with her that investigative journalism, which culturally and historically has had minimal presence in Venezuela, took “its first serious steps in 2007”. Also, they argue that the increasing lack of accessibility to official sources spurred some journalists to reveal cases of governmental and public offences and general corruption in investigative pieces.

According to nine interviewees, systematic elaboration of investigative journalism had been financially too costly for Venezuelan news organisations and had not attracted the public. They argue that this gradually changed in the second half of the 2000s, where five private newspapers – *Últimas Noticias*, *El Universal*, *El Nacional*, *El Mundo*, and *Panorama* – successfully began to generate investigative agendas of their own. Yet, Amaya, Bravo and López believe that for the broadcast media it is additionally difficult to carry out exhaustive watchdog or investigative reportages, because of the intimidation journalists may suffer from the government and the latter’s discretionary use of new media regulations. They also agree that during the 2000s investigative journalism has been carried out almost exclusively by certain newspapers.

The minimal leeway the press has had under Chávez’s government has in part been capitalised on by some print outlets by setting up teams of investigative journalism, as expressed by Boon and Uzcátegui. Like Scharfenberg and Zerpa, they argue that the investigative work of these teams has been promoting democratic values within the media and the Venezuelan society. “On the one hand, we publish reportages of public interest that monitor on an abusive regime and a powerful new elite; on the other, we’re fighting off the growing trend of pseudo-news based on rumours and speculation which is very pernicious<sup>108</sup>,” argues Zerpa.

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<sup>108</sup> As examples of detailed and accurate investigative pieces published, Zerpa mentions one about how state-owned petroleum company PDVSA illegally funds activities of the government party PSUV, and another related to how public hospitals are mismanaged and neglect cancer patients.

Boon and Weffer argue that there is fear among investigative journalists in the private media that the government, public institutions or Chávez's supporters will continue to intimidate and threaten them. Weffer agrees that investigative reporters in Venezuela during the 2000s increasingly faced the danger of being "censored and neutralised by the official sector", yet she claims that reporters in this area had been working, overall, "enthusiastically, meticulously, accurately, and ethically."

However, among pro-government journalists there is a tendency to argue that investigative reporting in the private media is predominantly confrontational, inaccurate, and responds to an anti-government agenda. "Some private newspapers have started producing what they call 'investigation journalism' as a political reaction to the success of the revolution, aiming to attack the government," argues Marco Hernández. "Those texts (investigative features) have appeared in some right-wing dailies not out of ethical journalistic considerations or not to check accurately on the government, but because of their unscrupulous political urge," says Chacín.

In conclusion, the views exposed in this theme demonstrate that, even though the predominant form by which the news media try to check on the government and power elites has been denouncement and opinion pieces, investigative journalism has been developing in Venezuela, since the mid-2000s, despite economic constraints and a hostile political environment. As Scharfenberg explains, there was "a deficit in the country in terms of the presence of this form of journalism and its importance as a contribution for democratic enhancement had been overlooked". This situation, by most accounts, has changed gradually. Most journalists working in the private media argue that, even though it has only been exercised consistently by half a dozen news outlets, investigative reporting highlights the desire of some journalists to anchor their practice in normative tenets.

#### **6.10. Ideas of professionalism, journalists' contribution to ethics and to democracy**

The legitimisation of professionalism in the media is, like normative ideals within journalism, a contested ground in both theoretical and practical perspectives (Aguirre 1998, Hallin 2000, Schudson 2003, Waisbord 2013). A normative framework as promoted by professional paradigms is argued to stimulate the production of accurate, balanced, independent information; encourage checking on government authorities and power groups; underpin ethical standards in working practice; and enhance democratic

debate (Siebert 1963, Keane 1991, Aguirre 1998).

Other views, however, suggest that “professional journalism’ is problematic for democratic expression” (Waisbord 2013: 7), because it represents an elitist mechanism of disseminating information in accordance with the wishes and views of a small, predetermined group of people, with little regard for inclusive participation of the disenfranchised. Such critiques emanate from non-liberal and Marxist-inspired perspectives. These, during the Chávez era, have been gaining terrain, and disputing liberal understandings of professional practice in the news media. This debate between the colliding stances in Venezuela is of utmost importance when assessing the institutional and democratic values of journalism.

#### 6.10.1. *Journalistic professionalism and ideals: divergent perspectives*

Most of the interviewees agree that during the time Chávez has been in power the social, political and cultural shifts his mandate has set forth have produced what some describe as a “crisis” in professional values, while partisan practice has been advancing. Most of the journalists working in private media subscribe Scharfenberg’s formulation that “journalists need to establish or re-establish values, norms and procedures that define our occupation, our place in society as journalists”. This group of interviewees also agrees that professionalism in the media is positive for democratic development.

Many pro-opposition interviewees explain that after 2003 most critical journalists have reconsidered professional values, and adopted a less political role in news production. This, however, has not always been the case during the 2000s among most of the editors and journalists working for the official media, according to this group. Scharfenberg argues that during the Chávez administration the country’s media practitioners have also become divided between a “militant or partisan camp and a professional camp – this division has been one of the most perverse legacies of the Bolivarian revolution.”

Lugo-Galicia says that most reporters have a clearer idea about the need to be professional compared to 2002, “when many turned into active political agents – it has indeed become harder to report, to investigate, to have access to public information, to work free from government censorship; but most of us are clearer about our professional role”. Bravo argues that “professional journalists require a commitment to

truth and to democratic debate, a sense of risk in defending human rights and in checking on the corrupt”. Yet, some interviewees maintain that journalists’ occupational values should combine normative reporting with certain Venezuelan literary and cultural elements. For example, Coscojuela says: “I don’t agree with having to be ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ at all costs, which belongs to the U.S. journalistic tradition”. Eleven other interviewees agree with his view that “there is also great value in the authenticity and originality of the literary voice of a good reporter”, which is a distinctive element of Latin American journalism. “Many colleagues and I defend the use of literary elements, of chronicle in reporting, which is part of a Latin American tradition – it offers the possibility to be both accurate and imaginative in reporting,” he says.

A smaller number of interviewees say that they pursue ideals of an objective and accurate journalism, arguably akin to the one that is predominantly practiced in the Anglo-American tradition. “Journalism must be rigorous and objective, it’s not about disguising opinion as news, it’s about facts and balance – that’s why news-making should be left to professionals,” says Medina. Scharfenberg defends the idea that “extreme polarisation and the rule of an arbitrary regime are no excuse for reporters to turn into commentators or partisan journalists when elaborating news”. Weffer argues that “for good journalism to prosper in Venezuela reporters require more freedom, accessibility to official information, a harassment-free environment, but mainly we need to preserve essential journalistic values.”

The strongest opposition to the above arguments are expressed by a group of pro-government journalists. Bolívar says he does not believe much in the alleged traditional norms of journalism for he finds they are contrary to “genuine participatory debate among citizens and among journalists, and have become a stagnant and outdated Decalogue”. He, Ameliut Hernández, Pérez and Villegas argue that professionalism in news production should be understood within revolutionary parameters. Such parameters imply, according to Villegas, “establishing direct channels of communication with the popular sectors and informing in a truthful and transparent way, outside the market orthodoxy”. Similarly, Pérez argues that normative journalism “does not have to be about complying with neo-liberal, commercial and capitalist standards, but about revolutionary commitment, because in Venezuela we’re going through radical changes.”

Clodovaldo Hernández considers that, contrary to most pro-government interviewees, news media should ideally follow the “liberal normative model that was predominant in Venezuela during the second half of the twentieth century”. He argues that a militant

and highly-biased form of journalism, similar to the one that was practiced in the country during the nineteenth century, “is not the best way to inform the people and to empower citizens”. “Today we have gone back to a very politically-charged news production that resembles nineteenth-century journalism in Venezuela – it’s a consequence of our reality under Chávez, which surpasses the question of practising journalism according to prescriptive ways,” maintains Clodovaldo Hernández.

#### 6.10.2. *Impact of community media and citizen journalism*

The vast majority of private media journalists and editors interviewed argue that they predominantly support both traditional professional norms and formal journalistic training. “Regardless of which media outlet one works for, or the type of audience one has, the journalistic values should be the same, and these ought to be better engrained among professionals than non-professionals or the so-called ‘citizen journalists,’” argues Peñaloza. Similarly, Weffer considers that news-making “should come mainly from media professionals, for they tend to be better trained to elaborate news stories for audiences with different points of view, and can present information in an accurate and balanced way.”

As pointed out earlier, many interviewees concur that professional journalism in Venezuela has been tested by factors such as extreme social and political polarisation; harassment and threats to media workers; forms of censorship and self-censorship; implementation of new media regulations; and lack of access to sources of information and official data. Additionally, when asked about the most recent challenges for professionalism in Venezuelan news media, some pointed out that the surge of communitarian media and the increasing use of digital platforms for comment and reporting have been affecting professionalism to various degrees.

A minority of interviewees working in pro-opposition media believes that communitarian outlets have been gradually attenuating some tenets of professional journalism, particularly because of their pro-government standings and state-propagandist roles. “I know many professional journalists who, like me, agree with the ideal that communitarian media should proliferate within a popular ‘bottom-up’ approach for local development, but not as cheerleaders of Chávez’s party, which is the sad reality,” argues Coscojuela. These interviewees, however, believe that the surge of communitarian media has not undermined professional journalism to a significant degree in the nation, because most of the influential private media organisations have

strengthened, during the second half of the 2000s, the promotion of professionalism.

Among pro-government media workers opinions are divided in relation to the impact of communitarian media on journalistic professional practice. Rivette argues that news reporting has become “too politicised on the one hand, and too amateur on the other”. He explains that there should be a clear divide in the communicational objectives and in the operational structures of mainstream media and communitarian ones. A small group of pro-government interviewees disagree with this view. Moreover, Bolívar, Caballero and Caraballo dispute the idea that communitarian media, and its predominantly non-professional journalistic procedures, could represent a threat to traditional tenets while championing non-normative ways to produce information.

#### *6.10.3. Digital/online media and its effects on journalism*

The majority of pro-government media workers consider that the new digital media platforms – particularly social media – have been gaining a significant place among media professionals. This group also believes that blogs, emerging local news websites, and social media platforms do not represent, as a whole, a dilemma for journalists and news organisations. Their opinions describe a process in which new media are continuously gaining presence locally, amplifying participation in media production and consumption, and changing to some degree aspects in the constitution of news while coexisting harmoniously with the mainstream national media.

Chacín, De García and Sartori say that the vast majority of Venezuelan mainstream media have incorporated online news sites, and that convergence between traditional and new media has been aptly assimilated by both media practitioners and the audience/readers. Also, some established journalists have begun developing opinion blogs and political affairs websites. According to seventeen interviewees, such tendency in journalistic blogging should expand significantly in the near future.

In Bolívar’s view, online media “is growing vertiginously fast in Venezuela, and this should force traditional media to rethink, themselves, the way they operate because soon they will be broke”. He belongs to a minority of pro-government interviewees that maintain that online media intensifies democratic inclusion and is more plural and accessible than traditional, mainstream media. Also, he considers that platforms such as Twitter are being increasingly used by local journalists and workers of communitarian media. Importantly, Saldivia argues that Chávez’s Twitter account (with



over 4 million followers) and his constant use of it has created “an interactive communication with the people and has stimulated not only media workers but the popular sectors to use Twitter for debating national issues.”

Most interviewees working in the private media concur that online media have been acquiring increasing importance among both journalists and their audiences. Notably, many of these journalists maintain that the multiple online media platforms have had a significant impact on Venezuelan news production, but that the new digital technologies should not represent a threat to normative journalistic values and practices. Arguably, Weffer sums up such idea when explaining that “Twitter, Facebook... indeed the Internet, are great tools for our journalistic work, but the essence and principles of journalism do not change – one must stay true to the ethics of journalism.”

A large number of private-media journalists has a critical perception of the way some new media platforms are being used by journalists and media workers. “Social media cannot be treated as a source, but during the last years in Venezuela we’re witnessing how speculative tweets are being considered news,” says Prieto. “Social media is de-professionalising news practice in the country, generating much speculation, uncertainty, and undermining whatever little reflectivity we have left in this highly-polarised society,” argues Marcano. “There is no adequate verification being practised in most of the social media or in supposedly independent news websites; and this applies to both Chavista and pro-opposition media – we are witnessing a sort of ‘twitterfication’ and ‘rumourisation’ of news, which goes against professional norms,” explains Mayorca. Like twenty-one other interviewees, he laments that some journalists carried out what he considers to be non-professional, unethical practices in online media by “using Facebook, blogs, and especially Twitter to spread rumours and false news.”

Importantly, this large group of interviewees considers that during the 2000s there has been scant news generated in social media or in news-aggregating sites. Rather, these digital platforms reiterate or expand the news produced by mainstream media. Lugo-Galicia argues that online media in Venezuela is “reactive to what the mainstream media reports on; one cannot say that the news agenda has shifted to social media or blogs”. Mayorca says that social media in Venezuela “tend to amplify, in a hysterical or hyper-polarised way” what has been communicated through the mainstream media. A majority of journalists working in private media agree with Lugo-Galicia’s and Mayorca’s views.

#### 6.10.4. *Professional ethics in “exceptional times”*

The growing presence of comment in news throughout all media platforms is only one of many aspects which, according to twenty-eight interviewees, have been undermining ethical practice among journalists. Most of the interviewees concur that during the 2000s there has been a crisis in journalistic ethics unknown to modern Venezuela and – what seems just as relevant – that such a situation tends to be understood as a result of an exceptional historical moment. “The reality of the media under the Chávez-led revolution cannot be placed on the same level as the general circumstances of the media during the neo-liberal years (1980s and 1990s) – then the media had some watchdog elements, but most of the outlets sided with the elites,” explains Clodovaldo Hernández.

Clodovaldo Hernández, Saldivia, Sartori and Villegas argue that during the Chávez administration ethical standards in the media have not been ideal and must find ways to be re-evaluated and exercised in order to underpin a radical democracy. “The ethics we studied at the schools of journalism, sadly, have not been viable for now, because the country is undergoing an intense political confrontation,” explains Sartori. However, the four also concur that a relevant achievement of the state-owned and communitarian media has been the ethical manner in which these have become an integral part of a revolutionary and democratic process whereby the media have become platforms for citizen participation, popular empowerment and public debate in Venezuela.

Most interviewees working in the private and pro-opposition media agree that the news organisations they are part of have, since the mid-2000s, shifted towards a more ethical journalistic practice. This group argues that journalists working in the private media have a clearer understanding of ethical values and are more self-critical about their ethical performance than their counterparts in the officialist media.

A more generalised view among private media journalists is that the politically-polarised and advocacy stances among a large group of news practitioners leaves scarce room for professional ideals and ethical contributions. Weffer echoes such critical opinions when saying: “The ethical journalist has become a very uncomfortable witness for the polarised sectors of society, because that ethical journalist cares about balance and transparency, whereas most of the audience want biased news and opinion”. In a conclusive manner, Prieto explains that for there to exist an ethical approach to journalism in Venezuela, journalists and editors “have to step outside the dynamics of

polarisation and take the risk of working from a non-polarised position, to generate truly democratic debate.”

#### 6.10.5. *Media's contribution to democracy*

A majority of interviewees expressed that among journalists – as with the rest of Venezuelan society – the notions and models of democracy and what these represent are varied and contested. Hence, as Saldivia, Bisbal and Petkoff argue, evaluating the media's contribution to democracy becomes a complex task. “A Chavista will say that the officialist media have supported the communities and will disregard the way the authoritarian regime has persecuted some critical journalists; most oppositional journalists, on the other hand, will say that we're living under a dictatorship”, says Petkoff. “If democracy is about trying to amplify the market and to follow a neo-liberal agenda, then the private media have contributed to it; if it's about enhancing popular participation and freedom, then the revolutionary media have contributed to it,” explains Saldivia.

Most practitioners established in pro-government news outlets claim that the officialist and state media – like its journalists and editors – have fortified democracy in the nation, especially in the sense of assisting and strengthening community organisation and participation, as well as helping debate revolutionary ideals. This is arguably summarised by Saldivia's words: “Revolutionary media have contributed like few sets of organisations to democratising political participation and political awareness among the people; the poorer sectors now know they have an ally in our media.”

This broad group is critical of the allegedly non-democratic performance of the pro-opposition media. “The private, right-wing media have not been promoting democratic debate but have been inciting chaos, hatred and attempts to damage the revolutionary process,” says Marco Hernández. He, like Canorea, Chacín and De García argue that the pro-opposition media owners and many of their journalists have been outspoken against the “revolutionary” media regulations because the former “see them as a threat for their businesses and interests; they dislike that the regulations are designed to empower the poor.”

Contrarily, most of the pro-opposition interviewees consider that the Chávez administration has sought to curb democratic practice while asphyxiating the nation's critical media, and that the official media have been echoing and defending its

authoritarian policies. “The officialist media, and to an important degree the communitarian media, stand in opposition to democratic principles – they agree with the persecution of dissident journalists, with the shutting down of critical media, with the regime’s harassment towards critics of Chávez,” says Medina. “The state media have contributed to destroying all sense of institutionalism and lack any autonomy; in essence, they are tools of a *caudillo*, not of democracy,” says Lozano.

When assessing the contribution of the private news organisations and the media in general to democracy in Venezuela, opinions tend to vary among interviewees that are critical towards Chávez’s policies. Most agree that during the 2000s it became very difficult for the private media to operate in relative freedom and to effectively promote plural and democratic debate. “Democracy is about debate, about defending rights and freedoms, and allows no room for threats from the government – most of the responsible private media have sought to encourage democracy through news and opinion, but the regime does not tolerate this,” argues Martín.

Twelve interviewees who have worked in the private media accuse the government of being authoritarian and the official media of being broadly militant; yet they also argue that the private media – to varying degrees – has not played a convincing democratic role. Prieto argues that “by no means” has the journalism carried out in the majority of Venezuelan private news organisations during the last decade helped strengthen democracy. “Journalism here has lost its will to debate ideas; it has mainly become a mere political instrument or a merchandising product, with very few exceptions”. In a similar tenor, Coscojuela argues that most media professionals are “caught up in the dilemma of polarisation and do little or nothing to contribute towards a positive debate within the public sphere.”

A large group of other interviewees working in the private sector is less pessimistic. They argue that even though it has become increasingly difficult to practice a transparent, balanced and watchdog journalism under the Chávez administration, there have been clear signs of a growing awareness among many editors, journalists and some media owners about the need to effectively promote democratic debate while embracing professional norms. This, many argue, has become evident during the second half of the 2000s, when certain reporters in the private media shifted from partisan practices to those underpinned by traditional, professional tenets.

To conclude this theme, it is important to highlight that among both pro-government and

pro-opposition media workers there are some nuanced postures in relation to professionalism and about the mechanisms by which journalists should develop their ethical standings and contributions to a democratic society. An important group of journalists and editors presage that a trend towards more professional norms and practices should develop further, and contribute to, liberal democratic principles, even though it is expected to be strongly challenged by the forces of Chavismo. Some pro-government reporters and editors disregard liberal notions of objectivity and apparent neutrality in news production and seem hopeful in continuing to promote and in being part of a predominantly partisan journalism, framed in the Chavista ideals of a participative and revolutionary media practice.

### **6.11. Conclusion**

The foregoing section offers an extensive description of this research's core findings. Having undertaken a process of qualitative interviewing with a representative sample of Venezuelan reporters, editors and media-related professionals, their perceptions and opinions have been presented within ten inter-linked themes which address this study's organising questions.

A very evident aspect of the new Venezuelan mediascape, according to journalists interviewed, is that during the Chávez era the national media have been highly-active elements in the construction of what has become the most socially and politically-polarised environment in Venezuela's democratic history. Even though a majority of interviewees agree that this is not beneficial for ethical journalistic practice and overall normative democracy, others believe that it represents a desirable stage of a revolutionary process. The clash of two different political projects – one led by Chávez, the other promoted by a predominantly liberal-leaning opposition – has significantly permeated journalists' everyday agency. A key shift the Venezuelan 'ideological war' has brought to the foreground in relation to the media has been the increasing harassment and physical threat towards reporters, media workers and owners. Another notable shift has been the gradual disappearance of accessibility to official, state sources for most private news outlets. A further limitation for independent and watchdog reporting in the private media in general – particularly within the broadcast spectrum – has been the official establishment of a legal framework for the media, which is backed by pro-government journalists who defend what they believe to be its enhancement of popular, participative democracy.

The media landscape has also been significantly transformed with the overwhelming growth of state-owned media and the transformative character of communitarian media. Views among interviewees are divergent regarding the role of communitarian media, for some are of the opinion that these outlets have democratised communication while others emphasise that they essentially operate as propaganda tools for Chávez. Partisanship and non-liberal practices within these and the news media at large have clearly challenged professional journalistic tenets as modelled in western theories.

While news-gathering has been negatively affected by the hostile environment towards the media, news agendas have been dramatically shaped by the logic of political polarisation and by the pervasive presence of Chávez in the media. His weekly broadcast *Aló Presidente*, and the systematic transmittal of official blanket messages, have redefined political communications in the country as well as the role of news media in social mobilisation and the shaping of public opinion. Again, Chávez's hypermediatic persona and his use of state and communitarian media to spur his political project have underlined a strong binary divide among journalists. Those of a critical viewpoint argue that Chávez's personalist use of the media is irreconcilable with balanced, ethical, professional practice, whereas those that support him find that it contributes to defining a desirable radical democracy.

Overall, there is evidence that the ideas of freedom of the press, of censorship and self-censorship, and of the media's role in enhancing democratic debate are manifestly different between most pro-government and pro-opposition media practitioners. This arguably underlines many other pressing aspects of journalistic understanding of democracy highlighted in this chapter. In the following section, these empirical findings are analysed critically by linking them to theoretical, historical, and normative perspectives which were discussed in the initial chapters.

## Chapter 7

### Discussion and analysis of findings

The preceding section of this study selectively presented opinions and data – grouped into ten thematic constructions – derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out among Venezuelan journalists, editors, media workers, media commentators and scholars. This chapter discusses and analyses their responses with reference to the theoretical, narrative, and historical formulations discussed in the first four chapters of this research.

The ten themes developed and discussed in the previous chapter have been condensed in this section into four inclusive analytical strands, in order to enhance focus and direction in critically addressing key issues related to journalistic practice and the democratic role of the news media in Venezuela. The four analytical strands are:

- Ideas of democracy, the democratic role of the media and polarisation;
- The populist paradigm, state media and communitarian media;
- Private ownership, media regulations, censorship and the ideological imperative;
- Accessibility, watchdog role, journalistic autonomy and dilemmas in professionalism.

#### 7.1. Ideas of democracy, the democratic role of the media and polarisation

There is evidence that the idea of democracy as the dominant standard of political legitimacy is prevalent among Venezuelan journalists and media workers. It could be argued that Carrera Damas' formulation of Venezuela's "third step in the road towards democracy" (2007: 164), when the nation's last dictator was overthrown in 1958, continues to provide a landmark within journalists' narratives of political representation, participation and deliberation. Prevalence and deepening of democracy continues to be a desired political and social aim for all interviewees.

However, democratic discourses and aspirations – just like the very concept of democracy – vary considerably among media practitioners and observers. Moreover, during the Chávez era the differences in understanding and promoting democracy have become further distinct, and media workers – like the majority of the population – much more vocal in promoting the models of democracy they stand by. Even though

there are evident nuances within the political spectrum, the majority of interviewees position themselves in colliding interpretations of democracy. These can arguably be located – at least nominally – in Corcoran’s (1983) guiding formulation of a radical tradition, on the one hand, and a liberal one, on the other.

As gathered from what was expressed by the majority of interviewees, there are two dominant camps of thought installed among Venezuelan’s discourses on democracy, each requiring various qualifiers. One is essentially aligned with Marxist-inspired paradigms of radical, direct, participatory, communitarian democracy (Macpherson 1972, Bobbio 1987, Callinicos 1991, Held 2006). The other belongs to the liberal current, circumscribing the ideas of representative, institutional, electoral, pluralist democracy (Dahl 1956 and 1999, Bobbio 1987, Held 2006, Sartori 2007b). Thus, in the context of Venezuela, the narratives of democracy are strongly installed – arguably like never before – within the Left-Right axis, as formulated by Bobbio (1987 and 1997). However, it was claimed by a non-Chavista sector of left-wing leaning media workers and commentators that Chávez’s discourse and its echoing by his government and supporters have “co-opted” and “kidnapped” – to use the expressions of two interviewees<sup>109</sup> – elements and concepts of the Left, while allegedly not representing the theoretical and practical tenets of a progressive, reformist and inclusive Left, as defined by Petkoff (2005 and 2007), Castañeda (2006) and Mangabeira-Unger (2006). So, even though the democratic debate within society, and as shown among interviewees, is essentially encompassed within a highly dichotomous scheme of Left-Right standings, both political concepts – particularly the Left – remain broadly contested, albeit Chávez’s emphasis on defining his political project as socialist, revolutionary and anti-imperialist.

It is important to highlight that the Left-Right divide was found to be strongly permeated by the populist paradigm, whereby, as defined by Arditì (2004) and Laclau (2005), a leading figure – Chávez in this case – subverts the pre-established socio-political order while creating a direct emotional and political linkage with ‘the people’, the subordinate classes. Interestingly, pro-Chávez interviewees did not define his rupturist political project as populist. In fact, only two of them used the term, whereas, among opposition journalists such characterisation – generally of pejorative connotations – was prevalent.

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<sup>109</sup> Teodoro Petkoff, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012; and Cristina Marcano, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2012.



Just as the understanding and valuation of models of democracy are contested so, too, are the ideas of journalistic practice and news-media production in relation to democracy-building. Most advocates of Chávez interviewed do not adhere to the principal liberal, western values as expressed by theorists of freedom of the press and defenders of commercial media, exemplified by Siebert (1963). They claim that, in the liberal context, media have been ultimately utilised as instruments of control by the dominant social class, the oligarchy, rather than as emancipatory and participatory tools for democratic enhancement. This group, openly pro-government, echo Gramsci's formulation of hegemony, as explicated by Artz *et al* (2006), when claiming that the media should be used by its practitioners to challenge and modify pre-existing forms of class domination and elitist representations of reality. Among this pro-Chávez group it was found that a revolutionary role of the media in terms of its emancipatory, participative and inclusive potential is the predominant form of understanding the democratic contribution of their journalistic work to the wider society.

Although many pro-government interviewees claim that such a revolutionary role within the state-owned and the communitarian media has been attained to a significant degree, others from the same pro-Chávez camp argue that authentic revolutionary, communitarian, grassroots media in Venezuela are very much in embryonic stages, and that these still entail many aspects "inherited" from liberal, capitalist models. There is, however, a minority of left-wing and pro-government reporters and editors who maintain that, for journalistic practice to contribute to democratic debate and civic dialogue, it is paramount that news media systematically check on the power elites – particularly the government. But, carrying out a watchdog role on the Chávez administration and on the public sector becomes a problematic area for the vast majority of pro-government reporters and editors, and has lost relevance as part of their ideals of journalistic contribution to democracy.

On the other hand, most media workers and commentators who are critical of the government are convinced that the media, as a democratic institution, should operate ideally in a non-partisan and autonomous manner, so as to elaborate information that is balanced and of public interest, while keeping the government and the powerful in check. In this sense, it can be argued that the majority of the pro-opposition group find desirable Habermas's notion that the press – and the news media at large – ought to be the public sphere's main institution for "fostering democratic politics" (Schudson 2003: 212). Yet, pro-opposition journalists – with few exceptions – by no means fully advocate for an Anglo-American media model in its most normative character, as

defined by Siebert (1963) or Hallin and Mancini (2004). The ideas of alleged balance, transparency, accuracy, and objectivity – all of which are prominent in the U.S. liberal narrative of the media – among the majority of these journalists tend to merge with certain licences to comment in news or reportages, and to use literary devices that mainly belong to fiction writing – aspects which have been part of the Latin American journalistic tradition (García Ponce 2001, Díaz Rangel 2007).

The different and often-colliding perspectives of the democratic role of the news media among practitioners have intensified during the Chávez era. Moreover, the dominant form of journalism that had been developing since 1958, during Venezuela's democratic period and underlined by the party-politics of *puntofijismo* (Díaz Rangel 2007, Caballero 2010), entered a time of crisis. Most of the news media in Venezuela had operated during the *puntofijista* period within a liberal-inspired framework – albeit with occasional limitations to freedom and patent clientelist traits –, and loosely influenced by its ideals. These have been strongly challenged by a social environment defined by overt political confrontation and ideological struggle between Chavismo and oppositional forces. According to most sources, Venezuela had not experienced such profound levels of political polarisation during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The partisanship which has emerged among media practitioners and in news media content – an all-important component of a highly-polarised social sphere – maintains close similarities with the overtly militant and pugnacious type of journalism practiced in Venezuela throughout the nineteenth century (Grases 1967, Febres Cordero 1983, García Ponce 2001). Political polarisation, as reflected in the news media during the 2000s, most resemble that which existed in the press during and after Venezuela's Federal War (1859-1863) through to Guzmán Blanco's presidencies<sup>110</sup> (Febres Cordero 1983, Salcedo Bastardo 1996).

The profound polarisation in Venezuela's media landscape also responds to the legacy of a "long history of incomplete democracy", as expressed by one interviewee<sup>111</sup>. There is consensus among most of the study's interviewees that the republic's democratic period generated a political-party system that gradually became discredited in most social narratives because of its increasing corruption and administrative mismanagement, lack of participative political and social policies, and a general negligence towards the needs of the popular sectors. A majority of interviewees echo

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<sup>110</sup> President Antonio Guzmán Blanco ruled Venezuela intermittently between 1870 and 1887, during three terms.

<sup>111</sup> Clodovaldo Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Lander's idea that, under the ongoing polarised environment in the Chávez era, "a discussion around the interpretation of meaning of events is no longer possible, since agreement on the very events themselves is impossible" (2008: 83).

Although polarisation in the news media increased overwhelmingly, its escalation has not been linear. Rather, it has developed through peak periods, alternating its intensity depending on how journalists, editors and owners react to specific events in the unravelling political collision between Chavismo and the opposition. Elections and referenda have proved to be markedly polarised spells, with media outlets redoubling their militancy and political sectarianism on both sides of the spectrum. However, the 2002-2003 period, during which both an anti-Chávez coup d'état and a general strike took place, proved to be the most critical point of polarisation, with most of the private media playing active oppositional roles and assuming, to varying degrees, the functions of political parties; and the state-owned and the pro-Chávez communitarian media reacting as instruments of state communications and support (Ibid, Botía 2007, Villegas 2009). It is arguably at this point that public service broadcasters – which had always been aligned with the government – became patent instruments of state messages and propaganda, serving to mobilise Chávez's supporters, and have since maintained such a role.

As explained by Lozada, polarisation has indeed "favoured the naturalisation and legitimisation of violence" in Venezuela (2011: 27). Some journalists and commentators in the news media have evoked and promoted forms of violent language. Hence, political content in the news media has become strongly charged with an emotional pitch, and it is not rare to find the use of words like "fascists", "coup plotters", "lackeys", "anti-patriots" in the pro-government media to label the opposition; or "assassins", "thugs", "dictator", "tropical Hitler" to describe Chávez's persona and/or his political project in the pro-opposition media. Over time, the dissident news outlets have shown more moderation in their journalistic language compared to the pro-government media, which echo the President's confrontational rhetoric. Furthermore, the pro-Chávez news outlets have reflected the hegemonic struggle between two rival political stances in a language of dichotomy: the Left versus the Right, "the popular" versus "the rich", "revolutionaries" versus "neo-liberals", etc. This was found to be less apparent in the private media, particularly during the second half of the 2000s – by then these news organisations reduced the polarising role they had adopted during the first five years of the Chávez administration. So, while the rhetoric of polarisation was used strategically by Chávez and the pro-government news outlets throughout the 2000s, some of the

private media, particularly the press, sought normative alternatives of journalism. It should be noted, however, that certain private news outlets maintained a polarising stance throughout the decade.

Journalists were found to be fully aware of the existence of intense polarisation in Venezuela and most have a clear idea about its mechanisms and socio-political consequences. Again, there is division of opinion in the evaluation of the consequences of polarisation in news-production, journalism practice, and the all-permeating effects these have on society. Within this division, a majority are critical in relation to polarisation, arguing that it constructs distorted representations of others in the media, thus impoverishing public discourse and political debate. Also, as argued by them, polarisation intrinsically imposes a Manichaeian reading of socio-political reality, and tends to legitimise violence as a means of political domination, while obstructing democratic and peaceful solutions to conflicts, as also argued by Bisbal (2008a and 2009), Lozada (2011) and Waisbord (2011 and 2012).

It can be inferred from these interviews that the pro-government media, in aligning themselves with Chávez's political rhetoric, have been strategically using a polarising narrative in news coverage and production, seeking to neutralise pro-opposition voices and critical media. An important sector of journalists and editors in the state-owned and communitarian news outlets affirms that polarisation in the media is not negative, for it is a mechanism by which 'the people' can become politically aware (Laclau 2005, Garretón 2006) and are able to attain mass mobilisation against oppressive agents – namely, the traditional, liberal, capitalist elite. Some argue that journalistic neutrality is not only a bourgeois or neo-liberal idea, but that it is anti-political and frivolous.

The justification and intensification for militant and polarised forms of journalism has meant that moderate voices in the media have been gradually losing ground and audiences/readers. Journalists and commentators with a radical, biased, militant stance have been amassing a large media following and have displaced, to an important degree, reporters and analysts that defend mainstream, professional, normative forms of journalism. The latter, critical of the use of news media as tools of overt ideological confrontation, argue that polarisation – if intensified further in Venezuela's media and journalistic environment – could lead to sustained forms of direct violence or even to a civil war.

## 7.2. The populist paradigm, state and communitarian media

Polarisation in Venezuelan media and society reflects many aspects of the logic of populism as partly defined by Canovan (1981), Ansaldi (2007), Merino (2007) and Keane (2009). Under Chávez's government, Venezuela represents that 'grey area' that is populism in democracy dynamics. Within the nation's society and media a Manichean discourse – in which political standings are defined to an important degree by the symbolic construction of an enemy, and through the rhetoric of systematic confrontation – has become prevalent. Authors of different political perspectives like Diamond (2002), Laclau (2005) and Ansaldi (2007) coincide in their view that, in Latin America's political tradition, populism has been identified with non-liberal, authoritarian and charismatic leaderships.

Not since Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón had the Latin American region experienced such an overwhelming populist phenomenon as the one brought about by President Chávez. According to many interviewees and analysts, Chávez epitomises the twenty-first-century version of Venezuelan nineteenth-century *caudillos*, most of who had military backgrounds, developed strong personalistic leaderships, and showed very limited concern for liberal ideas of institutionalism.

Chávez's hyper-leadership has relied heavily on the use of media. Some commentators in this study have gone as far as suggesting that his rise to power and successive popularity are mainly the product of his media exposure and his strategic use of broadcasts. However, what is most evident is that Chávez has been able to establish a relentless media presence for himself in Venezuela. With such media ubiquitousness he has strategically propagated his political messages, mobilised his followers, verbally attacked his enemies, and set the national news agenda – and the regional one, to an important degree. Under his government, it was found that news media in Venezuela have become more President-centred than ever before. This trait of the nation's new political and media landscape has, again, divided opinions and revealed to be problematic.

Hardly any neutral opinions were found in relation to Chávez's use of his weekly broadcast *Aló Presidente* and his recurring blanket messages that are compulsory for all national broadcasting outlets. His followers and sympathisers that work in the media maintain that the President's intense on-screen and radio presence is positive and necessary for the deepening of a socialist, revolutionary process. In this sense, it can

be argued that Chávez's personal use of media is partially guided by a political ideal that seeks to enhance participatory democracy while also channelling the popular disenchantment towards pre-existing neo-liberal policies and promoting alternative ones, as explained by Barret *et al* (2008) and some interviewees. Chávez's personal broadcasts and some of his *cadena*s simulate a direct connection between the people and the President, and some consider them to boost a radical, indispensable relationship between leader and revolutionaries. Also, within the political tug-of-war between Chavismo and opposition forces, *Aló Presidente* and *cadena*s proved to have been strategically successful in mitigating the advocacy journalism of some pro-opposition and anti-Chávez private media.

However, the pervasive manner in which Chávez utilises the media clashes with fundamental liberal values, and arguably undermines democratic practice, as many journalists and commentators explained. His discourse in the media – highly-politicised, militant and divisive – has not stimulated a constructive debate within Venezuela's society, which ought to be a role of the media in democracy, as explained by Keane (1991), Schudson (1995 and 2003), McQuail (2005), and Bisbal (2008a and 2009). Moreover, it has spurred a narrative that is both belligerent and divisive – often resorting to militarist allusions – through much of the media that is state-owned or pro-government, against the political opposition and the critical media.

Among interviewees of liberal and critical bent it became evident that dealing with the tone and content of most of Chávez's messages has been a challenge, particularly when the President accuses some of them of being "servants" of a "media oligarchy" or "pawns" of the "U.S. empire" – characterisation which can be associated with political-economic and neo-Marxist critiques of media ownership and corporatism, as formulated by McChesney (2000), Mosco (2006), and Parra (2010). As an important consequence of such deprecations, much of the population came to regard dissident journalists as declared enemies of the Bolivarian political project, and as unethical practitioners, who were allegedly subordinated – as argued by authors of the Marxist tradition – to the private interests of the dominant elite.

Similarly, Chávez's mediatic ubiquity represents a dilemma for journalists of liberal normative ideals, namely the majority of those working in the private media. It has become very difficult for most media outlets to maintain coverage of all the traditionally-established news sections in a professional manner. There are two main reasons for this. One is the personalistic disposition of Chávez's use of the media and his

broadcasted hyper-leadership. The other is the reactive nature of most of the critical reporters and editors to whatever the President affirms in his speeches and broadcasts. The news agenda has been increasingly determined on the basis of Chávez's actions and statements. As a result, the impoverishment of diversity in news coverage has become evident, as have the mechanisms by which critical journalists could withstand the logic of polarisation.

As a key component of his hyper-leadership and populist communicational strategy, Chávez increasingly created new state media outlets while also buying private ones for his revolutionary project. State-funded broadcast stations that had previously worked under a scheme which mainly privileged educational and public service – albeit always entailing a pro-government standing – have been turned into active disseminators of pro-Chávez messages and content. Never in Venezuela's democratic history had the state owned so many media outlets, principally in the broadcast spectrum. Very importantly, never had news material been so prominent in state-funded media and, by the same token, so politicised.

Defined as a new, disproportionate media hegemony by most critics of Chávez and his government, the ever-growing state ownership has been gradually asphyxiating the private sector and the political opposition. In its antagonism towards the pro-opposition media, one of its main aims appears to consist in minimising the power of oppositional voices in the private media and the potential re-emergence of a strong anti-Chávez force.

Evidently, the coup d'état against the President in April 2002 and its aftermath – which most of the private, pro-oppositional media covered in a highly-biased and unethical way – indicated to Chavismo that a more robust and larger state media structure was necessary in order to counter potential future attacks from sectors of the opposition. As Chávez's government increased considerably its ownership of media outlets and these, in turn, adopted a stronger advocate role, it can be argued that a majority of journalists within the private media began exercising a more moderate and less biased tone.

Pro-Chávez interviewees indicated welcoming the exponential growth of the state-owned media. Its expansion can be theoretically supported by the anti-imperialist and developmentalist narratives of Frank (1969), Mattelart and Mattelart (2005) and Bolaño (1999). These authors, echoed by some interviewees, have drawn criticisms towards the cultural and economic subordination of Latin American media to the United States.

Hence, a radical shift in media ownership – in which Chávez’s self-defined socialist and anti-imperialist media gains ground in terms of quantity – represents, under these views, a plausible way to curb the nation’s dependency on and influence of U.S. media models and information flow.

Some interviewees provided evidence that the Chávez administration has promoted and assisted the growth of communitarian media as a means to stimulate popular participation and representation in the media. This was also part of the President’s strategy for expansive mediatic dominance. Crucially, the vast majority of the more than 300 existing communitarian media – often referred to as ‘alternative media’ by pro-government commentators – not only reflect increasing political agency for the working-class and poorer minorities but have been operating to a significant degree as journalistic support for Chávez. The advocacy role of communitarian media workers, together with the non-professional background of most of its staff members, has resulted in trenchant criticisms from professional media workers of the private sector, and has also led to tensions with some pro-government professional journalists working in traditional media. The frequently colliding visions regarding journalistic practice between the predominantly-amateur workers of communitarian media and the professionals of state and mainstream state media proves that normative elements of liberal journalistic practice – as described by Gurevitch and Blumler (1990), Aguirre (1998), Curran (2002), and Schudson (2003) – are present among some ‘revolutionary’, pro-Chávez and non-liberal practitioners.

Indeed, it was argued by many interviewees that most community news outlets tend to reproduce or re-broadcast pro-government information elaborated by state and official media; they resonate as instruments that have been partly elaborated to echo Chávez’s messages and the government party’s indications. The significant dependence on the state, and the systematic assistance to the government’s actions in Venezuela’s newer community media, are traits that Siebert and Schramm (1963) would include in their formulations of ‘authoritarian’ and ‘Soviet’ theories of the press. Yet, their context, character and operating mechanisms are not as formulaic as that. Community media in the 2000s can be considered an integral element of Chávez’s socio-political policies to empower Venezuela’s popular and poorer sectors of society, which had been broadly misrepresented or under-represented – and even disqualified to some degree – in most of the news media prior to Chávez’s arrival to power.

Communitarian media have enabled the popular sectors in Venezuela to gain a socio-



cultural space from where to negotiate with national institutions and society at large, while also allowing them to attain an important presence in the news media and in public debate. The communitarian media arguably represent like few other recent phenomena in Venezuela a socio-political transformation whereby individuals of the poor majority recognise themselves as “subjects of political and organisational action” (Lander 2008: 81). These are voices that had been marginalised before, and through reporters and members of the increasingly numerous community media have found the informative access and means of self-representation that are desirable in a participative and deliberative democracy, as argued by authors Benhabib (1996 and 2005), Mosco (1996) and Sampedro (2000).

While views from various non-liberal theoretical camps uphold the idea that Venezuela’s communitarian media have represented an emancipatory challenge to the ideological supremacy of a pre-existing social order, a pervasive liberal and anti-populist critique among some interviewees contends that these are subordinated to the power of the state, to the figure of Chávez, and that most have assumed a propagandist role. Yet, an alternative view from the above-mentioned dichotomous understanding of communitarian media, and the tensions the latter have brought to the foreground among journalists, can be elucidated from Latin American cultural theoretical perspectives. Authors Martín-Barbero (1993 and 2000b) and García Canclini (1995 and 2008) have stressed that communitarian cultural and media products entail a hybrid, subversive and nuanced character; and that popular sectors in Latin America tend to maintain a non-passive and highly-fluid relation with the powerful through the media. Yet, theorists such as Pasquali (1980 and 2007), Reyes Matta (1983) and Beltrán (1999 and 2005), who proposed national media policies based in highly-participatory and multi-directional models of communication, would contend that the Venezuelan communitarian media model is too reliant on the state and its political guidelines, allowing scant space for autonomous communitarian decision-making and direct civic interaction. Even so, these communitarian outlets represent examples of emerging informative and communicational instruments by which the people can potentially mediate, to some degree, political and social aspects that affect them, while configuring their hegemonic struggle through their use.

The abundance of communitarian media, together with the Presidential rhetoric and the government policies that uphold them, have contributed markedly towards the newly-acquired relevance of community and popular themes across practically all the media spectrum. Evidence suggests that journalists of both state-owned and private news

organisations have been drawn to voicing in their news coverage and informative production the realities of sectors of society that had been marginalised and misrepresented. This labour of recognition and agency is particularly strong in the state and pro-government news media. Non-elite and popular sources have become more visible and tangible in journalistic production, and spaces in media programming dedicated to people's issues have increased. With the exception of radically capitalist theorists and advocates, this is desirable for adherents of varying democratic standings.

### **7.3. Private ownership, media regulations, censorship and the ideological imperative**

While state-owned news outlets and communitarian media have increased in numbers significantly under Chávez, private news organisations have been gradually decreasing. Importantly, those private outlets that seek to maintain a critical and dissident editorial profile have faced increased pressure and hardships from the government and media regulating bodies. The governmental media hegemony strategies have reduced not only the numbers of private news outlets but, more importantly, the power these had traditionally exerted. As highlighted by scholars in Chapter 4, the majority of the private media had been traditionally used by its owners for economic and political gains, maintaining traits of political clientelism while sustaining episodes of tension with the state (Capriles 1976, Díaz Rangel 2007). The Chávez administration, the media it funds, and its followers have challenged the traditionally-held domination of the private media.

Chávez's selectively radical policies defied the existing media system, which has traditionally relied on market and commercial dynamics, predominantly promoting liberal-inspired values, and possessing significant political agency. Since the fall of the nation's last dictatorship, in 1958, news media had ceased to function as direct extensions of political parties but had, since the 1989 social upheaval – *El Caracazo* – adopted a much more active political role, echoing general social discontent, and strongly criticising the successive ruling parties and government leaders (Hawkins 2003, Botía 2007, Caballero 2010). However, it was found that by 2000 many media outlets, reporters and columnists had begun taking an overtly partisan position, at times superseding political parties – during the early 2000s, this was particularly evident within oppositional news organisations. Hence, the validity of the argument which indicates that in the Chávez era most journalists became not only very political,

but significantly partisan. This, seemingly, poses a problem for some journalists who seek to elaborate news under the banners of autonomy, balance and fairness. Within the journalistic culture in Venezuela there is a desideratum among most professional media workers for normative standards, yet there seems to be scant regard for their sustained every-day practice in general terms – as is the case in many non-western media systems (McQuail 2005). Alternatively, it can also be argued that intense advocate and partisan forms of journalism have emerged among some professional reporters and editors as a result of the “exceptional times” – to use the expression of some interviewees – that Venezuelan society has gone through during the 2000s under a framework of broad politicisation and acute polarisation.

In the prevailing polarised scheme, the confrontational divide that has emerged between pro-government and pro-oppositional standings within the media and its workers has led to the configuration of ideologically-homogenous newsrooms. Since the April 2002 coup d'état, politically and ideologically-motivated migration of media workers to news outlets of similar political stances became evident.

Ideological and political homogeneousness within newsrooms was found to be a novelty in Venezuela's history during the democratic era, and has become a determinant factor in news decision-making (gatekeeping) and agenda-setting. These have changed to less hierarchical dynamics within most news organisations. Reporters in both private and state-owned media arguably have more active engagement in the type of material that is gathered for news, as well as in the production of information, which indicates that gains have been achieved in terms of broader journalistic participation and inclusiveness. However, this new form of homogeneousness has also presented some qualitative dilemmas. Firstly, there is scarce tolerance within newsrooms towards potential political and ideological diversity of its members. Secondly, under these conditions overall balanced, fair, accurate, scrupulous reporting tends to be supplanted by the organised political-ideological interests of the newsrooms. Hence, even though many editors and journalists claim that construction and provision of news has become more participative within media outlets it seems that, under the emerging rationale for newsroom ideologically-driven configuration, reporters relinquish political independence and conventions of balance and transparency, all of which undermines public constructive discussion and the media's potential contribution to democracy, as expressed by authors Schudson (1995 and 2003), Dahl (1999), McQuail (2005), Sartori (2007b) and Waisbord (2007 and 2013).

Many interviewees provided evidence that liberal, non-partisan ideals of journalism practice, particularly in the private media, have also suffered the effects of new regulatory and economic measures established by the Chávez administration. Spearheaded by the Organic Law of Telecommunications and the Law of Social Responsibility for Radio and Television (Resorte), the legal framework that took shape after 2002 seeks to democratise the media spectrum, thus incorporating actively different groups of Venezuelan society, particularly the popular and poorer sector, in inclusive debate.

Under a Marxist-leaning and within a populist logic – as derived from assessments by Bolaño (1999), McChesney (2000 and 2008), Waisbord (2011 and 2012) and Kitzberger (2012) –, Chávez's new judicial framework for the media offers a platform for non-corporate and popular information outlets and their workers to curb the communication power of the market-driven media, the traditional elite, and journalists who allegedly reproduce neo-liberal and capitalists values in their news production. Yet, a most evident effect of the official regulations – emanating from various liberal critiques, an array of freedom of expression organisations, and many journalists interviewed – has been the weakening of freedom in reporting, and the imposition of hurdles for checking on the public sector and exercising critical news reporting. Broadcast journalism is monitored and controlled by regulatory bodies more intensely than the press, and their news production has been more affected by the new communications legislation. Albeit experiencing increasing pressure from the discretionary application of these laws, there are indications that print media editors and journalists still have some margins by which to negotiate certain critical content with public functionaries.

The government's implementation of media regulations which allow the Executive to suspend any news that it considers unfavourable to national interests, and the manner in which it closely regulates the inflow of non-nationally produced media content (Hernández Díaz 2009), highlights the centrality of a nation state's policies under apparent globalising tensions. Contrary to central ideas of globalisation enthusiasts and technological determinists which stress the prevalence of media deregulation and international corporatism during the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, this study finds in Venezuela's newly-established set of laws an important example of media sovereignty and cultural resistance from 'peripheral' state nations towards the dictates of 'global' policies, as formulated in Latin American reform and dependency paradigms. Furthermore, the

implemented media and communications regulations under the Chávez administration indirectly brought to the fore in Venezuela a particular reordering of the developmentalist, non-western proposals that dominated the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates during the late 1970s and early 1980s, focused on combating cultural and economic dependency, and on promoting national media production and inclusive access and minorities' representation in the media. Significantly, it was found that many theorists, intellectuals, and journalists who backed reform-minded proposals during the NWICO discussions of the 1970s and 1980s (Pasquali 2007), have become very critical about the negative consequences of media regulations set forth by the Venezuelan government during the 2000s.

Both judicial manoeuvres and financial penalisation brought about by Chávez's reformist policies – together with the volatile economic conditions for the private sector during the second half of the 2000s – have partly paved the way for censoring critical newsrooms. Albeit having the enthusiastic approval of pro-government editors and reporters, the new national media legislations have been threatening freedom of expression in the private news organisations and imposing varying levels of censorship and prior-censorship. The overriding argument among Chavista journalists for the escalation of censorship and relative restriction to freedom of expression in the media tend to gravitate around two central reasons: the defence of the Chávez-led revolutionary process; and the use of 'revolutionary' laws and media to counter what they consider "right-wing", "neo-liberal", "counter-revolutionary" threats from the pro-opposition media and the rivalling political camp.

Prior-censorship and government-censorship are not new in Venezuelan history (Febres Cordero 1983, Cañizalez and Lugo-Ocando 2008). Journalistic standards underpinned by theories of freedom of the press and in western, libertarian, normative media imperatives have been deficient or have fallen into crisis cyclically throughout the nation's republican history (García Ponce 2001, Bisbal 2009, Waisbord 2011). However, as expressed for this study by some interviewees, to find such levels of state censorship one would have to draw analogies from twentieth-century periods of dictatorship and from those of nineteenth-century *caudillismo*.

Another pivotal element which has induced censorship and self-censorship in newsrooms has been the general environment of hostility, threat and physical assault boosted by the radical factions of opposing political groups, as experienced by most journalists. In the view of many media practitioners, news reporting has shifted from

being considered one of the most respected and credible professions to one of the country's most visible targets of collective aggression. President Chávez's belligerent rhetoric towards critical media has permeated most sectors of society, and journalism has become – as expressed by one interviewee<sup>112</sup> – a “high-risk occupation”. And although most reporters wish to work normatively they have had to become mainly preoccupied in preserving their lives in a context of increasing harassment, threat, physical aggression, and possible detention and imprisonment.

It is evident that high levels of politicisation have resulted in violent reactions by Chávez's supporters towards journalists who seek to practice under liberal models and perform a watchdog role. Within the same binary logic, albeit to a lesser degree, radical followers of the opposition have harassed officialist media workers, reactively and in an attempt to nullify the flow of governmental information. Reporters of most beats or news sections had never feared the street as much as during the 2000s. The tension between the risks of being harassed while reporting and producing critical, scrutinising news material has become very problematic.

Many news reporters, editors, media owners and freedom of the press organisations find that violence towards journalists is a form of intimidation and coercion which has the tacit approval of the Venezuelan state. As demonstrated through the interview process, many journalists in Venezuela wish news media could function both as organs of self-expression and as tools of socially-responsible communication. Such desired freedom and responsibility, as argues O'Neill (1990), are key aspects for the democratic role of the media. However, they remain only aspirational tenets among Venezuelan news workers because, in day-to-day practice, interests in self-expression and group ideological imperatives seem to prevail among most journalists over the need to produce balanced, inclusive and socially-responsible news.

The violence towards private-media reporters also underlines the relative negation of dissidence in populism. Chávez's anti-corporatist, anti-imperialistic, and anti-dissident populist designs have arguably placed at least two external forces that have partly led to censorship, prior-censorship and curbing of freedoms among private-media journalists: a new legal framework but also, and seemingly more so, the emerging violent clashes from radical groups against critical media outlets and their workers.

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<sup>112</sup> Laura Weffer, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

There is, in addition, concern among those professionals interviewed about internal forces leading to censorship and self-censorship. Across most media platforms, regardless of their political-ideological leanings, important areas of 'internal' censorship have been perpetuated to varying degrees. In the private, commercial media most censorship within the newsrooms is exercised by owners or editors, and is related mainly to information of financial and an economic nature, especially if the information alludes negatively to a commercial client or advertiser of the news organisation. Even though there is no evidence to suggest these measures have increased during the 2000s compared to previous decades, they have created tensions between reporters and private-media owners. Within official, state-owned media this type of censorship is rarer. These outlets, relying entirely on governmental funding and siding with Chávez's political project, are not critical of state policies and actions, nor do they produce watchdog pieces that check on the government. The claim that there is apparently less 'internal' censorship from editors to reporters in official media can also suggest that there are less demands for journalistic autonomy from the reporters and/or that they overtly align themselves within the traditions of advocacy journalism. Hence, the "professional devotion" to freedom of expression and to freedom from any ideological constraint, which Schudson (2003: 200) underpins as the aspiration of all journalists, does not seem to be constitutive in many pro-Chávez reporters and editors.

Even though some forms of 'internal' censorship are patent in the country's media, it is coercion and censorship from the state which was found to have augmented exponentially; and in doing so these have challenged the development of forms of journalism that relate to the ideals of "objective reporting", as promoted in the U.S. liberal tradition (Siebert 1963: 60). A narrative of censorial culture which is set from the state has become very prevalent among most of the critical media practitioners. An alternative view, as formulated by a group of interviewees, is that advocates of normative, liberal journalism abused their freedoms in order to help undermine the political process led by Chávez, and ultimately collaborated in his ousting during the events of April 2002. It can be argued that even though freedom of expression and freedom of the press are values that are – at least nominally – esteemed and desired by the majority of Venezuelan journalists, some maintain – in the vein of Marxist-oriented and critical political economy thinkers (Mosco 1996 and 2006, Bolaño 1999, McChesney 2000, Sparks 2006) – that state-imposed media restrictions are necessary in order to curb the power of private media organisations, and that journalists in the context of a radical process of social change should not expect the maximisation of liberal freedoms.

#### **7.4. Accessibility, watchdog role, journalistic autonomy and dilemmas in professionalism**

One of the most negative effects of extreme politicisation during the 2000s for Venezuelan journalism, as this study's findings indicate, has been the diminishing possibility to, or rights to, access official information that is newsworthy and of social interest. For most media workers and observers interviewed, this new characteristic in the country's mediasphere is alarming – it undermines significantly what is for most journalists the desirable prospect of elaborating news with a sense of accuracy, utilisation and portrayal of varied voices, and broad representation of diversity of views. Moreover, for most critical media professionals, inaccessibility also imposes the non-viability to exercise critical, watchdog and investigative forms of journalism. These are forms of journalistic practice primarily defended by editors and reporters who stress linkages to principles embedded in liberal theories such as freedom of the press and social responsibility.

The wider the quality and range of sources represented in news content, the closer journalists allegedly become “to achieving an accurate account of what is happening”, bearing in mind that maintaining high standards of accuracy “are important to democratic media” (Street 2011: 318). As argued by most western promoters of liberal and social-responsibility media theories, for journalistic practice to serve effectively as an instrument which democratically enhances dissemination of information and stimulation of plural and constructive debate within society, adequate access to data and sources of information is a requirement (Keane 1991 and 2009, Schudson 1995 and 2003, Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Even though some pro-government journalists and editors argue that no access to official or state data is justified in the context of an hegemonic battle within the media, or as a necessary consequence of non-liberal journalistic ideals clashing with liberal ones, most news workers do not consider inaccessibility to relevant official data and public information a part of a revolutionary phase. Instead, they see this as a component of state media strategies which are framed, on the one hand, under a scheme of polarisation and, on the other, as a result of a dualistic view of journalism which has been elaborated counter to “‘professional’ reporting”, which pro-Chávez news practitioners interpret as “representative of oligarchic, imperialistic, corporate interests” (Waisbord 2012: 511).



This study found that developing ‘resourceful’ *ad hoc* techniques to access official information by some reporters has contributed to destabilising wishful normative journalistic practice among many practitioners. Private-media journalists resorting to negotiating with state-owned and militantly pro-Chávez outlets in order to obtain basic official information, which should be readily available, has been damaging the sense of autonomy in news-construction and the quality of political and social discourses in Venezuela, as have argued many interviewees and scholars Hawkins (2003), Bisbal (2008b) and Cañizalez (2011). Importantly, it was found that demands by the private media for rights of access to information tend to be denied by public institutions. Seemingly, media access to timely and accurate public information of social interest is not guaranteed by the state, but determined by whether or not a news organisation backs the government and its revolutionary project. The state strategies of non-accessibility again underline rupturist, divisive, non-liberal characteristics that are prevalent in markedly populist governments in Latin America (Diamond 2002, Ansaldi 2007, Waisbord 2012).

The crisis in accessibility to official data and to certain types of information was found to be further compounded by the new configuration of a binary scheme of understanding ‘balance’ among journalists and editors. The binary idea of news balance that has become prevalent is one that renders invalid any news piece that does not offer opposed and confronted views. Sources are sought among spokespersons of politico-ideological rivalling camps, pro-government and opposition, leaving scant space for nuanced, moderate, non-polarised and non-cartelised voices. Before the mid-2000s, most journalists tended to pursue the use of sources that reflected certain diversity and could enhance rational debate through more ample representativeness; this, however, has been evaporating in Venezuela’s media landscape.

Another relevant consequence of non-accessibility to government sources, underpinned by the polarising logic within news-production, has been the gradual waning of the journalistic scoop, particularly in the state and official media. As expressed by an interviewee<sup>113</sup>: “Venezuelan media is witnessing the death of the scoop”. The notion of scoop is inherent to a competitive market-driven framework of news-media functioning, as stressed in liberal, normative narratives of journalism.

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<sup>113</sup> Xabier Coscojuela, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Partisan loyalty has eclipsed competition among news outlets for breaking-news stories, all of which evidences the increasing ideological and political bias among most reporters, editors, and media owners.

Political and ideological bias, lack of transparency and neglect for accuracy in news production were found to have incremented further during election or referenda processes. In liberal thought and in many radical political variants, elections represent one of the central instruments for political legitimisation and broad democratic arrangement within society (Dahl 1956 and 1999, Schumpeter 1976, Fishkin 1991, Schmitter and Terry 1991, Held 2006), and within a functional democracy the media are expected to play a prominent role in informing the public about the various aspects of electoral processes, candidates, and results in an ethical, transparent and independent manner (Dahl 1999, Keane 1991, Curran 2002, Sartori 2007b).

Although in Venezuela's history news media's treatment of electoral processes has traditionally never been even-handed and entirely transparent (Botía 2007, Díaz Rangel 2007, Cañizalez 2009b), during the Chávez era attitudes among journalists and editors towards balance, accuracy, fairness, accountability, and overall professional quality of coverage has suffered significantly during referenda and elections. In fact, agenda setting and gatekeeping have become predominantly manipulative when elections have taken place, and much of the language used in news has become aggressive and bellicose.

There is the perception among journalists – particularly among those working in the private sector – that throughout the 2000s there has been an unprecedented loss of credibility towards their work and profession. This impression among some reporters and editors can arguably be guided by a part of the public that tends to endorse non-partisan ideals of news production. Another sector of Venezuelans, arguably a larger one, seemed to equate journalistic credibility with high-levels of polarisation or overt partisanship. It is indeed quite symptomatic, as argued by commentators interviewed, that for the majority of the audience, outlets such as Globovisión and VTV – which represent the extremes of the polarised spectrum in news media – are identified as the most credible by much of the audience/readers and also by some journalists.

It is evident that in most of the interviewees' opinions, audiences and readers have been influencing more strongly than before the ideological bias in news production. Some professional journalists were found to resent this, while stressing that it is the

journalists' responsibility to counter external polarising influences and to strive to elaborate and present news as tools for social and political scrutiny, particularly in a political environment in which the government and its leader are not inclined to accept criticism and have been attempting to nullify efforts by the critical, private media in denouncing state abuse and corruption.

News outlets favouring watchdog roles find that the impediments for accessing public data, the restrictive aspects of the new media regulations, and direct government pressures have all imposed forms of censorship and self-censorship – the latter being more prevalent – on the production of watchdog, investigative journalism. Historically, there has always existed in Venezuela political tensions between media owners and government officials (Díaz Rangel 2007, Cañizalez and Lugo-Ocando 2008), and forms of hybrid, incomplete watchdog journalism have been deficient in ethical grounding; while “denouncement” journalism or *denuncismo*<sup>114</sup> has had a stronger presence. Yet, the execution of both *denuncismo* and a normative watchdog role in Venezuela has become complicated, particularly for the private broadcast media.

While some reporters and editors seek to surpass *denuncismo*, and even though Venezuela's journalistic culture lacks any tradition or consistency in investigative journalism (Febres Cordero 1983, Botía 2007), it was found that a small group of professionals has been promoting investigative journalism since the second half of the 2000s. This has also proven to be difficult, due principally to economic limitations, the threat of censorship, and the strenuous and risky conditions for many reporters when undertaking this journalistic approach.

There is evidence that in four print news organisations investigative journalism's tenets, such as revealing to the public an issue that has been actively kept secret by the government or other power elites, carrying out original and often risky research, using techniques of investigation and of writing that are not part of common news story production, have been systematically integrated into informative agendas and production.

However, the fact that investigative reporting has grown – albeit very timidly – since 2007 in Venezuela does not necessarily mean that a more balanced, accurate and

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Schudson also defines *denuncismo* as a journalistic “practice whereby one insider uses the press to spread a scandal about another insider... from the reporter's perspective, this is simply quick-and-dirty journalism” (2003: 140-141).

transparent form of journalism is being practiced overall. But such an investigative trend demonstrates that some journalists wish to work in an independent manner within the private media, while championing the practice to check on the government and on public institutions – practices and attitudes which are enshrined in the liberal, western traditions of normative journalism (Keane 1991, Waisbord 2000a and 2013, Curran 2002, McQuail 2005).

This is echoed by Aguirre (1998: 251) when arguing that freedom to scrutinise “political abuse by the powerful, and the defence of freedom of the press in general, is one of the strongest nucleus of the ideology of professionalism”. In this sense, this study found that a majority of journalists – including almost all of those working in critical, private media – wished to embrace normative standards of professional journalism. Another group, however, tend to view professional conventions “as an ideological construct, a discursive strategy mobilised by publishers and journalists to gain social prestige” (Waisbord 2013: 4), while underpinning elitist, commercial, market-defined models of news production. The concept of professionalism in Venezuelan media was found to have antithetical interpretations. Journalists and commentators defending liberal narratives argued in favour of a professional model of journalism; whereas some radical, Marxist-inspired, and communitarian views formulated critiques to media professionalism in the sense that it allegedly derives from a capitalist and elitist conception, while stressing that such notion of professionalism does not necessarily enhance democracy, as argued by Miège (2000), Gans (2003) and Artz (2006).

Tensions among journalists regarding normative and professional ideals became evident in Venezuelan news media during the Chávez era. It was found that the majority of interviewees generally affirm the relevance and the need for normative and traditional journalistic values such as fairness, accuracy, balance, transparency, reliability and accountability to be maintained in their own work and in that of their colleagues. Very importantly, they aspire to instrumentalise such values in an environment of autonomy and independence. Yet, their support for normative values and professional tenets in news gathering and news production are nuanced and tend to vary somewhat. For example, a minority of journalists and editors, identified with Chávez’s project, have reservations with the normative ideals that have been traditionally promoted by liberal narratives and practices.

Similarly, opinions of some pro-opposition journalists proved that, although they endorsed professional and normative ideals, they also expressed being aware that

often their reporting and news-production did not demonstrate an assimilation of such tenets. It was also found that their ideals and levels of endorsement of normative journalism are less related to their levels of formal education, the time they have been working as media professionals, and the technical characteristics of the media they have worked in, than to their political and ideological leanings. News media in Venezuela under Chávez has become more politicised than in any democratic stage of the country's history – partisanship and politico-ideological bias were found to be the most influential factors in journalists bypassing and evading the alleged professional standards which they had informed they stood by.

Politicisation in the newsrooms poses a problem for autonomous, independent practice. In order to “contribute to democratic life”, media organisations and journalists require autonomy (Waisbord 2013: 43); yet such an ideal, defended by liberal theories as “a question of individual morality and freedom” (Ibid: 50), has been threatened in twenty-first-century Venezuela. Some of that menace has derived from market pressures within the private media and economic hardships within the news organisations; but more determining factors have been censorship, ‘internal’ or self-censorship, harassment and physical violence towards media practitioners, new media laws and regulations and some of their effects, and the over-arching advocacy imposed by the logic of intense polarisation.

Interestingly, as autonomy has become problematic and partisan journalism advanced, some journalists have been turning to social media – particularly the Twitter micro-blogging service – to disseminate news-related opinions, political comments and rumours which they would not broadcast or print in mainstream media, mainly due to censorship or because of the speculative nature of the texts. Thus, for some Venezuelan media professionals who have arguably adhered to normative standards and have defended accurate watchdog and investigative news production, social media platforms such as Twitter – and Facebook to a lesser degree – have become the newly-defined normative space where they ‘allocate’ comments, political rumours, potential news briefs, and ‘micro-denunciation’. Content in Twitter among journalists is predominantly political. And speculative. As explained by an interviewee, these types of online social networking platforms have come to be “highly purgative political spaces for comment among media people”<sup>115</sup>. Some interviewees detected a risk that such opinionated, conjectural, and polarised content could be considered news by most

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<sup>115</sup> Hugo Prieto, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

users, and even by fellow journalists. It is, nonetheless, a trend that has been growing markedly in Venezuela, and is seemingly configuring an alternative communication platform for polarised comment among media workers and society at large.

## **7.5. Conclusion**

This section of the study has critically analysed the empirical data obtained through the qualitative technique of in-depth, semi-structured interviewing of journalists, editors, media workers, scholars, public functionaries and commentators regarding journalistic practice, media and democracy in Venezuela (2000-2010). The findings were grouped into four different analytical strands to provide a framework for effective qualitative evaluation of the data.

It is evident that the understanding of democracy and of the democratic role of the media varied significantly among interviewees; and that such differences are essentially determined by ideological positioning in relation to the Chávez-led revolutionary process. Although news media – particularly the pro-government and state-owned – have echoed Chávez’s rhetorical divide between the Left and the Right, journalists and media organisations tend to establish their political footing and ideals of democratic institution on the basis of their standings vis-à-vis Chávez’s persona and mandate.

During the 2000s, Chávez’s ‘hyper-presidency’, his populist, nationalist, anti-imperialist and non-liberal leadership has marked the news agenda in a most divisive, tumultuous, and polarised manner. His administration’s utilisation of state-owned media outlets – which increased consistently in number – has been a most effective political tool for its re-founding national project and for curbing the power of the oppositional forces. This has led in part to a surge of pro-Chávez communitarian media and to a qualitative augmentation in the representation of disenfranchised social sectors in the media. Yet, the effects of such official strategies of radical traits in the private media and on independent, critical journalists have been negative.

Private media and dissident editors and reporters were found to be working in a most hostile environment. Under a prevailing Manichean political discourse and a highly-polarised social landscape, some journalists have been targets of aggression, physical attacks and financial penalisation. Moreover, censorship, self-censorship, and general curbing of freedoms have risen patently. Very importantly, a set of newly-established

media regulations has challenged normative and autonomous forms of journalistic practices, as underpinned by various liberal theories and narratives. This legal framework, according to an alternative view, has represented a revolutionary shift in media practice and the relative empowerment of 'the people' – the working class and poor sectors – while strengthening participatory, popular democracy.

Advocacy and partisan journalism have advanced significantly during the Chávez era while balanced, fair, transparent, accurate and comment-free news reporting has been generally weakening. This has represented a test for most journalists of a liberal, normative bent. Some have circumvented their alleged journalism tenets; others have been, under adverse circumstances, seeking to strengthen professional values and ethical practice. Hence, it was found that some journalists – although only in the press – began since the mid-2000s endorsing and producing investigative and watchdog news pieces, in what is a new trend in Venezuelan journalism, and which has been growing marginally.

These important differences in journalistic ideals and practice highlight existing tensions within reporters' notions of professionalism. The all-permeating logic of polarisation in Venezuela and the hyper-politicisation of news production have placed the desirability of professional journalism under a binary debate, and its potential contribution to democracy is questioned by many pro-Chávez media practitioners, while being supported by most of those working in the private media.

This chapter has presented substantive analysis on the empirical findings of this research, and has also proceeded to formulate some conclusive thoughts on the topic examined. The following chapter, as a form of general conclusion, brings together the most relevant aspects of this study and establishes further interconnections between the empirical data and the theoretical framework outlined in the opening chapters.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

The previous chapter presented an analysis of the empirical data acquired through interviewing techniques, supported by critical discussion of theories and narratives on democracy, media, news production, and journalistic practice in the West, Latin America and Venezuela. This chapter draws together the main findings and seeks to elaborate on some final considerations while, in a critical note, raising questions for potential future studies.

Firstly, news media practice in Venezuela during the 2000s needs to be understood within the context of an intense politico-ideological national clash that began almost as soon as Hugo Chávez was elected President in 1998. His political project, which grew increasingly statist, nationalist and populist, has been defined as leftist and Marxist-inspired by followers and by various scholars; but as authoritarian, militarist, pseudo-democratic, and as fitting the tradition of Latin American *caudillos* by critical observers. Its foundational characteristics have generated ample debate among media practitioners and in the public sphere about its democratic nature.

Chávez's political project reinserts the tensions – both nationally and regionally – of a nominally participatory democracy and a communal state presented as an alternative to a pre-existing and liberally-prescribed representative democracy. In many ways, it negates the notion – supported by Fukuyama (1992) and neo-liberal advocates – that the fall of the Berlin Wall epitomised at a global level the end of the conflict of ideology and corroborated the dominance of liberalism. Rather, the Venezuelan socio-political experiment – and those that followed in other Latin American nations – stresses the need to re-evaluate the relevance of the Left-Right ideological axis, as formulated by Bobbio (1987 and 1997) and, in a more radical tone, by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). However, this study suggests that the 'leftist shift' set forward by Chávez can be best contextualised within the theories of populism emerging from Latin American scholars such as Ardití (2004), Laclau (2005), and Ansaldi (2007).

The set of ideas that formulate populism as a 'hybrid' or 'grey' area in democracy, in which a leader monopolises the political arena, promotes a Manichean rhetoric, disjoints democratic institutionalism, and calls for mass mobilisation to challenge the political establishment are instrumental in guiding the evaluation of the nation's media



and, indeed, of most social and political phenomena in Venezuela during the Chávez era.

Political polarisation is a crucial aspect that Chávez's populism and its adversaries have brought forth and which has shaped, possibly irreversibly, the national media landscape. Extreme polarisation was found to be both reflected in and promoted by the news media. It is in this context that the majority of journalists, editors, and media owners have developed an overtly partisan role, while news production has acquired a markedly political bias. In assessing the strains of such politicisation in media and journalistic practice, freedom of the press theory, the four theories of the press – as formulated by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963) –, and social responsibility theory have served as pertinent theoretical frames by which to address normative ideals, belonging to liberal traditions, that defend freedom of expression, scrutiny of authorities, accuracy, balance, transparency in news elaboration, among other tenets.

Similarly, the revolutionary rupture sought by the Chávez administration in the media, and its complex rearrangement of the relationship between democracy and the media, find a theoretical grounding in both Marxist-derived and populism theories. This is echoed in the rhetoric of pro-government journalists and commentators when stressing that mainstream, private media of liberal leaning represent political tools that replicate the dominant, market-driven, bourgeoisie discourse, in detriment of the claims for egalitarianism and emancipation by the subordinate social classes.

The new media laws and regulations established by the government have enhanced popular participation in the media, but it was found that their discretionary use by authorities has undermined and restricted oppositional voices. This legal framework for the media arguably reinserts aspects of the policies promoted by development theorists and Latin American participants in the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) debates during the 1970s, explicated in this study's theoretical chapters. However, the increasing implementation of regulations for media and journalists should be primarily understood in the context of the hegemonic struggle of populism and, very importantly, guided by theories of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-globalisation.

It is these policies which arguably best emphasise the relevance of national sovereignty and ideals of nationhood vis-à-vis the forces of globalisation in the field of journalism and news media production. If, as Mattelart points out, globalisation “walks

hand in hand with deregulation” and is driven by the logic of the market (2010: 322), the media regulatory strategy set forth by Chávez represents one of the most evident ways in which the globalisation and cultural imperialism paradigms have been challenged. Like globalisation theories, the regional trend of cultural theories in this research proved not to be the most suitable for assessing such a politically-charged national media environment. As Bisbal and Nicodemo (2010) and Szurmuk and Waisbord (2011) argue, the ideas of ‘mediation’ and ‘negotiation’ – pivotal concepts of the Latin American cultural critique – do not seem sufficiently adequate in theoretical terms to structurally explicate power struggles in the media between the government and oppositional forces, or the politicisation of news production under a highly-polarised environment, or the hegemonic peculiarities of media regulations and their impact on media practice.

While the neo-liberal thesis of market-led media and globalisation have arguably gained terrain internationally during the last three decades – as argue different authors reviewed in this research –, Venezuela under Chávez offers evidence that nation-centred radical and non-liberal media policies have been, since 2000, curbing the power of private media corporations, while challenging normative imperatives in journalistic practice. Moreover, the ideological centrality and the nationalist traits that Chávez’s media strategies entail represent a challenge for some media theorists, for the character of these laws appears to be democratically participative on the one hand, but highly restrictive on the other. For local journalists, editors, and commentators, however, they are far from nuanced and, instead, framed quite dichotomously – Chavista media workers believe that the governmental media strategy is revolutionary, counter-elite, and empowers the masses; their pro-opposition counterparts interpret it as aggressive, tendentious, censoring, and unconstitutional.

Paradoxically, as biased and partisan journalism was found to have increased significantly in Venezuela, many reporters and news workers affirmed situating themselves as professionals driven by normative standards of balance, fairness, transparency, accuracy, accountability, independence and ethical considerations emerging from liberal models and theories. A nominal advocacy for normative, liberal-based, U.S.-modelled reporting was more prevalent among the journalists who are employees of private, critical or pro-opposition news outlets; yet others who work for state-owned or pro-government media – albeit criticising certain aspects of western-inspired normative journalism – support core ideals of professionalism in news media

practice. A different minority among pro-Chávez reporters regards as desirable an ‘implosion’ of these values in favour of the emergence of radical and communitarian models of media, and of direct and participatory democracy.

The variations of views and attitudes towards professional journalism and its core values are aligned with clashing theoretical arguments reviewed in this study. The relation between professional journalism, autonomy and democracy is clearly defined in the ‘fourth estate’ paradigm and throughout traditional liberal theories of the media (Ungar 1990, McQuail 2005, Waisbord 2013); whereas critiques to liberal ideals of professional journalism are formulated in part by political economy theorists and advocates of populism, and more radically by classical Marxism scholars in their critical claim that such professional parameters reproduce elitist discourses and are ideologically constructed so as to preserve the capitalist *status quo* (Mosco 1996, McChesney 2000 and 2008, McQuail 2005, Waisbord 2013). It is noteworthy that a majority of those media workers who claimed to embrace professional standards and their ethical delineations, were found to have had difficulties in mirroring those tenets in their reporting – this indicates that such tensions within defenders of journalistic professionalism arguably need to be weighed further in liberal theories.

The advocacy and militant shift that journalism has undergone represents a crisis in journalistic professionalism in Venezuela. As newsrooms become ideologically homogenous and framed within the binary discourse of polarisation, journalists and media owners – especially those of the private, critical and pro-opposition media – have increasingly suffered threats, intimidation and physical attacks from radical cadres. It is indeed difficult to work normatively in such a tense socio-political climate, particularly during electoral and referenda processes. In this sense, further challenges have been compounded on journalists of professional values by the government’s discretionary instrumentalisation of media regulations, the financial penalisation executed by authorities on dissident news media and reporters, the overuse of blanket official messages, and the overall weakening of institutional autonomy in the country. It is not surprising that the concatenation of the above-mentioned factors has created a general ambient of restrictions, censorship, and self-censorship in the media, which had never been so defining in Venezuela’s democratic historical period.

While evidence suggests that many reporters began resorting to social media – mainly to Twitter – for commentating news while bypassing limitations set by the new legal media framework for mainstream media, a minority have been resisting the

dominant partisan and unprofessional trends by focusing in the normative elaboration of watchdog and investigative journalism since 2007. This represents a new phenomenon in Venezuelan journalistic history. Arguably, the excesses of militant journalism – exemplified in the conduct of most private media during the April 2002 coup d'état – found a discursive and practical counterpoint in a group of reporters and editors – small as it is – who have defied the government and dominant groups by denouncing abuses of power in the name of freedom of expression and in clear tension with the new political establishment and its media agendas.

This emerging set of investigative reporters' information elaboration and provision seem to aim at checking on the powerful, while nurturing a sense of balance, accuracy, transparency and social interest. Evidently, they have been influenced by normative – and idealised – parameters of the U.S. press and the core of liberal theories of freedom of the press and watchdog scrutinising. They represent an aspect that has been embedded – albeit in a somewhat defective manner – in Venezuelan journalistic culture for at least one hundred years, and which gained force once the nation became a relatively stable, representative democracy. Contrary to Hallin and Mancini's formulation that during the nineteenth century Latin American press inherited and predominantly relied since on a Hispanic, Southern European media model (2007), empirical findings and reviewed Venezuelan historical-sociological analysis by Grases (1967 and 1981), García Ponce (2001) and Aguirre (1998) for this study indicate that both British and Anglo-American press models have been very influential in shaping the national media model and its journalistic culture. Moreover, the U.S. 'prescriptive' media model attained a stronger presence during the second half of the twentieth century.

It can be argued that the model that prevailed until Chávez's arrival to power had mixed elements of the U.S. and British liberal traditions, a marked Iberian tendency for comment and political slant, and varying local stylistic features. In brief, it had been constructed as a heterodox and hybrid journalistic model. Since the early 2000s, and under the singular political and social climate brought forth by the clash between Chavismo and oppositional forces, it has been partly incorporating non-professional reporting, communitarian representation, and markedly anti-neo-liberal comment. Resorting to historical perspectives from scholarly works reviewed, one model that has emerged, particularly among the pro-government media, holds similar traits with the one prevalent in Venezuela during the era of nineteenth-century *caudillos*, in which journalistic standards were determined by partisanship and news tended to be

framed within a politically binary scheme.

This model is significantly shaped by the President's rhetoric and his government's media strategies. It has indeed placed ideological agency and political confrontation at the heart of journalistic practice. Taking into account Habermas' formulation that commercial and global media would "eliminate the public sphere" and contribute to depoliticise citizens (Street 2011: 56), the case of Venezuela during the 2000s proves that both national commercial and state media can strongly enhance debate intra and extra-nationally, underpinning a public sphere of hyper-politicised confrontation. However, the nature of such political and social debate has been so Manichean, polarised and divisive that it has not contributed towards an open and inclusive democratic dialogue.

Venezuelan news media have scarcely contributed to alleviate confrontation and promote democratic solutions to a national crisis that only seems to escalate. In an attempt to briefly formulate a prognosis, based on this study's findings through qualitative research methods and on the theoretical/historical explications utilised, it can be argued that Venezuelan journalists and news media will face increasing challenges in the near future in relation to their contribution to paving the nation's next steps in its strenuous road towards democracy. Additionally, President Chávez's death in March 2013 – while this study was in its final stages of production – arguably intensifies uncertainties in any prognosis of Venezuela's media and socio-political landscape.

It is hoped that this research has been able to identify new avenues by which to further explore both new and pressing issues in the recent development of journalism and media in Venezuela and Latin America.

A key area that requires further analysis, as found by this study, is the character of populism that Chávez's national project represents, its similarities and specificities when compared to other regional forms of populism and to western socio-political contexts. Very importantly, assessing in more detail the nuances of such a political paradigm seems paramount as to identify the ways in which such a specific form of populism can potentially affect the reinvention of journalistic practice in Venezuela and the reshaping of the country's media landscape.

Similarly, this study detects a need to explore in more depth a unique phenomenon

which has emerged as part of the populist and radical process led by President Chávez – the unprecedented surge of communitarian media. By the time this research concluded, it was estimated that more than 400 community media outlets were operating in Venezuela, which represents by far the largest amount in any Latin American nation. As already stressed, the purpose of such type of media is disputed among highly-polarised views; yet their internal working dynamics, means to sustainability, and the manner in which its collaborators have been developing new ways to produce news and non-news content are some aspects to empirically evaluate further as a means to contribute in explaining the increasingly hybrid character of journalistic practice and media platforms in Venezuela during the Chávez era.

Such hybridisation, which represents a challenge to normative frameworks in journalism, has also been intensified by the significant increase in the use of social media by professional journalists and media owners. Comment in social media by reporters and editors is evidently a growing trend in the country, particularly as of the last years of the 2000s and due in part to the restrictive and polarised environment many Venezuelan journalists find themselves working in. The recent rise in the use of social media by local professionals and the characterization of the comments the latter formulate in these platforms is also an area worth examining in future research.

In closing, and in reference to a broader research framework, this study also aspires in contributing to stimulate further analysis related to the complex relationship between normative and radical ideals of journalism and democracy in Venezuela, as well as in similar polarised and conflicting contexts.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Narratives of the history of media**

In order to evaluate the relation between democracy, media and journalism, in terms of how it has been developed and presented as historical narratives, it is worth exploring their characterisation as elaborated by James Curran (2002). Although Curran's formulations relate primarily to the British context, these can help shed light in other national and cultural contexts. He evaluates seven narratives, but amplifies a critique mainly towards three of them – the 'liberal', the 'populist', and the 'radical'. For the purpose of this study, and due to its focus of research, these three are reviewed in more detail than the others.

Curran (Ibid) argues that the 'anthropological' narrative has essentially focused on the configuration of a national identity through media and in the ideological variables that make up nationalism. Therefore, this strand of narrative observes and evaluates the relation between media and the specific nature of nation-states. A key exponent of this line of thought is Benedict Anderson, whose work contends that all nations are 'imagined communities' in the sense that they "exist in people's minds as objects of orientation and affiliation" (Schudson 2003: 67). In this view, the media would play a principal role in helping create the sense of national community and national consciousness.

The 'libertarian' narrative, which acquired relevance during the 1960s, tends to describe a very different issue, which is the confrontation in the media between liberals and traditionalists, particularly on issues of public morals. A different focus is that of the 'feminist' narrative, which studies the media through history as an incomplete process in which women have been misrepresented to a significant degree, but which has been gradually utilised by them to gain participation and liberation (Young 2000, Curran 2002).

All three of the narratives above mentioned are affirmative in their nature – they emphasise from varying perspectives a positive view of the media in terms of enhancing distinctively social diversity and tolerance, people's empowerment, freedom of expression, liberation and inclusion of interest/minority groups, and civic nation-building (Curran 2002, McQuail 2005). The 'technological determinist' narrative is arguably the most affirmative of all. It pays attention to the supposed transformative influence of the media. Also, it tends to interpret communication technology as an independent force that is likely to shape democratic practices and social change (McQuail 2005). Various elements of the technological determinist narrative arguably emanate from the populist narrative.

The populist narrative focuses on the alleged collective fascination with the emergence and use of various media technologies. Its dominant theoretical trait is to defend the market as a key means of democratisation and to celebrate the media as one of its derivations. Also, its focus of study is fundamentally the audience, its behavioural and consumerist patterns. Curran (2002) argues that this narrative has been enriched mainly by both authors of neo-liberal and neo-Marxist trends. Such theorists, he explains, have maintained the following common features in their speeches: an understanding of the media essentially as a source of meaningful mass pleasure; a defence of the relevance of the democratic culture; and a distrust of state power and the professional protagonism. The 'populist' narrative's emphasis on comprehending egalitarianism as recognition seems to fail to grasp aspects such as distribution, while

employing the United States media 'model' as exemplary. In this respect, Curran formulates the following:

It is about equality of esteem, as reflected in respect for mass audiences, 'ordinary' people and popular taste. It has little to do with other dimensions of equality: about the distribution of wealth, income, power, public spending, life opportunities or space... This [populist] tradition views the United States as a land of equality since it scores high in terms of the civil respect accorded to its citizens... [but] the United States also has a greater inequality of wealth and income than any other major western country... This accounts for a puzzling feature [of this narrative]: its lack of interest in the link between democratic social recognition and redistributive politics (Ibid: 43).

In the 'liberal' narrative the media is principally understood as a tool by which the democratic process has been greatly strengthened (Curran 2002, McQuail 2005). One of the determining factors argued by this narrative about the role of the media in a democracy relates to the historical struggle these have sustained – especially the press (as has been the case of Great Britain) since the seventeenth century (Ibid). Another of its arguments has been the ways in which the media have been encouraged by the pursuit of individual rights, of freedom of expression, and of mass empowerment (Keane 1991, Ibid).

The fundamental liberal argument for free media lies in the core of this type of historical narrative. It formulates that the media would become free when it is not subject to a centralised power, when it is able to operate without the control of the state, and when the various information and communication outlets have the possibility to compete freely between each other (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, Street 2011). The idea of the media as a 'fourth estate' was based on these ideas and can be appreciated as a derivation of this narrative (Curran 2002).

The liberal history of the media has been questioned mainly by authors of the radical, neo-Marxist, and critical political economy traditions (Hardy 2010). They contend that the media has not been capable of operating in a genuine independent manner, as they are an inherent part of the power structure of societies (Curran 2002, Artz *et al* 2006) and tend to operate as ideological tools for its owners or controllers (Hall 1986, Mattelart and Mattelart 2005). In this sense, Colin Sparks argues that the media are principal mechanisms "through which powerful groups in society –capitalists, politicians, and even trade union bureaucrats – are able to reach the mass of the population" (2006: 111).

The only non-affirmative narrative of media history is the one maintained by the radical trend –a general sense of pessimism towards the role of media in liberal or capitalist democracy permeates most of its arguments. A prominent feature of this strand of thought is to question the way in which liberal democracy has not been able to 'equalize' political power and empower the people in an egalitarian way (Hall 1986 and 1997, McChesney 2000 and 2008, Artz *et al* 2006).

## APPENDIX B

### Main media groups and conglomerates in Venezuela (2010)

**State/Government:** President Hugo Chávez's government/the state own seven television stations of nationwide signals: Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), Vive TV, Asamblea Nacional TV, Avila TV, TeleSur, Televisora Nacional Social (TVES), and Alba TV. In the radio sector it owns three stations of the Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV) network, plus Radio Sur network and YVKE Mundial network. There have been three state-owned newspapers during the 2000s: *Correo del Presidente*, *Correo del Orinoco*, and *Ciudad Caracas*. Many studies include as "para-state" outlets approximately 230 communitarian radio stations, 36 communitarian television stations, and 120 communitarian newspapers, most of which are in part funded by the state and affiliated to the government party.

**Cisneros Group:** Owners of terrestrial and cable television network Venevisión – one of the two largest in Venezuela –, DirectTV satellite network, and Radio FM Center network. The group owns shares in broadcast networks Chilevisión (Chile), Caracol (Colombia), Caribbean Communication Network (in eight Caribbean nations), Univisión (U.S.A.), and Galavisión (U.S.A.).

**Phelps-Bottome Group:** Venezuela's oldest commercial television station, Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), had been owned by this group until 2009, when Chávez's government did not renew its licence for broadcasting. After that year, the group maintained radio stations 92.9 FM and Radio Caracas Radio (RCR), and U.S.-based film production house Coral Pictures.

**Capriles Group:** The country's most read daily newspaper *Últimas Noticias* during the 2000s is owned by this family group, as well as financial daily newspaper *El Mundo*. Five magazines are owned by this group, including *Dominical* (varieties) and *Líder* (sports). It owns the regional rights of U.S. Continental Publishing Co.

**De Armas Group:** Owners of daily tabloid newspapers *2001* and *Meridiano*, television station (of sports content) Meridiano TV, and Meridiano Radio Deportes FM. The group represents Hearst Group publications. During the 2000s, eight different magazines – mainly of entertainment, sports, and gossip – have been owned by the De Armas family group, including *Varietades* and *Playboy Venezuela*.

**Camero Group:** Owners of Televén – the commercial television station, with open terrestrial signal, which had the country's third highest viewers share and rating, after RCTV (while it was operative) and Venevisión.

**Otero Group:** Owners of broadsheet *El Nacional* – one of the country's two best-selling quality national dailies. The group launched, since the mid-1990s, tabloid dailies *Así es la Noticia* and *Hora Cero*, and book publishing label Libros El Nacional.

**Mata Group:** Venezuela's oldest operating daily newspaper, *El Universal*, is owned by this group – it is the other best-selling quality national daily. The group also owns a majority share of Media Zoom Group, publishers of magazines *Loft* and *Poder*.

Sources: Cañizalez and Lugo-Ocando (2008), Aguirre and Bisbal (2010).

## APPENDIX C

### **Reporters Without Borders' report on 2009 government-led media 'shutdown'**

#### **"34 broadcast media shut down at government's behest"**

Published on Sunday 2 August 2009.

Reporters Without Borders vigorously condemns the massive closure of broadcast media on allegedly "administrative grounds." The government announced yesterday that it was withdrawing the licenses of a total of 34 radio and TV stations, 13 of which already stopped broadcasting yesterday.

"In any country that respects the rule of law, a broadcast media suspected of using a frequency in an irregular manner would have been warned in advance that proceedings were being initiated against it and its representatives would have been given a chance to defend themselves," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Is it still possible to publicly express any criticism at all of President Hugo Chávez's "Bolivarian" government?" the press freedom organisation asked. "This massive closure of mainly opposition media is a dangerous for the future of democratic debate in Venezuela and is motivated by the government's desire to silence dissent. It will just exacerbate social divisions."

When the authorities announced the withdrawal of 34 broadcast media licenses, they warned that 200 other radio and TV stations could suffer the same fate. Diosdado Cabello, the minister who supervises the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), said the reasons were technical and administrative inasmuch as the owners of these media were unable to demonstrate that they had broadcast licenses.

The announcement set off a storm of protest. "This is the most import curb on freedom of expression ever seen in Venezuela," said Carlos Correa, the head of Espacio Público, an NGO that defends free speech. "This is without precedent in a period of democracy," he added. The closures came on the heels of a government announcement that it intended to "democratise" Venezuela's media. Attorney general Luisa Ortega presented a bill to the national assembly on 30 July providing for severe punishments for "media crimes". "The Venezuelan state must regulate freedom of expression," Ortega said. "I demand that a limit be placed on this right." The bill envisages prison sentences for those who break the 2004 Radio and TV Social Responsibility Law, which until now punished violators with fines and license suspensions.

Under the new bill, broadcasting a "false", "manipulated" or "distorted" report, or broadcasting reports that "harm the interests of the state" or attack "public decency" or "mental health" will be regarded as a media crime carrying a maximum sentence of four years in prison. The bill would also punish "refusal to reveal information" and "deliberate omission of a report," thereby jeopardising the principle of the confidentiality of journalists' sources. These offences carry a sentence of six months to four years in prison.

Source: <https://en.rsf.org/venezuela-34-broadcast-media-shut-down-at-02-08-2009,34056.html#> [Accessed 5 March 2012].

## APPENDIX D

### **Freedom House reports on freedom of the press in Venezuela**

#### **2002 Report:**

President Hugo Chávez and his government repeatedly attacked the news media through harsh speeches, a court ruling that newspapers must state their political leanings, and threats to pass a "law on content" and revoke the license of a respected television network. A 2000 law empowers the president to suspend broadcasting when he judges it to be in the interest of the nation. Journalists are required to be a member of the National College of Journalists. Criminal defamation laws are enforced against journalists. The constitution, redrafted under Chávez, includes a clause requiring "truthful information" in the press. The National Telecommunications Commission investigated the 24-hour news channel to determine whether it had reported "false news." In June, Chávez threatened to expel foreign journalists who insulted Venezuela or his government.

#### **2005 Report:**

A hostile political atmosphere has pitted the largely pro-opposition private media against the government of President Hugo Chávez and the state-controlled media. One result has been a steady decline in press freedom over the past several years—a trend that continued in 2004—reflected in the government's enactment of legislation prohibiting the broadcast of certain material, its intimidation of and denial of access to private media, and the continued harassment of journalists, directed primarily at those employed by private media outlets. The most worrying development occurred on December 7, when the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television was ratified, mandating large fines and possible closure if prohibited content is aired. Content not to be broadcast includes a series of vague prescriptions against "incitements to war," "disruptions of the public order," "disrespect toward legitimate institutions and authorities," or "threats to national security," which could have the effect of producing self-censorship. The law also restricts content including sex and violence to specific broadcast times and requires source disclosure. An 11-person Directorate of Social Responsibility, 7 of whose members are appointed by the government, is responsible for enforcing the law. The penal code was also amended in December to include a broader category of government officials covered by *desacato* (disrespect) provisions and to increase dramatically the criminal penalties for slander and libel, charges often employed by government officials to intimidate private media journalists. The government allegedly abuses its power to regulate media, with community radio stations reporting politically motivated irregularities in the allotment of broadcast frequencies. Freedom of expression is also restricted by a law requiring journalists to have a journalism degree and formal membership in the National College of Journalists; violations are punishable by a three-to-six-month jail term. This law was upheld by the Supreme Court in July (these requirements are waived for foreign journalists and columnists).

Tensions between private media and the government of Hugo Chávez remain high. International organisations including the Inter American Press Association denounced a hostile climate toward media fostered by the government. Direct assaults against media declined compared with 2003, but journalists still decried authorities' efforts to prevent free reporting, including threats and attacks by government supporters.

Journalists from private media outlets complained that a lack of access impeded their reporting, including being denied entrance to the presidential palace and other official events, rights granted to journalists from state-controlled media. Journalists reported more than 30 complaints of harassment; the majority were committed by government supporters against private media, but some cases involved attacks by opposition leaders against state-owned media. Several cases involved the harassment of journalists by the National Guard and other officials. In June, government supporters attacked two Caracas media outlets, including a television station (Radio Caracas Television) and a daily newspaper (*El Nacional*). In both cases, attackers threw stones and other objects, set fires, and damaged buildings. Pro-government assailants shot and injured four reporters with rubber bullets and tear gas during protests. Radio reporter and columnist Mauro Marcano Ramos was killed in September, allegedly by drug traffickers as a result of his reporting.

The government controls two national television stations, a national radio network, and a wire service; the president maintains a weekly radio show and exercises his power to preempt programming to ensure extensive broadcasting of governmental announcements in private media.

### **2008 Report:**

A hostile political atmosphere over the past several years under the government of President Hugo Chávez has fostered a steady decline in press freedom that continued in 2007. The major event of the year was the government's refusal to renew the broadcast license of the popular opposition-aligned television station Radio Caracas Television (RCTV). In general, state initiatives have gradually eroded the influence of private media and pro-opposition outlets. Among other actions, the government has enacted legislation prohibiting the broadcast of certain material, intimidated and denied access to private media, and harassed journalists and media outlets that are critical of the government.

The legal environment for the press remains poor. While the law guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, signed in December 2004, contains vaguely worded restrictions that can be used to severely limit freedom of expression. For example, the law forbids graphic depictions of violence between 5:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. on both television and radio. In March 2005, the penal code was revised to make insulting the president a crime punishable by six to 30 months in prison. Furthermore, comments that could "expose another person to contempt or public hatred" constitute a crime punishable by one to three years in prison as well as a severe fine. Inaccurate reporting that "disturbs the public peace" carries a prison sentence of two to five years. Dozens of legal proceedings against media workers and outlets remained open in 2007, and there were several convictions, including of the opposition daily *Tal Cual*, which was fined some \$75,000 for seemingly innocuous comments in a satirical piece that mentioned Chávez's daughter. (...) Despite weeks of student-led protests and denunciations by numerous human rights and media groups, RCTV was forced off the air on May 27. Media watchdogs questioned the decision's motivation, legality, and lack of transparency. In a survey by regional watchdog Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (Ipys), 30 percent of journalists declared that the station's closure would make them think twice about publishing certain information.

Direct assaults on the media continued to occur regularly in 2007. Political polarisation remained high, and numerous journalists were injured by either supporters or opponents of the government during street protests, which peaked during the periods

preceding the May RCTV closure and the December constitutional referendum vote. One of the only remaining local opposition television stations, Globovisión, remained a primary target for physical aggression, lawsuits, the denial of access to information, verbal attacks, and threats to cancel its license. A survey by Ipys revealed that 56 percent of journalists had suffered some sort of verbal or physical threat or attack during the previous year. The state does little to nothing to discourage such harassment. The same survey noted that only 9 percent of reporters were inclined to formally complain about threats, attacks, and harassment. In May, prominent government ally Eva Golinger unveiled a list of 33 journalists who had participated in cultural exchange programs financed by the U.S. State Department. Along with some congressional allies, she called for investigations into whether the reporters were engaged in espionage. However, even some government supporters, notably National Assembly president Desiree Santos and former vice president José Vicente Rangel, acknowledged that the accusations were extreme. In general, independent journalists complained that a lack of access impeded their reporting; they were often denied entry to military ceremonies and other official events that state media representatives were allowed to attend.

In addition to fostering the proliferation of community-based media outlets, the government controls five national television stations, a national radio network, and a wire service, all of which have benefited from budget increases. Government-run stations operate alongside a shrinking number of private television and radio stations. The country's leading newspapers are privately owned and most identify with the opposition, but they are subject to threats and violence by the government and its supporters, sometimes leading to self-censorship. Local and regional media are particularly dependent on government advertising revenue, leaving them vulnerable to economic retaliation for criticism. According to responses to the Ipys study, fear of offending the government and a reluctance to antagonize ad buyers were the two primary reasons for a high level of editorial-directed self-censorship. The president has a weekly television show and exercises his power to preempt regular programming to ensure extensive coverage of government *cadena*s (announcements) in private media (...).

### **2010 Report:**

Media freedom declined in Venezuela in 2009 due to increased legal harassment. The authorities suppressed political opposition in the media through harsh regulation of privately owned broadcast channels. While freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed, the 2004 Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television contains vaguely worded restrictions that can be used to severely limit these freedoms. Criminal statutes assign hefty fines and long prison terms for "offending" or "denigrating" the authorities. Since 2005, defamation of the president has been punishable by 6 to 30 months in prison, while offending lower-ranking officials carries lighter punishments. Individuals can also sue the press for "public disdain" or "hatred."

In July 2009, the attorney general introduced a bill designed to curb "the abusive exercise of freedom of information and opinion" and to "prevent and punish actions or omissions" in the media that could constitute a crime. These included messages that threaten "social peace, the security and independence of the nation, the stability of state institutions, the peoples' mental health or public ethics, and the justice system." Following international criticism, the National Assembly shelved the bill in August. However, the legislature did adopt an education statute that prohibited materials inciting "hate," "aggressiveness," or "terror in children." Journalists protested this law as a restriction on freedom of expression.



Regulatory harassment of the press continued unabated in 2009. After President Hugo Chávez succeeding in lifting term limits for elected officials in a February referendum, authorities again resorted to revoking broadcast licenses and taking legal action against critical media organisations. In July, the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) launched a sweeping review of 240 broadcast licenses, pulling 32 private radio and 2 private television stations off the air. While Conatel called the move an effort to “democratize the airwaves,” it was widely seen as an attempt to suppress dissent.

Throughout 2009, the private, opposition-oriented television station Globovisión remained a key target of official harassment. Beginning in May, Globovisión faced a growing number of state inquiries, such as accusations of “inciting panic and anxiety in the population” after it aired reports of an earthquake in Caracas. By mid-June, Conatel and the Attorney General’s Office had opened a formal review on possible violations of the 2000 Law on Telecommunications, including lack of a proper network registration. The commission launched another probe in July, this time into claims that the station had created a general state of “anguish, anxiety, and fear.” In an additional administrative proceeding launched in September, Globovisión was accused of using on-air text messages to incite a rebellion.

Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), a popular television station whose free-to-air broadcast license had been revoked in May 2007 and which had since operated a cable subsidiary called RCTV International (RCTVI) and an internet-based service, also faced renewed pressures in 2009. Conatel extended the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television to the cable industry, requiring domestic network operators to clear time for presidential addresses (*cadena*s) and state advertising, free of charge. On December 22, Conatel announced that “international” stations would be defined as any cable or satellite channel on which foreign programming accounts for at least 70 percent of the content. Consequently, RCTVI could not qualify.

Journalists—largely but not exclusively from private media—continued to be intimidated, beaten, threatened, and detained, or have their equipment destroyed or confiscated. In January 2009, gunmen shot and injured political editor Rafael Finol of the pro-Chávez daily *El Regional* in Acarigua. In February, the progovernment group La Piedrita claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on independent journalists and threatened Globovisión and the director of RCTV. Individuals believed to be employed or supported by the state assaulted Grupo Capriles newspaper reporters during a street protest in Caracas in July, criticizing them as “oligarchs” and “enemies of the people.” (...) In August, a group of at least 30 pro-government activists with the Venezuelan Patriotic Union (UPV) attacked the Globovisión offices with tear gas, injuring a police officer. Past cases of harassment of opposition media have not been investigated sufficiently. Top officials also frequently engage in negative verbal rhetoric against journalists and media outlets that are perceived to be anti-government, while opposition-aligned media owners respond in a similar fashion.

Although murders of journalists are relatively rare, with six reporters killed in the past decade, two Venezuelan journalists were murdered in separate incidents in January 2009. Jacinto Lopez of *El Impulso* was kidnapped and shot to death, and Orel Sambrano, director of the political weekly *ABC de la Semana* and Radio America, was shot and killed by gunmen on motorcycles. Two suspects were arrested in connection with Sambrano’s killing in February and July, but the alleged mastermind of the murder remained at large, and no trial date had been set by year’s end. Before his death, Sambrano had been publishing stories about the drug trade in the Valencia area.

While a large portion of the print sector and a number of opposition broadcast outlets remain hostile toward the government, their share of the market has declined in recent years, as the government has cancelled or taken over private outlets' licenses. Mass media investment and usage remain a top priority for the Venezuelan government, which relies on some 238 radio stations, 28 television channels, 340 publications, and 125 websites to disseminate its political platform. Venezuela's leading newspapers are privately owned, though dependence on government advertising encourages the papers to avoid critical coverage or politically sensitive topics. Self-censorship is also practiced regularly due to harassment and threats of fines or closure (...).

The government maintains control over most of the free-to-air broadcast media. For a number of years, prominent private networks have decidedly avoided confrontation with the government, minimizing if not eliminating their criticism of the Chávez administration. After toning down its anti-Chávez line, Venevisión had its license renewed for another five years in 2007, as did Televisión in 2008. During a March 2009 broadcast of his weekly television show, Chávez ordered the government leadership at all levels to investigate radio stations and newspapers, determining their content and owners. This declared "media war" with the opposition also extends to material on the Internet.

Source: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela> [Accessed 14 May 2012]

## APPENDIX E

### Violations to freedom of the press in Venezuela (2003, 2005, 2008)

Types and quantities of violations to freedom of the press in Venezuela

<i>Types of violations</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2008</i>
Aggressions	28	15	18
Physical attacks	32	10	16
Threats	25	16	12
Official censorship	28	13	18
Legal restrictions	4	2	3
Verbal harassment	7	16	11
State intimidation	47	31	24
Judicial harassment	3	28	17
Administrative restrictions	12	13	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	186	164	123

Source: Non-government organisations Provea, Espacio Público, Instituto Prensa y Sociedad

Victims of violations to freedom of the press by (media) occupation

<i>Occupation in media</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2008</i>
Reporters	45	47	31
Camera-operators	16	5	14
Columnists	4	8	15
Programme hosts	2	4	11
Directors/Editors	7	10	8
Supportive citizens	0	2	4
Photographers	18	9	11
Broadcast narrators	2	2	7
Investigative reporters	2	9	5
News media outlets	7	53	42
Institutional journalists	1	3	3
Drivers/Other	11	4	9
Media owners	1	1	2
TOTAL	114	164	162 (*)

Source: Non-government organisations Provea, Espacio Público, Instituto Prensa y Sociedad

(\*) According to data from Provea and Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (Ipys), 16% of the victims of violations to freedom of the press worked for state-funded and official media, 74% worked for the private media, 4% worked in communitarian media, while 6% could not be identified.

## APPENDIX F

### **Amnesty International Reports: Venezuela\***

#### **2007 Report:**

Most human rights violations committed by members of the security forces remained unpunished. Human rights defenders and journalists were threatened, intimidated and attacked.

#### **Background:**

Hugo Chávez was elected President in December for a third six-year term. In April Venezuela abandoned the Andean Community of Nations trading block, after Colombia and Peru signed free trade agreements with the USA, and joined the South American trade group Mercosur. The government continued to establish social programmes aimed at the most vulnerable, including programmes to improve access to education, health and housing. The independence and impartiality of the judiciary continued to be questioned. There were serious concerns that the proliferation of small arms was fuelling an increase in violence.

Impunity, intimidation and harassment: Human rights violations, including torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances perpetrated by members of the security forces remained unpunished.

In July the bodies of eight people, including two children, were found on a ranch in the villages of La Victoria and El Nula in Alto Apure region, on the border with Colombia. Their hands were tied and they had been shot and their bodies burned. Witness accounts and initial evidence obtained by the police indicated that several members of the military had been involved in the killings. Despite this, only one member of the military was charged and tried for this crime. Human rights organisations alleged that this was part of a wider pattern of human rights violations by the same military unit against rural communities in Apure state.

Melquiades Villaroel was threatened in February after a judge sentenced five police officers to 25 years' imprisonment for the killing of her son Rafael Moreno Villaroel and two others, including a child, in El Tigre, Anzoátegui state, in March 2001.

There were concerns for the safety of the Mendoza family in Araure, Portuguesa state, following a shooting at their house in March. The Mendoza family had taken part in the trial of 11 police officers accused of the killing of seven people, including three members of their family.

#### **Human rights defenders:**

Human rights defenders continued to be threatened and intimidated. In May the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reiterated its concern at threats and other open hostility towards human rights defenders by government officials who publicly referred to human rights defenders as "coup plotters" and agents of instability.

In April, María del Rosario Guerrero and her husband, Adolfo Martínez Barrios, were victims of an attempted assassination in Guárico state. They had been the subject of a campaign of defamation and intimidation since 2001, apparently linked to María del

Rosario Guerrero's allegations of human rights violations by the police in Guárico state. By the end of the year, María del Rosario Guerrero was receiving protection, following a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

In September, the Public Ministry recommended the dismissal of the case and closure of the investigation into the threats and acts of intimidation against members of the human rights organisation COFAVIC (Comité de Familiares de Víctimas de los sucesos de Febrero-Marzo de 1989). A court ruling on the recommendation was pending at the end of the year. Staff from COFAVIC feared for their safety as the dismissal of this case might mean the withdrawal of police protection.

There were concerns that a draft law on international co-operation which would allow government officials to decide which non-governmental organisations could access international funds, could be used to restrict the work of human rights defenders (...).

### **Attacks against journalists:**

Threats and attacks against journalists continued.

The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Organisation of American States expressed concern about the killing in April of Jorge Aguirre, a photographer for the newspaper El Mundo. He was reportedly shot dead at a demonstration in Caracas protesting against high levels of crime and insecurity, following the kidnapping and killing of three students. A former police officer was charged with the shooting. At the end of the year he was awaiting trial.

In August, Jesús Flores Rojas, Co-ordinator of the newspaper Región in El Tigre, Anzoátegui state, who had exposed corruption by local civil servants, was shot eight times in the head while he was parking his car in front of his house. The men allegedly responsible for the shooting were reportedly shot and killed by police. Three police officers were reportedly detained, accused of involvement in the killing of Jesús Flores Rojas. At the end of the year it was not known whether the Public Ministry had pressed charges.

### **2008 Report:**

Thousands of government and anti-government supporters took to the streets on several occasions. A number of demonstrations ended in violent clashes between different groups of protesters and between protesters and the police. A new law on the right of women to live without fear of violence gave hope to thousands of women who experience violence in the home, community or workplace.

### **Background:**

President Hugo Chávez Frías took office for a third term in January and Congress granted him powers to pass legislation by decree for 18 months on a wide range of issues including public security and institutional reform. In December, Venezuelans rejected controversial constitutional changes in a referendum. Concerns had been expressed, including by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, that some of the constitutional changes proposed would have curtailed fundamental human rights.

**Political violence:**

The authorities did not take effective action to stop an escalation of violence in the context of demonstrations by supporters and opponents of government policies. There were reports of violent clashes between civilians, and between civilians and police officers throughout the year which resulted in scores of injuries and at least two deaths.

Scores of demonstrators, mainly students, including several who were under 18 were injured or arrested in the context of protests over the authorities' decision not to renew the licence of Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) in May. Several police officers were also injured in the clashes.

Confrontations between both law enforcement officials and demonstrators, and between demonstrators and armed civilians, also took place in the context of tensions over the proposed constitutional reforms.

**2009 Report:**

Attacks on journalists were widespread. Human rights defenders continued to suffer harassment. Prison conditions provoked hunger strikes in facilities across the country. Some significant steps were taken to implement the 2007 law on violence against women but there was a lack of commitment from many of the authorities responsible. Lack of arms control contributed to high levels of violence and public insecurity.

**Background:**

On 31 July the enabling law that empowered President Hugo Chávez Frías to pass legislation by decree on a wide range of issues including public security and institutional reform came to an end with legislative power returning in its entirety to the National Assembly. During the 18 months the law was in force, President Chávez issued a total of 66 decrees covering a wide range of issues.

A law on national intelligence and security passed by presidential decree in May was withdrawn the following month following protests against several aspects of the law, including a provision that would have obliged people to inform on each other or face prosecution.

There were reports of physical attacks on journalists, by both security forces and by civilians. Public insecurity remained an issue, with high numbers of small arms in circulation, including within the prison system. (...)

Local elections for mayors and governors took place in November. Implementation of anti-corruption orders against a number of public officials effectively prevented them from standing for election. The Supreme Court of Justice upheld the constitutionality of these orders in August.

In December, the Supreme Court ruled that a decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that three judges should be reinstated and compensated for their removal from their posts, was "unforceable". The judges had been dismissed in 2003. There was concern that the Supreme Court decision could undermine provisions in the Constitution guaranteeing the implementation of rulings by international bodies. (...)

**Human Right Defenders:**

Government officials attempted to undermine legitimate human rights work by making

unfounded accusations against human rights organisations.

Local human rights activists supporting the Yukpa Indigenous community who were involved in a dispute with local landowners over land rights in the State of Zulia were harassed and detained in August. An official investigation was initiated following the death in July of the elderly father of Sabino Romero Izarra, one of the community leaders; he was allegedly beaten to death by armed men.

In September, two senior officials of the international NGO Human Rights Watch were expelled from the country following the launch of a report criticizing the government's human rights record.

Human rights defender José Luis Urbano was repeatedly threatened because of his work as President of the Foundation for the Defence of the Right to Education (Fundación Pro-Defensa del Derecho a la Educación). In May, the director of a school where he had exposed irregularities threatened him and called for him to be attacked. Also in May he received anonymous death threats by telephone. (...)

### **2010 Report:**

Attacks, harassment and intimidation of those critical of government policies, including journalists and human rights defenders, were widespread. Unfounded charges were brought against those who opposed government policies. More special courts and prosecutor's offices specializing in gender-based violence were established. However, the implementation of the 2007 law to eradicate violence against women remained slow.

### **Background:**

In February, the limit on presidential terms was removed, following a referendum. Social unrest increased; there were nearly twice as many protests between January and August as in the whole of 2008. The protests were sparked by issues such as discontent over labour rights and basic services, including a new education law opposed by the private education sector and the political opposition.

The National Assembly debated the possibility of legal reforms to regulate the use and possession of small arms, including harsher sentences for possession of weapons. According to the National Assembly's Security and Defence Commission, there were between nine and 15 million illegal firearms in circulation.

Reforms to the armed forces in October included provisions allowing the creation of militias. Ten police officers charged with criminal offences in the context of the 2002 attempted coup against President Chávez were sentenced to up to 30 years' imprisonment in April. They were convicted of homicide and grievous bodily harm against anti-coup protesters amid concerns that not all of those who committed acts of violence in the context of the attempted coup had been brought to justice.

### **Human rights defenders:**

Human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations and their relatives seeking justice and redress continued to be attacked, threatened and harassed by the security forces.

In August, two men shot at José Luis Urbano, President of the Foundation for the



Defence of the Right to Education, an NGO working to promote and defend the constitutional right to free education for all. He and other members of the Foundation had been the targets of a series of attacks and threats. By the end of the year, nobody had been brought to justice for this attack or for the shooting in 2007 which left José Luis Urbano seriously injured. No protection measures had been put in place for him, his family or other members of the Foundation by the end of 2009.

In October, Oscar Barrios was shot dead in the town of Guanayén, Aragua State, by two armed men dressed in similar clothing to that worn by police officers. The shooting followed a six-year campaign of harassment and intimidation against the Barrios family which began after they reported the killing of Narciso Barrios by police officers in 2003. Further killings of family members took place: Luis Barrios was killed in 2004 and Rigoberto Barrios in 2005. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called on Venezuela to take the necessary measures to guarantee the right to life and security of the Barrios family and to bring those responsible for the killings to justice.

In November, human rights defender Mijail Martínez was shot dead in Lara state. He had been working with the Committee of Victims Against Impunity in Lara on a documentary film featuring the stories of people who had suffered human rights violations at the hands of police officers. By the end of the year nobody had been brought to justice for the killing and no protection had been provided for the family.

#### **Freedom of expression:**

Journalists were harassed, intimidated and threatened. At least 34 radio stations had their licences revoked for non-compliance with statutory telecommunications regulations. However, as noted in August by the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the authorities' public statement that these stations "play[ed] at destabilizing Venezuela" indicated that their editorial stance could have been the actual reason behind the closure.

There was concern that a draft law which would criminalize the dissemination of information in media outlets which was "false" and could "harm the interest of the state" could undermine freedom of information and expression. The law remained before the National Assembly at the end of the year.

In August, staff at the Caracas offices of the television channel Globovisión were attacked by armed men. Teargas grenades were thrown and one of the security guards was beaten. Globovisión was widely regarded as opposing government policies. In January, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a ruling ordering the authorities to investigate reports of intimidation and physical and verbal attacks against Globovisión staff. No investigation had been initiated by the end of the year.

(\*) Reports by Amnesty International on Venezuela for the years between 2000 and 2007 were sought, but not found on the organisation's local and international websites.

Source: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/venezuela/> [Accessed 2 March 2012].

## APPENDIX G

### List of interviewees, their job roles, and dates/periods of interviews

#### List of Interviewees, and their occupations and employers (2000-2010)

<b>Name of interviewee</b>	<b>Occupation and organisation/media outlet(s) where interviewee worked (2000-2010)</b>
Juan Francisco ALONSO	News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily
Víctor AMAYA	News producer at FM Center Radio / former Political reporter at <i>TaíCual</i> daily
Marcelino BISBAL	Media Professor at Andres Bello University / Co-Director at Centro Gumilla Communications Think tank
Douglas BOLÍVAR	News reporter at TeleSur TV / former News reporter at <i>Correo del Orinoco</i> daily
Lisbeth BOON	Investigative reporter at <i>Últimas Noticias</i> daily and <i>El Mundo</i> daily
Isnardo BRAVO	News reporter at RCTV
Michel CABALLERO	Political reporter at Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV) and VTV / former News reporter at state news agency Agencia Venezolana de Noticias (AVN)
Hernán CANOREA	Reporter at Radio Nacional de Venezuela (RNV)
Rafael CARABALLO	Coordinator of Programming at Tiuna Community radio
Mercedes CHACÍN	Deputy Editor at <i>Ciudad Caracas</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>Últimas Noticias</i> daily
Alexis COLINA	Content Coordinator at Voces Libertarias Community radio
Xabier COSCOJUELA	Information (Deputy) Editor at <i>TaíCual</i> daily
Eleazar DÍAZ RANGEL	Editor-in-Chief at <i>Últimas Noticias</i> daily

Víctor Hugo FEBRES	Co-Director of Los del Medio journalism group/ former News and content producer at Televisión and RCTV
Tania de GARCÍA	Editor-in-Chief and Co-owner of <i>Vea</i> daily
Aliana GONZÁLEZ	Director of Information at <i>El Nacional</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily and at <i>TalCual</i> daily
Moraima GUANIPA	Media and Journalism Professor at Central University of Venezuela
Ameliut HERNÁNDEZ	News reporter at VTV
Clodovaldo HERNÁNDEZ	News reporter and columnist at <i>Correo del Orinoco</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily
Marco HERNÁNDEZ	Director of Journalism NGO Periodistas por la Verdad / Content manager at Conatel Government Bureau / former News reporter at <i>Panorama</i> daily
María Alejandra LÓPEZ	Head of Programming and former News reporter at Unión Radio network
Diana LOZANO	News reporter at <i>El Nacional</i> daily
Hernán LUGO-GALICIA	News reporter at <i>El Nacional</i> daily / General Secretary of National Journalists' College (CNP)
Cristina MARCANO	Politics Editor at <i>El Nacional</i> daily
Américo MARTÍN	Columnist at <i>Código Venezuela</i> website and at <i>TalCual</i> daily / independent politician
Javier MAYORCA	News reporter at <i>El Nacional</i> daily
Taisa MEDINA	Director of Information at <i>El Universal</i> daily
Alonso MOLEIRO	News Producer and Host at Unión Radio FM / News commentator at Globovisión TV / former News reporter
Pedro Pablo PEÑALOZA	News reporter and commentator at Globovisión TV / News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily

Argelio PÉREZ	Information Editor at <i>Vea</i> daily
Teodoro PETKOFF	Editor-in-Chief at <i>TalCual</i> daily / News Programme director and Host at Globovisión TV/ independent politician
Hugo PRIETO	News reporter at <i>Últimas Noticias</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>El Nacional</i> daily
Carlos REVETTE	News reporter and programme director at ANTV/ News commentator at YVKE Mundial Radio
Jordán RODRÍGUEZ	News reporter at TeleSur TV and ANTV
Diana Carolina RUIZ	News reporter and Host at Globovisión TV
Felipe SALDIVIA	Assistant Editor at <i>Ciudad Caracas</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily
Stephanie SARTORI	News reporter at VTV
Ewald SCHARFENBERG	Director of Journalism NGO Instituto Sociedad y Prensa (Ipys)
Rafael UZCATEGUI	General Coordinator at Human Rights NGO Provea / Co-Director of <i>El Libertario</i> newspaper
Ernesto VILLEGAS	News commentator and Host at VTV / Editor-in-Chief at <i>Ciudad Caracas</i> daily / former News reporter at <i>El Universal</i> daily
Laura WEFFER	Investigative reporter at <i>Últimas Noticias</i> daily/ News reporter and commentator at Fe y Alegría Radio / former News reporter at <i>TalCual</i> daily and <i>El Nacional</i> daily
Fabiola ZERPA	Investigative reporter at <i>El Nacional</i> daily

Periods in which interviews were carried out *in situ* (Caracas, Venezuela):

26<sup>th</sup> March 2012 to 14<sup>th</sup> April 2012,

20<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to 9<sup>th</sup> June 2012,

22<sup>nd</sup> December 2013 to 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

Dates of interviews:

Juan Francisco Alonso, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Víctor Amaya, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Marcelino Bisbal, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

Douglas Bolívar, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012.

Lisbeth Boon, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

Michel Caballero, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Rafael Caraballo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

Isnardo Bravo, interview by author, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

Hernán Canorea, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Mercedes Chacín, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Alexis Colina, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

Xabier Coscojuela, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Eleazar Díaz Rangel, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Víctor Hugo Febres, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Tania de García, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

Aliana González, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Moraima Guanipa, interview by author, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

Ameliut Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 2<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Clodovaldo Hernández, interview by author, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

Marco Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

María Alejandra López, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

Diana Lozano, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Hernán Lugo-Galicia, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Cristina Marcano, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Américo Martín, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

Javier Mayorca, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Taisa Medina, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Alonso Moleiro, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Argelio Pérez, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012.

Teodoro Petkoff, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Hugo Prieto, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012 and 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2013.

Carlos Revette, interview by author, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2013. (Telephone interview).

Jordán Rodríguez, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Diana Carolina Ruiz, interview by author, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2013. (Telephone interview).

Felipe Saldivia, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Stephanie Sartori, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2012.

Ewald Scharfenberg, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

Rafael Uzcátegui, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

Ernesto Villegas, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2012.

Laura Weffer, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 29<sup>th</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Fabiola Zerpa, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

## APPENDIX H

### Interview Guide

*The interview guide (organised around the research's main questions and related themes) is directed to Venezuelan news reporters, media practitioners, and editors; and also to news media owners, communications and media scholars, NGOs' representatives, public functionaries, politicians, and "expert" commentators.*

#### Personal Background

- What has been your main occupation during the 2000s?
- How would you define your professional or non-professional journalistic/media background?
- Which media outlets and organisations have you worked for/with in the 2000s? What have been the main motives behind this?
- How would you define yourself politically/ideologically?

#### Ideas of media's contribution to democracy

- Do you hold specific ideas and tenets about democracy? Is there a specific model of democracy you support?
- Has the Left-Right political debate been defining your own political standing, and influencing your views on media and society in Venezuela?
- Historically speaking, would you define Venezuela as a democratic society?
- How do you understand the contribution of media to democratic enhancement? Has there been democratic enhancement in the country under the Chávez administration?
- What type of democracy does President Chávez's political project represent? How would you define, broadly, the political process he leads?
- Is it pertinent to define Venezuelan society (2000-2010) as politically polarised? If so, how do you evaluate such polarisation, broadly speaking?

#### Historical perception of the political climate in Venezuela (2000-2010)

- How would you describe the political climate in Venezuela during the Chávez regime? What could make it different from the past national political experiences?
- Have narratives and theories of radical thought vis-à-vis liberal political traditions been shaping Venezuela's social, cultural and media context in the 2000s?
- What might be the main reasons behind such political environment?
- In what ways is the Chávez era similar or different to 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century political historical periods?
- How democratic is the country (2000-2010)? How solid are institutions? How plural and participative is the public sphere? Have these aspects changed compared to the pre-Chávez era?
- To which Venezuelan political historical figures can President Chávez relate to?

#### Characterisation of Venezuela's news media environment, and the democratic debate (2000-2010)

- What have been the most significant changes in journalistic practice during that period of time (2000-2010), and compared to before?

- What have been the causes of these changes? How do these relate to political and ideological aspects?
- What is your perception of the democratic role the news media have played in society? Has democracy been generally strengthened or not by journalists and news media (and how so)?
- How have news media fitted into national institutional dynamics? Can you give examples?
- To what degree have the media offered democratic participation and debate?
- How have the President's figure, and his use of the media, contributed to democratic debate?

**Journalistic “negotiation”, news bias, and legal aspects in Venezuelan media (2000-2010)**

- What have been the main constraints and pressures for reporters and news-media practitioners (please give examples)? What effects do these have?
- How have political/ideological standings affected newsroom work and the structure of news media organisations? Does the internalisation of political values need to be consonant with the news outlets journalists work for?
- How do you perceive the coverage of political and social issues in terms of balance, transparency, and accuracy?
- Which model predominates in agenda-setting and gatekeeping: informative or partisan? Can you explain why?
- How do you, as a journalist, negotiate with the news media outlet when covering news events?
- How do both the journalist and the news media outlet negotiate with the state (and its media policies) when covering news events?
- Have you or colleagues experienced self-censorship, based on anticipation of what is acceptable as news (both by the news organisation and the government)?
- How do you evaluate the presence –or not– of censorship and previous censorship in the news media?
- How would you evaluate the media policies that have been implemented (2000-2010)? What effect have they had for journalists and media owners?
- Has your “ideal” form of journalistic practice, according to your own professional norms, been constrained or compromised? If so, how, why, and by whom?

**Access to data, coverage of elections, and coup d'état (2000-2010)**

- How do you evaluate the way journalists have been accessing official and non-official data/information?
- What are the main challenges and advantages when covering sensitive issues in terms of access and sources?
- Is journalistic reporting a safe job in Venezuela? Has safety increased/decreased while reporting?
- How have news media contributed to the democratic elections that have taken place between 1998 and 2010?
- How do you perceive the way the national news media acted during the April 2002 coup d'état that momentarily ousted President Chávez? What was your reaction as a journalist / media owner / media scholar?
- What has election news coverage shown about the political hegemony in the country?
- Have some news media outlets and professionals changed political direction before or during elections? What might be the causes for this and implications media-wise and politically?



### **Community participation/representation, media ownership and professionalism (2000-2010)**

- How have journalists and news media been “constructing” the new Venezuelan communities?
- How has the representation of community and its issues shifted –if at all– under the Chávez administration and through state, pro-government media?
- What are the editorial policies for covering all political parties and communitarian movements? Do all sides have equal access? Is each faction represented without bias? Can you give examples?
- Have news media outlets or specific journalists been used as ‘bridges’ or mediators between different political groups? If so, what is your view on this?
- Is there a professional logic to news-making in your experience?
- Can you describe what are the differences between state, communitarian and private media; and how do the three interrelate? What are their different communicational, political and economic priorities?
- Have media ownership structures changed during the Chávez era? How significantly? And how has possible change of ownership affected journalistic output?
- To what extent have you felt editorial or proprietorial influences when covering and delivering news?

### **Autonomy, ethics and journalistic values in Venezuela (2000-2010)**

- What are the editorial priorities in the news media outlet that you work for? Can you give examples?
- How autonomous do you feel when reporting/editing?
- How committed are you and fellow journalists to independent journalism?
- What have been the main constraints when trying to carry out investigative reporting, when covering the street for information?
- Which notion of journalistic ethics do you cultivate? Do these differ from the predominant news environment, or not?
- How do journalistic ethics relate to market pressures, legal challenges and notions of social responsibility in your practice?
- Have the news media played a watchdog role? If so, how accurate and factual-based are the checks on government and on the powerful?
- How committed are you and fellow journalists to independent journalism?
- Have the national media and journalists played a role as mediators between state power, non-government power and the public sphere?

### **Journalistic culture and models in Venezuela (2000-2010)**

- What are the similarities and differences of the Venezuelan media case when compared to other Latin American media (2000-2010)?
- How influential are global, western models (particularly the U.S.) to journalistic practice and ideals in the country?
- Do you consider the media and political landscape in Venezuela unique in any way, exceptional in its characteristics?
- What could be the impact, nationally, of online news media, social media, blogs, Twitter?
- Where do you sense journalism practice is heading in Venezuela? Will it become more democratic, more participative?

