

CHAPTER 15

Imperialism and Hegemonic Information in Latin America: The Media Coup in Venezuela vs. the Criminalization of Protest in Mexico

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15.1 Introduction

A systematic study and institutional analysis of the current performance of Latin American media groups based on the propaganda model illustrates how the mass media operate as effective transmitters of messages designed on the basis of strategic information manipulation criteria to mold, predict and control the public behaviour of the middle classes and popular sectors towards a colonial and imperialist logic, as evidenced by the recent media coups in the region.

If we take a look at the forms of ideological closure of public discourse and the voices capable of making themselves heard in the media sphere, the data reveal a steady and ruthless representation of the interests and criteria of the elites in newspaper accounts of vital issues for the countries of the South, which

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for decades have been under the hegemonic control of foreign cultural industries and subject to the imposition of the policy of the free flow of information.¹ Moreover, it has become clear how, after the long neoliberal night, there have been substantial changes in the foundations and problems of the structure of information, as well as in the economic functions of the media and cultural industries, especially regarding the neocolonial role that hegemonic information from the North plays in the contemporary capitalist crisis in which the countries of the subcontinent are currently immersed.

The governments of progress in the region introduced into the public debate observable historical contradictions created by the imbalance in the dominant structure of information against the right of access, popular communication and, of course, the rights of professionals, citizens and civil society as a whole. In the following pages, two illustrative cases of the social logic of journalistic mediation in Latin America are analysed: Venezuela and Mexico. These case studies illustrate the repetition of history as a farce through the systematic contribution of information dependence and the violation of human rights, as has occurred before in US imperial projects such as Operation Condor.

The publication in 1988 of the first edition of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* coincided in the USA with the end of the 'Reagan era' (1981–1989), a period marked by political conservatism and a foreign policy of interventionism to which nobody remained indifferent, whose influence on Latin America would be decisive in episodes such as the dirty war in Nicaragua. It was in this context that Herman and Chomsky carried out a detailed investigation of the internal workings of the US media industry, its patterns of conduct, the motives behind the production of messages and their social function: the production of consent around a series of values destined to maintain the status quo at the time, both inside and outside the borders of the USA.

To illustrate the relevance of such a theoretical-methodological contribution, we will try to reveal the logic behind, and critical perspectives on, the basis and validity of the propaganda model and its application to recent newsworthy events in the region. The task is none other than to assess theoretical contributions by criticizing news mediation, on the basis of a structural analysis of the study context of the two cases discussed below. The comparative analysis shows that elite interests are strictly defended by mainstream media in both cases, resulting in the systematic support of elite actors who violate human rights combined with aggressive attacks on the social and political forces that are considered enemies.

15.2 The Permanent War Against Venezuela

Bearing in mind the distinctive features of the real structure of information in practically all the countries of the region, the state of siege under which the Bolivarian revolution has been placed can be regarded as a revealing exam-

ple of the validity of the propaganda model for the purposes described here. Since Hugo Chávez became President of Venezuela, the private media, national and international alike, have subjected the country to continual and systematic harassment, thus contributing to the construction of a distorted picture of the democratic processes in the Republic of Venezuela, even to the extreme of justifying the failed coup d'état in 2002.²

The North American 'peace operations' have, nonetheless, gone unnoticed by the populace. As a matter of fact, in the public space audiences do not have access to any other type of narrative than the vilification of the revolutionary leaders. To such an extent that the coordination and lobbying activities of those representing the hegemonic geopolitical interests remain hidden from the public eye, by deliberate omission on the part of the mainstream media, while they contribute, without constraints, to control and repress the emergence of popular protest movements, if not to destabilize expressly unfavorable or unreliable governments, as is the case of the so-called 'unrestricted warfare' waged by the Pentagon against Venezuela.

Thus, the self-styled 'independent media' such as *El País* implemented an information policy to legitimize the planned coup and the destabilizing pro-insurgency captained from Washington by expert conspirators like Otto Reich, a former collaborator of Ronald Reagan and a leading expert in counter-insurgency and low-intensity operations such as those orchestrated in Central America against Nicaragua. The in-depth study of Fernando Casado illustrates analytically to what extent this process of psychological war relies on the committed work of the so-called 'anti-journalists.' A hundred qualitative interviews with Spanish-speaking journalists, both European and Latin American, from leading newspapers including *Clarín* (Argentina), *El Tiempo* (Colombia), *El País* (Spain) and *El Comercio* (Ecuador), revealed the existence of a deliberate propaganda campaign launched by the major media corporations against the Chávez government as part of a covert operation to counter the revolutionary process. In this coverage, several techniques have been employed to step up the media siege and propaganda war in which the country is currently immersed:

1. *The caricaturing of Presidents Chávez and Maduro.* The sensationalist representation of both heads of state has tended to waver between the ridiculous and the grotesque, both being criminalized by their antagonists, according to the Nixon hypothesis, as 'dangerous, mad criminals.' Be that as it may, at any rate it is possible to confirm a hugely negative and distorted portrayal of both presidents in the national and international media, which has gradually permeated public opinion to such a degree as to justify a possible intervention in 'defence of democracy.'
2. *Disinformation and psychological warfare.* The production of false news, from non-existent conflicts on the Colombian border, to putative shortage crises, through set-ups involving cases of corruption and ties with drug

trafficking, has aimed to destabilize the Bolivarian government and isolate it on the international stage. In short, ‘information about Venezuela is usually spectacular and sensationalist; anecdotes turn into the focus of the news; important political figures as President Chávez are trivialized, emphasizing witty remarks rather than significant decisions which have benefited millions of people.’³

3. *Campaigns against the lack of freedom of expression and democracy.* The opposition and the international press have promoted continuous propaganda campaigns, describing the Chávez government as a dictatorship because of the purported absence of liberties, a term that has been repeatedly dismissed by the Carter Foundation, the Organization of American States (OAS) itself, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the European Union (EU), among other multilateral agencies.
4. *The spreading of rumors and the dearth of news on social networks.* Together with the clichés and the distorted picture of the country due to the continuous disinformation in the mainstream media, social networks have been used to reinforce this prevailing image by circulating all kinds of canards about the leaders of the Venezuelan government or their allies, even, as has occurred during the elections in Spain, to invoke the alleged danger of a Venezuelan-type drift in other countries whose progressive parties aspire to government.
5. *The bias and imbalance in the sources and the use of ideologically focused language on a lexicological and semantic level.* Furthermore, news about the country has been continually manipulated as regards the use of sources and semiotic operations, repeatedly employed with the clear purpose of propaganda. Thus, for example, the mainstream international media only cite sources reflecting the stance of the USA and its opposition allies, without giving voice to the Venezuelan government, except to reinforce a priori the bias in news coverage or to ridicule its representatives in a conspicuous fashion. By the same token, when reference is made to the democratically elected government of the country it is regularly referred to as a regime, which conjures up images of authoritarian systems such as that of the ex-USSR in the eyes of public opinion. This bias is applied across the board to North Korea, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia, and functions, in tandem with other semiotic strategies, to construct a view contrary to the revolutionary process.

Consequently, the media war against Venezuela ‘is translated into a continuous deformation and manipulation of information, produced serving destabilizing agendas against Bolivarian Revolution,’ which systematically violates the right of readers and audience to receive truthful information.’⁴

It has always been held that, in war, as in times of peace, the first victim is the truth, but in the case of Venezuela the media have never, now or before, intended to shed light on the murky, coup-mongering web of interests opposing the Bolivarian revolutionary process. What is of real interest in the case,

however, is that the major disinformation campaigns orchestrated in favor of covert operations before the coup d'état were not a success, in spite of the fact that they managed to snare many intellectuals, journalists and media companies, who believed the manipulated version of the facts purposefully fabricated by the Cisneros Group and the psychological warfare advisors sent by the USA for that purpose, in their discursive plot and strategy of persuasion.

The situation of the Bolivarian Republic, described by the Pentagon 'as a battle cry of communists and socialists' in the heart of South America, recalls in this sense the plan designed to topple the government of Salvador Allende in 1973: media smear campaigns, rumors and intense disinformation; the mobilization of the elites; unfounded accusations against the person of the President; an army divided; the economic blockade promoted by the employers' association; the flight of capital; an attempted coup; and considerable international pressure. In this respect, the tragic events of September 1973 in Chile should be recalled, because not by chance Charles Shapiro, one of the actors also responsible for operations in Trinidad and Tobago and an advocate of the terror campaigns in Central America (Nicaragua and El Salvador), occupied the post of US Ambassador to Venezuela in order to implement a destabilizing pro-insurgency program against the Bolivarian government.

As in the case of the operation against the Popular Unity (UP) government in Chile, the counter-revolutionary operation in Venezuela has focused on four lines of strategic action bolstered by the activities of the media:

1. Economic destabilization (as in Chile, the gains in welfare and economic equality, a result of the reallocation and exploitation of the country's oil resources, have been attacked by means of an active campaign based on the flight of capital and lockouts against the government's policy of redistribution).
2. Political-social destabilization (the economic and political establishment have attempted to present as a civil war what is none other than an active operation of psychological warfare and mobilization by means of reports with eye-catching headlines revolving around corruption, which have since proved to be unfounded).
3. Destabilization of the National Armed Forces (the protests of sectors of the army have been associated with the manoeuvring of the USA to garner support against Chávez and Maduro, inciting prominent military officers to implement a strategy of harassment and destabilization of the government).
4. Civil disobedience (after the failure of the coup d'état, minority groups of the population, overrepresented in the country's oligopolistic media, painted a picture of ungovernability, which has had a strong impact on public opinion, with *garimpas* and continual sabotages, such as those instigated by Leopoldo López).

Thus, media conglomerates such as PRISA have presented as a ‘civil rebellion’ what is none other than a mobilization organized by the corporate/media/military bloc in favor of US interests. The outcome of these covert operations is unpredictable and, if this symbolic escalation of violence continues, it could lead to an authentic class confrontation. We have outlined this as a working hypothesis in previous studies. The problem with the spiral of dissembling and silencing dirty wars like this is that it is highly likely that it will lead to upheavals and disruptions, multiple disturbances and wars, in the growing escalation of exploitation and indiscriminate violence of this fearsome product of military engineering in Latin America, as is currently the case in Mexico.

15.3 Mexico: From Chiapas to Ayotzinapa

The second case study is a counter-factual example that confirms the propaganda model as regards the distinctions made by the press between worthy victims (opponents such as Leopoldo López in Venezuela or the pro-coup movement of the Brazilian extreme right against Dilma Rousseff) and unworthy victims (indigenous communities, students and peasants in the case of Mexico). The distortion of news, as in the case of Ayotzinapa and, prior to this, the Zapatista insurgency, perfectly illustrates the institutional working model of the media oligopoly governing the country, whose maximum expression lies in the tendency to criminalize protests and collective mobilization, whether in Mexico’s poorest states (Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz) or, as has been recently observed, on the occasion of the demonstrations against the *gasolinazo*.⁵ In this regard, the information blackout is, in these and other cases, striking indeed, as has been shown in studies conducted by the Technological Institute of Monterrey.

A content analysis of the coverage of the country’s main news programs, which constitute the primary and practically exclusive source of information for Mexicans, reveals conspicuous inequalities. Thus, ‘the public figures receiving most coverage belong to the Federal Government and, to a lesser extent, the legislative power and the State Government. By the same token and given that it is the ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) receives the lion’s share in comparison with other political institutions. It is no wonder then that the main issues addressed in the news have been the economy, security and politics, since they are precisely the topics included on the agenda of these political figures.’⁶ As a dominant pattern, this agenda tends to be marked by Televisa, characterized by the systematic concealment or stigmatization of the social actors taking part in the protests. ‘The amount of time dedicated to social actors highlights the huge imbalance in their coverage, inasmuch as, whereas there is a vast amount of information about their political counterparts, those people concerned with social issues are relegated to the third, or even the fourth news slot. This difference in the coverage of the different actors within the social system denotes a lack of diversity in Mexican television con-

tent, a state of affairs that was reconfirmed when applying the Gini Index (GI) (IG= 0.58) ⁷⁷

This logic has also been confirmed empirically in the case of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, the massacres of Acteal and the mobilizations in Oaxaca on the occasion of the teachers' strike. So, for instance, 'after analyzing the news broadcast by Televisa on 25 November 2006 following a huge demonstration, the researcher Margarita Zires concluded that, by means of its narrative logic and interpretation of reality, the news program represented the members of the APPO as *provocative vandals* even *criminals* and the federal security forces as the *legitimate forces of law and order*.⁸⁸

In the last few years, social breakdown and increased repression throughout Mexico due to the deepening of the economic crisis have favored, as a result, a polarization between the reality of the process of militarization and indiscriminate violence on the part of the elites and state apparatuses and reality according to the news programs and mainstream press. The contradiction between the dominant version in the media and the reality experienced by the majority of the population has consequently led to a crisis of trust in the Channel of the Stars (Televisa) and the quest for a greater control over information, with the resulting concealment and legitimization of state terrorism that has been unleashed against civil organizations, opposition parties and cooperatives and popular movements opposing the counter-insurgency policy of the Stalinist development model that President Peña Nieto currently represents. Notwithstanding the crisis of confidence in the state and its ideological apparatus, the influence of the media duopoly still prevails. This has been possible thanks to a high level of concentration throughout the country's history, under the sway of a small clique including the Azcárraga family. 'In Mexico, Televisa (with three national channels) monopolises 66% of 465 concessions, has 52% audience share and channels 70% of commercial screen advertising. TV Azteca has 28% of concessions, 21% of the audience and 25% of advertising. Together they account for 90% of the television audience.'⁸⁹

The history of Mexican television has been characterized by the symbiotic relationship and alliance with the political-economic and media powers, thus constituting an authentic duopoly in which the vast majority of the population depends on a limited information framework:

The concentration of the mass media industry in only two institutions has been one of the most criticised aspects of the Mexican political system, above all due to the impact that television has had on the democratic life of the country for many years now. However, despite the fact that Mexican population trust their national news, the concentration of television market could be working against them, in particular offering a biased view of reality as has been pointed out by some authors, who consider that, in the previously described conditions, media cannot strengthen democracy [...] The concentration characterizing Mexican

television is a factor that, in one way or another, has influenced the news content accessed by the majority of the country's inhabitants, and the media policies that are ultimately implemented will have an impact on the vision that viewers have of national reality. The partiality with which information is treated is one of the most questionable aspects since it contravenes the principle of diversity through which an attempt is made to describe reality in all its complexity.¹⁰

Therefore, the regular reports released by bodies such as Amnesty International denouncing the systematic violation of human rights in states like Oaxaca and Guerrero, and in Chiapas itself, have not been covered in the mainstream media, which have only mentioned military sources or, failing that, high-level decision-makers of the Secretariats of National Defense and of the Interior, due to their continued structural dependence on the Party-State. The multitude of cases and individual complaints – which would make any journalistic investigation a simple matter – have been habitually relegated to the fringe networks of some community-based, counter-information networks and to a few – albeit important – independent media such as *La Jornada* or *Proceso*, amid the clamorous and critical situation of human rights in the country which even affects media professionals themselves. Threats, impunity and the persecution of journalists are nowadays the norm in a country living under a permanent state of emergency:

In Mexico, threats, violence and persecution against information professionals are a daily constant and an effective tool to silence those who write about corruption or organised crime. According to several national and international organizations, Mexico has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world to exercise journalism profession.¹¹ However, the international press has warned against the lack of freedom of expression in countries that have advocated for national communication policies for democratizing the digital radio spectrum. The book recently edited by Professor Bernardo Díaz Nosty, coordinator of the UNESCO Chair of Communication of Malaga University, underscores such contradictions.¹²

A careful reading of its report on and diagnosis of the situation of journalists in the region ought to lead us to other conclusions very different from those that the official mouthpieces of the 'free press' would have us reach; though we should not expect the guardians of freedom to try to denounce the violation of human rights in pro-coup processes such as those experienced in the region. Rather, making the most of the leading role of institutions such as the OEA, this has been a systematic pattern or logic with the blessing of the major oligopolistic media groups.

Returning to the case of Mexico, the operability of the propaganda model is more than evident. Since the beginning of Peña Nieto's six-year term, the Mexican government, far from meeting the social demands of the population, has attempted to conceal the most serious cases of corruption in alliance with Televisa, while diverting state resources to the country's main media monopoly.

Moreover, since the beginning of Peña Nieto's term in office government policy has been characterized by a substantial increase in militarization, a remarkable strengthening of the systems of law and order, an increase in counter-insurgency measures, the harassment of social leaders and human rights advocates, and systematic attacks against the main nascent opposition party MORENA and its leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

As shown by a content analysis of the main news programs of Televisa and TV Azteca, there is a clear predominance of the public agenda of the government authorities, fostered as sources in the media overrepresentation to which the television duopoly has led. 'Of these, the Federal Government emerges as the principal actor in journalistic reports, since 37% use some of its members as their main information source. The legislative power and the State Government trail far behind with 17% and 14%, respectively. In addition, the political origins of the people appearing in the content analysed also reinforces this situation. So it is that 72.2% are members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party and barely 7% belong to the Democratic Revolution Party. This absence of diversity of opinions is underlined when the corresponding Gini Index is applied, whose result points to a clear deficiency of equity in content (0.58 in the case of political actors and 0.80 for political parties)'¹³

Meanwhile, the political-military action of the government remains concealed from public opinion, following the prescribed guidelines of low-intensity warfare in order to terrorize the peasant population immersed in a widespread climate of general insecurity and repression, unprecedented in the history of Mexico, regarded today by some as a failed state.¹⁴ As a parody of the film *The Perfect Dictatorship*, the routine production of the mass media tends to focus the attention of audiences on other matters, supposedly of greater interest. Thus, for example, in 2012 the monopolistic company Televisa undeniably played a leading role as the stage for constructing the figure of the PRI candidate. Peña Nieto and the country's main television company sealed an alliance that still holds, albeit with some discrepancies. The 2014 massacre of young *normalistas* in Ayotzinapa was undoubtedly a hard blow for the image of the President: public opinion associated the lack of justice with his inaction. But, in essence, the limited coverage avoided drawing parallels between the causes and the terror policy implemented by the state against subaltern sectors.

Faithfully following the non-explicit manuals in use on counter-insurgency, the Mexican army, whose operations receive the benefit of the advice of the Pentagon and special operations units of the CIA, is proceeding in this way with the destruction and systematic harassment of civil populations, while any revealing knowledge of this rationale of creative devastation or destruction is discredited as an invention, typical of conspiracy theories, despite the evidence displayed, the continuities of the *modus operandi* of the country's dominant media and the authentic ideological apparatuses of the process of accumulation endured by the country's population, even to the extent of procedures infringing upon the right to life.

15.4 Conclusion

As Michel Collon has written:

‘[...] so at first the Cold War media portrayed a systematically exaggerated apocalyptic ‘Soviet threat’ (as has been shown in recent American studies), to justify the huge US military build-up. This was followed by the ‘yellow peril’ and in turn by Iraq and its ‘four global armies’: currently, the threat to the West comes from the Third World as a whole.’¹⁵

The threat to US hegemony posed by the processes of autonomy and regional unity taking place in Latin America, has been responded to with the expected denigration and criminalization of the progressive forces.

The process of concentration of media ownership has made globalization work in the interest of political and economic elites both in the US and Latin America. The capacity of governments, led by the United States, to direct media misinformation campaigns with the support of large corporations has naturally lead to an underreporting of the crimes committed by elite actors, who actually became the main sources of information. Attacks on alternative media and movements promoting change have gone together with a campaign of fear to demonise political and social change. As during Reagan’s era, the scarecrow of communism, together with discourses on national security, has provided the ideological basis to defend elite interests and attack those who are labelled as enemies.

In Venezuela, the coup and destabilizing actions put into action by an alliance between the US government, the national political opposition, economic elites and media companies has resulted in a ferocious attack on the democratic leaders and the Bolivarian process, while the leaders promoting violence and coups d’état are enthroned as democratic heroes in the tradition of Dr King and presented as victims of totalitarianism. In contrast, the voice of indigenous communities, students and peasants who suffer from structural and direct violence in Mexico are systematically excluded from the public sphere, thus being rendered *unworthy* victims, as the priority of the oligopolistic media has been to side with the interests of the right-wing and violent forces that receive fundamental support from the US government. These two case studies confirm for Latin America the powerful influence of the filters identified by Herman and Chomsky and supports a key hypothesis of the propaganda model that the mainstream media will follow double-standards when informing about ‘us’ and ‘our allies’ as compared to ‘them,’ ‘the enemies.’ The reason for the difference in treatment is the same one: the structural interconnection between the media, governments and economic powers that impose its will over the peoples of Latin America, who nevertheless continue to resist and engage in processes of social and political transformation.

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