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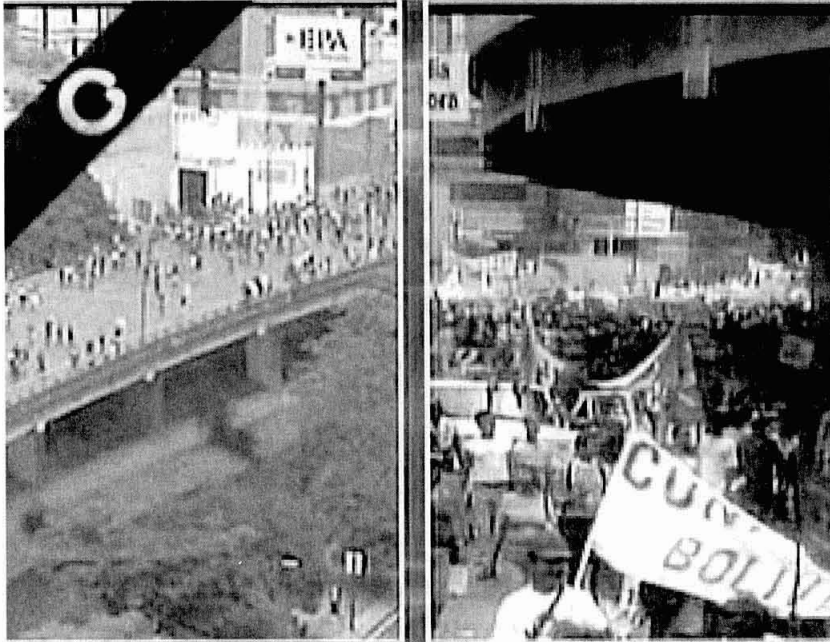
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THE IMPACT OF SELECT MEDIA ON THE CONTEMPORARY VENEZUELAN POLITICAL PROCESS



By
Camila Herrera

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master's of Science in Mass Communication

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APPROVAL OF THESIS

**THE IMPACT OF SELECT MEDIA ON THE CONTEMPORARY VENEZUELAN
POLITICAL PROCESS**

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Chapter I

Introduction

This investigation is based on the argument that despite claims for impartiality, mass media have a direct influence on both the construction of public opinion and on the development of the contemporary Venezuelan political process (Venegas, 1997, p 106). They attempt to influence every individual's ability to determine political preferences. Mass media, which include TV and radio broadcasting, newspapers and magazines, Internet access, and public forums, among others, are the fundamental means for transmitting political messages. In particular, TV, radio, and newspapers are the ideal media for government to communicate with the governed (Cotteret, 1977, p 187). These media are instruments for building political preferences and/or attitude towards politics. Citizens tend to turn to mass media to weigh the options available in the political arena (Martínez, 2006, p 167).

For purposes of this thesis, in Venezuela the two media with the most influence in Venezuela are television broadcasting and newspapers, informing the population about current affairs and complex and controversial political situations that have characterized the country over the last several years, more specifically during Chavez's presidential reign and campaign from 1999 through 2006., This study is based on the analysis of television coverage, but newspaper coverage will be also taken into. According to Professor Pasquali, one of the most influential of contemporary Venezuelan thinkers in the area of communication, television surpasses the capability of the other channels of mass

media to effectively reach consumers. Pasquali has argued that television has the ability to send pre-processed images and ideas that, in general, are accepted by viewers without questioning the messages' validity (Pasquali, 2003). The images have a direct impact on viewers, thus influencing their perceptions and viewpoints, and even their values.

Likewise, Professor Elster in his *Homo Ludens*, (1998) has shown how television may create a non-critical, non-questioning consumer of programs and ideas. TV's influence affects people's ability to evaluate the appropriate characteristics of the environment and the society in which they live. The fact that private television reaches almost 80 percent of the population in Venezuela, leads this study to consider only the impact that television networks may have on the construction of political values and the impact over the current political situation of the country. The term "mass media" in the following text refers to TV and newspaper because the common person in Venezuela has little or no access to the Internet and other financially unaffordable means of communication. Even though accessible, people prefer to watch TV than to listen to the radio (Abreu, 1997).

In Venezuela, private groups own most television stations. According to Professor Miguel Latouche of the School of Social Communication at the Central University of Venezuela, television stations are private corporations that have important relationships with major companies and interest groups outside of the country. Two out of four privately owned TV stations, Radio Caracas Television and Venevision, were founded during the fifties. Until recently, they formed an

oligopoly with the capability of overlooking legal regulations and directly influencing the government. Founded in the 1980s, Globovisión has almost tripled its share of the audience within the last three years. These three television networks (Radio Caracas Television, Venevisión, and Globovisión) are the most deeply rooted means of mass communication in the country with direct influence in the development of the political and social situation of the country. For this reason, they constitute the subject of this study.

Democracy, in its most basic definition, assumes that citizens are able to decide for themselves about their political preferences. Similarly, it is widely accepted that the quality of their decision-making processes depends on available information. The public requires free and appropriate access to information without intermediation from either government or private corporations (Lucien, 2002, p 145). The media educates citizen about the different political views and ideals embedded in a democracy. In addition, because media are the link between society and government, in modern society politics and democracy are not conceived and supported without them.

In Venezuela the mass media have become fundamental players in the process of political debate, assuming sides and repressing the role that they are supposed to play as providers of objective information (Lucien, 2002, p 203). Indeed, privately owned TV and newspapers have not been representative of “open spaces,” meaning outlets for society to participate in the expression of their points of view, or political preferences (Pasquali, 1992, p 105). In Venezuela, freedom of expression on political issues is then limited to whether citizens are

being heard by the mass media. In general, this right is limited to the space allowed by the owners of mass media mechanisms (Nuño, 1992, p 50). Media owners play a fundamental role in constructing the political process because they take sides in the political debate instead of being neutral: they create messages that support their interests rather than presenting reality (Aveledo, 1992, p 98).

This study focuses on the particular role that these select media have had over the contemporary Venezuelan political process during Hugo Chavez's government from 1999 to the present. In Venezuela, media have become political actors playing a role and following a script written by their benefactors instead of presenting the public with information about the actual evolution of social and political situations. Privately owned broadcasting and newspapers manipulate the news in order to present a particular negative perspective of national life; they attack the work of the government in what Barreto has defined as the "prejudice" of the "Mediatic Reason" (Barreto 2006, p, 67).

Democracy is a relatively new concept in Venezuela. As a model of a political organization, its beginnings were in 1958 when popular demonstrations, backed by important sectors of the military, overthrew the long dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez who had been in power since 1948. At that time, Venezuela had not acquired a tradition of democratic values. Since the end of its war of independence from Spain in 1824, military raids, revolutions, coup d' etat, and civil war characterized Venezuelan politics. Militiamen and leaders were the principal protagonists on the political scene, while it was impossible to recognize a real development of civil society's participation in the political process.

During the nineteenth century, Venezuela began the process of building a nation. Venezuela was a very primitive country that lacked social and economic coherence. Democracy was born in Venezuela under adverse conditions. Without democratic traditions or institutions, political power in Venezuela was associated with the presence of a powerful man that concentrated on his own political agenda based on his ability to dominate the military. In 1999, the people elected Hugo Rafael Chavez for his ability to create a democracy that included the poor and opened the political system to diverse sectors of society. Still, his regime was very polemic in the sense that it did not embrace the canons of traditional democracy. During the last few years, the Venezuelan political process has been characterized by violent confrontations between the government and the opposition, most of which have been developed within the ambit of the mass media (Cañizales, 2006, p 100).

As opposition to Chavez grew, owners and managers, commentators, and other personnel affiliated with private mainstream television networks and most major mainstream newspapers stated their opposition to the Chavez administration. These media accused the Chavez administration of intimidation and censorship. However, the owners of these networks have primary allegiance to Venezuela's elite (Urquiza 2005, p 33). The Venezuelan political culture, at least since the arrival of representative democracy in 1958, can be characterized by its ability to reduce political conflict (Rey, 1994, p 176). Yet, after the electoral victory of President Chavez in 1998 and the introduction of participative

democracy, political attitudes and actions have changed, thus increasing the level of political unrest within the population (Latouche, 2006, p 77).

This discussion represents the hypothesis that select media have hardly attempted to have a direct influence on the construction of values and worldviews. Citizens have been exposed to mixed messages about the current situation in Venezuela; however, the constructed “reality” developed by privately owned media attacks the government of Hugo Chavez and his actions in favor of the poor (Barreto, 2006, p 115).

Both the government and opposition have used the power of the media in order to transmit their messages: the government has tried to build support for public policies where the opposition has tried to build a feeling of dislike and even of panic among some sectors of the population (Cañizales, 2004, p 178). The objectivity of the public TV station is debatable because it did not question Hugo’s Chavez popularity between 2004 and 2006. Furthermore its range of coverage is statistically insignificant when compared with privately owned and operated television.

Misperception around the political arena has been constructed using mass media. In a sense, political debate has moved the public arena to the television screens and newspaper pages, which have distorted the perception of the problems that Venezuelans face and their possible solutions (Pasquali, 1991, p 60). With research, arguments show no correlation between the discourse elaborated by the media and the results of the electoral process in Venezuela during the last eight years. While the media have predicted the political

weakness of Hugo Chavez and his lack of popularity or the rejection of governmental policies by the majority of the population, the fact is that Hugo Chavez has won the electoral process in his last two terms. Even though the media insisted that this process was fraudulent, and assured the public that the exit polls predicted that Chavez would lose by 20 percent in the 2004 referendum (Schoen & Berlan, 2004) the Carter Center investigated the statistical study to find that “none of the statistical studies by the exit poll evidenced that fraud had occurred” (Carter Center 2006).

The U.S. Department of State accepted that the results of the audit were “consistent with the results by Venezuelan National Electoral Council” (Pravda 2005). The permanent representative from the U.S. to the organization of the American States added that the results of the referendum “speak for themselves” (Maisto 2004). It is important to make clear that the intention of this thesis is not to take sides in favor of Hugo Chavez but to demonstrate the influence of the media on the public’s perception of the political process.

Nevertheless, a nongovernmental organization closely linked to the opposition SUMATE, said that the sample for the audit was selected by the Chavez-controlled National Electoral Council and was not sufficient in size to be statically reliable (Castillo 2004). Equally, this NGO used an exit poll carried out by the New York-based enterprise Penn & Shonen that claimed the results were absolutely the opposite to that proclaimed by the CNE (Consejo Nacional Electoral) i.e., Chavez 40 percent, the opposition 60 percent. At this point, it is very important to state that as demonstrated, private TV channels used this

source to carry out a campaign favoring the claim of fraud and disregarded the statement made by the international observers and local survey companies.

It can be argued that television networks presented their viewers with information that did not reflect the real development of political preferences. Indeed, by using the data from Penn & Shone, they did not inform the public about the content of a statistically relevant instrument. Instead, they tried to persuade viewers to digest a biased perception of political reality (Latouche, 2004).

This thesis is neither about studying the figure or actions of the president nor judging the role of the opposition and their behavior from the time Chavez was elected to the presidency. Instead, it focuses on the media's role in the social construction of reality, especially in the past six years and on how media affect politics, particularly in Chavez's campaign for a second term.

Literature review

Democracy is a type of government supported by participation of the people on several levels in the political process. On the first level, people vote for their representatives. On the second level, they organize in order to guarantee the protection of their rights and the fulfillment of their demands; and on a third level, they actually participate in constructing public policy. Generally, it has been accepted that democracy is a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," in which the will of the citizens determines the

course of the policies that may be adopted by the government (Beethan 1963, p.80).

Democracy, I take to be a mode of decision making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collectively enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision making directly – one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise. Democracy should properly be conceptualized as lying at one end of the spectrum, the other end of which is a system of rule where the people are totally excluded from the decision making process and any control over it (Beethan, 1993, p 56).

In this sense, citizens share the responsibility with politicians and public servants of constructing a functional democracy (Sartori, 1997, p 122). Having such a responsibility on their shoulders, it seems obvious that citizens need to be very well informed about public issues to allow them to make the right decisions about their interests and the society in which they live. However, citizens have no guarantees that media can perform the way they are expected to. Perhaps one of the most important criticisms of modern democracy is about difficulties the system faces in trying to guarantee that citizens perform the second and third levels of political participation. In many cases, democracy is limited to the process of electing representatives. There can be several explanations to this situation.

According to Barreto, the mass media has the capability to influence politics, but even more, it does play a role in the political theater, which defines its actions in order to guarantee the interests of its political views. The mass media then, ends up being a political actor.

The concept of 'political actor' applied to the media or anyone else, implies observable action that is purposive ... and sufficiently unified so that it makes sense to speak of a single actor. A critical question therefore, concerns whether, -or to what extent - media outlets do in fact use their publications and broadcasts in a purposive and unified line up at the various points along the ideological continuum or continua (Beethan, 1996, p 20).

With that, some evidence suggest that predominant political values expressed in news stories do in fact correspond closely to the political stands taken in overt editorials sometimes (Beethan, 1996 p 21). The mass media tends to build narratives about the way human interactions develop in a given society. It tells stories about different issues. Clearly, when referring to politics, the media is a principal actor of any phenomenon. In this perspective, media are agents; they act in a certain way in order to obtain particular objectives. One of the most important aspects of human action is our ability to transmit to others the stories that result from those actions. Those narratives require someone to assume the process of transmitting information:

Narrative requires the narrator's perspective. It cannot be voiceless. Thus, it moves from mere reporting; it suggests how the speaker makes sense of the common place; it reveals the speaker's organizing experience and it reveals the distinctions people make in their everyday lives (Patterson and Monroe, 1998, p 367).

In modern society, the responsibility of transmitting information to others is assumed by the mass media. With that, the media has created an influence and direct impact on the political process, the preferences of voters, citizens, and political activists, in other words, the political system. Indeed, this has become a very important area of research (Latouche 2006, p 123).

In recent years, more students of politics have turned to the study of news, convinced that the media is an increasingly important and autonomous force in politics independent of political parties. Such students are impressed, as well, that parties, politicians, and pressure groups develop sophisticated strategies regarding the media and devote increasing resources to them (Shudson, 2002 p 234).

In a democracy the mass media are expected to present viewers and readers with an objective account of social phenomena as newsworthy. Media should present the facts as they develop without taking a particular position on the issue. In that sense, mass media should foster the political involvement of citizens on the issues that influence their lives.

Ideally, a media system suitable for democracy ought to provide readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. The overwhelming conclusion is that media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence rather than active citizenship and participation. Furthermore, all the trends seem to be in the wrong direction – towards more and more messages, from fewer and bigger producers, saying less and less (Gamson, 1992, p 263).

In the idealistic theory of the media and politics, the former is presented as a neutral transmitter of information that citizens process and use according to their own perspective. In this sense, citizens are informed so they can form their own opinions. This is possible only if the media is considered as a neutral party. However, it has been documented that in general the media assumes a key position in the political process. “Several studies demonstrated that editors who select wire services stories for their newspapers, do so in ways that do not mirror the whole array of stories before them, but select according to individual

prejudice or bureaucratic newsroom routines” (Shudson, 2002). Therefore, the media has a huge capacity to influence the political process:

The media influence political outcomes—especially election outcomes in democracies—but they also affect the fate of legislative decisions, bureaucratic in fighting, and individual political advancement or failure. Enormous effort has been lavished on clarifying the nature and extent of the media’s political impact. This is beyond my purview here, but it is still worth two quick cautionary notes. First, whatever influence media exercise, they may exercise it in ways that reflect very different conclusions about independent media power. The media may have influence by conveying information provided by government officials—in which case, the officials, not the media, initiate any effect. Alternatively, the media may have influence by legitimating or providing a kind of aura to information simply because the information appears in a place that carries prestige and public legitimacy. In this case, media are exercising a kind of power of their own, but it is independent of any particular framing, shaping, or bias they contribute. Third, the media may exercise influence by framing information in a particular way. This third form of media influence is almost always what students and critics of the media think they are examining, hoping to discover and discount a media bias of some kind—but this is only one dimension of media influence, and in many or most cases it may not be the most important (Shudson, 2002).

Several researchers have studied the influence of mass media in Venezuelan politics. Because people rely on mass media as reference in the process of political decision-making, they evaluate candidates according to their televised look; politics have become a spectacle enjoyed through the television screen or the newspapers (Martinez, 2006). In “Political crisis and mass media” (2002), several researchers from the Central University of Venezuela, presented a discussion on the role that the mass media plays in Venezuelan politics.

Barreto (2006) has argued that in Venezuela media have perverted the political process to the point that they have induced the crisis of the political system and reduced the viability of democracy in the country. During the Venezuelan coup attempt of 2002, domestic and international observers like OEA and the Carter Center criticized the opposition and the owners of the television stations (Radio Caracas Television, Venevision, and Globovision) for excessive abuse of their right to call national broadcast. This required all broadcast media to cease scheduled programming and transmit broadcasts in their entirety (Escarra, 2005).

In 2002, between April 9 and 11, the TV media only broadcasted the huge meeting that involved the opposition – those living away from the poor people in the city and the other side of the political arena. TV covered only the east side of the capital (where wealthy people live which makes up about 40% of the Venezuelan population) and did not even refer to what was going on in the west. The concentration of people in favor of Chavez, probably about 60 percent of the Venezuelan population, lived in the western part of the capital (LLamos, 2006).

Political communication can be defined as the “exchange of information between those who govern and those who are governed” (Cotteret, 1977). In general, these exchanges are facilitated by the mass media, “the instrument by means of which information can be massively communicated to society” (Latouche, 2003). The mass media has the responsibility to transmit information interpreted under pertinent criteria to avoid reactions from misinformation (Mattelart, 1977). The analysis of this paper focuses on those aspects of broadcasting susceptible to subjective interpretation. In other words, this

investigation centers on news broadcasting rather than political analysis from TV shows that could be misinterpreted for lack of objectivity.

Well-known Venezuelan author and political activist, Teodoro Petkoff says that nowadays, each form of media reflects its own reality in order to compete with each other's. In other words, mass media owners have become political actors who have always wanted to offset the balance of the president in office because they feel their interests are not shared and because they know the power of their influence; that's why the safest way to avoid subjectivity is to focus on news casting.

By using the mass media, politicians and the government let people know about their projects, ideas, and accomplishments. The mass media has the ability to legitimize messages given to society. Additionally, the mass media has become a means for denouncing the ills of politics. Generally, corruption, abuse of power, and moral issues are transmitted through the media so people can know and evaluate the performance of political actors. Normally, forms of mass media are not the fundamental "agents" in society. They are, instead, perfect channels for the transmission of political information to the people, despite affecting the preferences of their viewers or readers (Alvarez, 1995). This characterization of media as principal diffusers of political messages has induced Venezuelan politicians to advance strategies of political communication through the mass media. Politics, then, is not a marginal subject on mass media; instead, it has become one of the most important subjects for Venezuelans (Cañizales, 2004).

The media has direct influence on recent developments of Venezuelan politics by influencing the common citizens' political preferences and perceptions. The role that media play during Hugo Chavez's government is highly discussed in current Venezuelan politics. The mass media has been a biased intermediary between the State and the society.

Providing public spaces¹, influence of the media on their actual participation through editorials, opinionated programs and propaganda in public political debate. These have affected the development of the Venezuelan political process during the presidency of Hugo Chavez. According to a recent report by European Union experts who participated as observers during this year's presidential electoral process, they report "... [the] mass media does not behave as it 'normally' does in a democracy." Instead, their representatives failed to fulfil their legal obligations, but offered a biased perspective on the electoral campaign, as well as used opinionated programs, interviews, and documentaries to attack the figure of Hugo Chavez and his actions in the presidency (Venegas, 2006; Barreto, 2006).

One member, Andrea Malnati, gave a very detailed study on media's performance during the electoral campaign and the presidential election. In order to define the European Union media committee members data, they considered the diffusion of information, the sectors reached, and the importance of the political content. In this process, the experts followed news coverage, programs

¹ The idea of public sphere refers to the actual place where public debate and inter-subjective Exchange take place. In my argument I am affirming that in modern, complex and diverse societies, this 'dialogue' is only possible through the 'intermediation' of mass media. They have become the political forum, that allows for the political discourse to be presented to people.

that expressed their opinions every day from November 15 to December 4. They watched television programming from 6 p.m. to midnight in order to experience the quality of information and their general political messages. A general conclusion was that media for the masses lack neutrality, which affect their ability to project a neutral, balanced, and impartial coverage of political news, particularly regarding those actions of political candidates, political organizations and political offerings, as the reports from European Union experts have demonstrated (Venegas, 2006). TV media in Venezuela failed to inform its viewers objectively about the development of political matters. Newscasters gave a biased perspective from their own political preferences and/or interests. The study also reveals high levels of polarization among mass media. 'Venezolana de Television' (VTV) the government-sponsored television station used 86 percent of its political coverage on the incumbent, emphasizing the positive aspects of his presidency; VTV covered the opposing candidate for a mere 14 percent of the time, pointing out negative aspects of his political campaign. Privately owned television stations showed this lack of impartiality, as has been documented by electoral observers such as 'Ojo electoral', which demonstrate a very important polarization in the use of private television for political purposes. Both Radio Caracas Television and Globovision presented, in comparative bases, the inverse behavior. The former covered the oppositionist coalition for 69 percent of the time, emphasizing its positive aspects and covering the president only 29 percent of the time, accentuating negative aspects (Petkoff,2006). In the case of the latter, Manuel Rosales, the opposing candidate was covered 65 percent of

the time, while President Chavez was covered for only 35 percent.

On December 4, 2006, under an atmosphere of political tension and nervousness, Venezuelans faced a very important electoral process to decide the presidency for the next six years. While the candidates were deploying their messages to the population throughout the country, public space was filled with rumors about the possibility that the military would break the constitutional mandate by means of a military coup, and, in that sense, limit democratic guarantees. Venezuelans confronted a very complicated situation where they were exposed to mixed messages. On one hand, government-oriented groups, such as the political party, Movimiento Quinta República, accused the entire opposition of preparing a coup d' etat against Hugo Chavez. Although the opposition never retreated from the electoral process, they were considered undemocratic. On the other hand, groups from the opposition, such as 'Primero Justicia' and Acción Democrática, accused the government of influencing constitutional guarantees to bring about fair play among candidates, political parties (Latouch, 2006). They focused on issues of fair play – campaign budgets, truthfulness of the platform -- the very heart of polarization Venezuelans were confronted with during the electoral campaign. According to Professor Latouche from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, a few days before the election, Venezuelans were expecting a military coup, for which the political situation was filled with tension and social distress. People were shopping in nervous anticipation, leaving supermarket shelves empty.

Mass media played upon their anticipation when reporting the news. Both sides, the Revolutionary Political Coalition supporting Hugo Chavez and the so-called Democratic Coalition supporting Manuel Rosales, used media coverage to ensure their followers and the general population that their party's candidate was going to win the election. As part to this strategy, the mass media was the crucial instrument for spreading their candidates' messages to the public, enticing them to vote for the candidate they represented. TV stations showed the extent of their influence on the popular support they enjoyed.

Justification

Presented in this paper is an innovative perspective of the relationship between mass media and politics in Venezuela. Because the issue has been widely considered both in academia and in the media, to my knowledge as a researcher, no other author has done an extended study on this subject, especially with this perspective.

Mass communication has justified the tenuousness of Venezuelan politics. The media has dedicated an important portion of its news coverage to political issues, and more particularly, to the recent presidential election in which President Hugo Chavez won the majority of the population. To a certain extent, the mass media has assumed a critical position on Venezuelan governmental action in political situations. Asalia Venegas, former director of the Social Communication School at the Universidad Central in Caracas Venezuela has pointed out to El Universal, one of the oldest Venezuelan private newspapers, the polarization that the political coverage by the mass media has introduced in political discourse.

Minister of Communication William Lara, as well as other leaders in government, has alerted the population that private mass media have become political players that oppose the government with the objective of protecting their own interests. This explains governmental communicative actions in support of governmental policies that attempt to protect the president's image. According to Professor Juan Barreto, it is necessary to maintain a restriction of the actions of the mass media since they only respond to their own interests and not to the interests of the general population.

Methodology

The literature review clearly shows the need for objectivity in reporting on politics as opposed to the acceptance of the media's biased control. This thesis is a descriptive analysis of the private television coverage in Venezuela and its framing of political issues. This study consists of a comprehensive analysis of news broadcasts from TV stations. The Internet has been excluded purposely because most of the population have very limited or no access to Internet news and broadcasts. Due to this, any news or broadcast transmitted via the Internet probably would have no impact on the lower class and its perspective of politics.

Textual analysis is the research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or images. Researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of such words and concepts. Then they make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part. Texts,

defined broadly, are books and chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, or any occurrence of communicative language.

In this study, textual analysis is used to establish whether the mass media has an influence on the perception and election of political choices for the people in Venezuela.

The research question is this: Has private television in Venezuela distorted the news about President Chavez's popular support?

The timeframe of observation is the two weeks from November 20 through December 3, 2006, one day prior to the presidential elections. Then a comparison is made between the categories of images, text, sounds, in the newscast with measurements of Chavez's popular support; i.e., electoral results, surveys, and reports by national and international observers. The two TV stations analyzed are Radio Caracas Television and Globovision.

Limitations

Certain limitations are evident for this study. Collecting data from the specific country under study and capturing it from its citizens would provide a better understanding of their political views. Unfortunately, with security issues, it is impossible to conduct onsite interviews and obtain information directly from the people. However, this study has analyzed data through TV footage,

newspapers, and online resources, thus providing valid results and a vivid understanding of the influence media has on the masses.

Chapter II

Historical Background

Society

The origins of the National State

Democracy is a relatively new concept in Venezuela (Latouche, 2003). According to Diego Bautista Urbaneja, former director of the Institute of Political Studies at the Central University in Venezuela, as a model of political organization, democracy began in 1958 when popular demonstrations, backed by important sectors of the military, overthrew the long dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez who had been in power since 1948. At that time, Venezuela had not acquired a tradition of democratic values. Since the war of independence from Spain in 1824, military raids, revolutions, coup d' etat, and civil war characterized Venezuelan politics. Militiamen and leaders were the principal protagonists on the political scene, while it was impossible to recognize a real development of civil society or civil involvement in the political process. During the 19th century, Venezuela confronted the process of building the state of a nation. It was a very primitive country, which lacked socio-economic coherence,

making it very difficult to recognize it as a well-organized National State. Indeed, in the 1800s civil war and revolutionary struggle imposed serious difficulties for Venezuela to become a cohesive nation.

The fundamental problem of building a centralized government after the war of independence was maintaining order for defending territorial integrity. Despite the efforts of the government during the 1800s, a national state was only possible at the beginning of the 20th century under the long dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gomez. He put an end to the civil war that characterized the country by imposing a state apparatus to finally end civil struggle and keep regional resistance to a minimum. He developed the very organized Armed Forces that placed important restrictions over the political and civil rights of the population. Some authors like Derhan argue that it was a necessary step to guarantee the existence of the country and its integrity, despite its military control on the population.

In fact, Gomez can be considered to have been responsible for positive changes in Venezuela: apart from bringing stability to the country, his regime also saw an increase in the power of the central state and the defence of national interests (Derhan, 2002).

It is important to note that the fundamental problem for Gomez was putting an end to civil wars and military distress, granted, at a very high price. His government hunted down and incarcerated his political opposition, then submitted them to torture and assassinations. If they were lucky, they were sent into in exile where they could not harm the interests of Gomez, his family, and his companions. In this enterprise, intellectuals and university professionals who

preferred his excessive generosity supported Gomez's government more than the shadows of anarchy, territorial disintegration, and war. During this period, society was practically suppressed from the political game. Venezuela was a poor country, which had just begun reaping the benefits from the exploitation of its oil supply (Caballero,1999)

With a high rate of illiteracy, the population was exposed to diseases associated with poverty, such as malaria and tuberculosis, which made them unable to organize in order to develop political actions. Despite this, with Gomez, Venezuela entered into the 20th century. He centralized political power, as he became its undisputable owner. He led the construction of roads and railroads around the country, which allowed him to control most of the country. As a result, he led the early industrialization of the country toward the exploitation of oil resources (Caballero, 1999).

It is important to note that during the 19th century and despite civil war, Venezuela enjoyed a system of free press enterprise that wrote about the government's actions. The government constantly attacked the press and even closed down some newspapers. However, during the first few years of the Republic, no government dared to attempt to openly attack the principles of free press and free speech (Latouche, 2003). During the first decades of the 20th century, Gomez did not allow the media to write against his authority. The very few newspapers found in principal cities were owned by government supporters, and became the instrument for maintaining Gomez's regime. What can be said about Venezuelan history from 1909 to 1937 is that it was characterized by the

undisputed power of a centralized government that suppressed any form of freedom. (Gallegos, 1935)

From dictatorship to democracy

Isbelia Segnini argues, the development of democracy in Venezuela was the product of a very important confrontation between the traditional forces of military dictatorship and those of popular party organization (Segnini, 1994). After Juan Vicente Gomez died, members of the inner circle of the military hierarchy maintained social order in a more liberal political framework. The former Minister of Defence General Eleazar Lopez Contreras, considered Gomez's advisor, assumed the presidency. Despite his military origins, introduced important transformations in the Venezuelan political system. He freed political prisoners and allowed the functioning of political parties organized by the civil opposition. Additionally, he started a very large process of demilitarization of the public bureaucracy. (Villalba, 1975)

General Lopez Contreras demobilized the military as he developed a civil police force to control social order. At the same time, he managed to reduce the pressure from both the right wing who wanted to restore Gomez's militarism and the liberal and democratic new political movement, the sector that protested in favor of introducing modern institutions such as the universal election of public servants. Research shows that the political system at the time was so feeble that

it was necessary to disassemble the military apparatus without affecting the interests of important economic sectors while including the interests of the people in defining public policies (Gallegos,1935). Furthermore, General Lopez Contreras was the first Venezuelan president who reduced his legal mandate from six to five years and gave up the presidency to his successor General Isaias Medina Angarita, whose mandate resulted in an election by the congress.

The most radical representatives of democracy considered General Medina's election to be problematic, particularly for the Democratic Action Party (AD), whose leaders confronted the military class. Democracy would only be possible if the government recognized voting and only elected civil servants were to take charge of the government. However, Medina built his government under the ideas of positivism; if democracy were to be possible in Venezuela it would be the result of a parsimonious evolution (Sosa, 1990).

Medina and the members of his Cabinet believed that public decision-making was restricted to the actions of the most educated people of the country, whether or not they represented the interests of popular sector of society. Indeed, politics was perceived to be above the reach of the people. According to this belief, the people were not ready to assume responsibility for themselves. They needed protection provided by a "governmental aristocracy" (Sosa, 1990) It cannot be denied that Medina advanced policies that helped to deepen the reach of democracy. There were no political prisoners and legalized opposing political parties were allowed to function, with the exception of the Communist Party. His

government allowed, without restrictions, the presence of a free press and the free discussion of ideas. However, Medina did not allow free elections.

For the period of the transition to democratic rule, 1936 to 1945, considerably more literature exists on the Medina Angarita administration than on Lopez Contreras. This is possibly due to the continuing reformism of Medina Angarita's government, including the legalising of the influential Communist Party, and Acción Democrática's attempts to justify its armed insurrection. On the other hand, under Lopez Contreras reform was planned but not carried through completely. What is often forgotten is that the return from exile of the democratic politicians brought the outbreak of rabble rousing and protests. (Derhan, 2002: 277)

These actions produced very important consequences for the evolution of Venezuelan democracy. During President Medina's government, he confronted important, popular public demonstrations conducted under the leadership of Rómulo Betancourt who, together with his Democratic Action Party, could be considered the founding father of democracy. Medina governed with relatively few difficulties during his five years; however, problems appeared at the end of his presidential term. To succeed him Medina decided to present a candidate who lacked the support and the confidence of the raising democratic sectors of society. This resulted in a coup d' etat held by the middle rang sectors of the Armed Forces as well as Romulo Betancourt and his AD political party. (Urbaneja, 1999)

Once in the presidency, Romulo Betancourt called for a popularly elected Constituent Assembly, responsible for writing a new constitutional and redefining the legal structure of the country with basic rights. In 1947, Romulo Gallegos, the

candidate for the Democratic Action Party, was elected. He won with a large majority of votes, which allowed his party to control most of the public offices and the congressional seats. Such an overwhelming majority led the AD to control the totality of the public administration, not allowing participation from other political groups or other representatives of society (Urbaneja, 1999).

Betancourt's regime conceived the new government of AD party as if they were the only interpreters of popular will. In fact, the government became isolated from important sectors of society, as it confronted political pressure from sectors and organizations that were dissatisfied with its actions. Universities, the Catholic Church, and the mass media confronted and questioned the actions of the government, which produced a very fast and notable reduction of its initial legitimacy. Gallegos was overthrown in 1948, one year after he took power. A military action was advanced to put an end to the social unrest that characterized this first democratic attempt (Urbaneja, 1980), because of his inability on Betancourt government to build agreements with other political forces (Latouche, 2003).

Once again, a dictatorship

The political regime developed after the coup d' etat of November 24, 1948 lasted until January 23, 1958 and was based on military power and authority that reflected the authoritative model that had been implemented in the past by Juan Vicente Gomez – a system with very tight social control that

excluded any form of political manifestation and protests. Even so, at the beginning of this period, the Military Council assumed a very discreet role of social and political regulators (Sosa, 1990). After two years of institutional uncertainty, General Marcos Perez Jimenez assumed the presidency and called for rewriting the Constitution with the intent of guaranteeing legitimacy for his authoritative order. Perez Jimenez declared his new National Ideal, a program based on constructing social order based on military principles, exploiting natural resources, building a new infrastructure, and reducing political participation and organization. As a result the government became obsessed with maintaining social order, reduced protests, and led to the disappearance of political adversaries. These actions led to the incremental power of the state, the reduction of dissidence, and the absence of political pluralism (Njaim, 1998).

This dictatorship was characterized by its authoritative structure, based on the power of one man's control over the Armed Forces. During this period, under Perez Jimenez's authority, secret police, known as National Security, hunted down, incarcerated, and tortured political adversaries. This allowed for restricting political and civil rights and imposing a regime based on terror. Despite repression, a few years later the regime lost its legitimacy. In fact, in 1957, an organized underground opposition was created based on the discontent of students, corporations, economic groups, and even the church. This pressure led the government to call for a plebiscite in which the people would decide the continuity of this administration. In November 1957, the majority of the population voted against Perez Jimenez; however, the results were ignored by the regime

with the intention to remain in power, despite popular discontent. As a result, important manifestations and protests all over the country resulted in the overthrow of the government by very important sectors of the military (Njaim, 1998). As the dictator fled to the Dominican Republic, the military called for Military Council, presided by Admiral Wolfgang Larazabal, to rule the country until new elections were called.

Democracy is back

With the end of Perez Jimenez's dictatorship, began a redefinition of the political structure of the country. Clearly, it was necessary to create certain conditions for the construction of a functional democracy. Political parties had popular acceptance, and they were capable of mobilizing and organizing the population. The Military Council had only a few albeit very important tasks to assume. On the one hand, it had to resolve the lack of unity inside the Armed Forces; on the other hand, it had to guarantee the reduction of social unrest and to channel popular restlessness without restricting popular manifestation. But, perhaps the most important duty it had to assume was creating conditions that favored the realization of the popular, universal, and direct elections of 1958 in which Rómulo Betancourt, the candidate of the Democratic Action Party, was elected as president (Njaim, 1998).

Democracy was born in Venezuela under adverse conditions and with no democratic traditions or democratic institutions. This was a model of political organization based on the idea that conflict of interest among the political groups

is reduced in order to guarantee the continuity of the system and reduce any possible threats against it. This resolution is found in the pact of Punto Fijo, determining the principle of the elite's responsibility for preserving democracy (Rey, 1989). The premise is for each political group to reduce its particular aspirations in order to sustain the common objective of building a democratic government.

Venezuelan democracy relies on the structure of having political parties; thus, the political process ends up in the hands of principal leaders of the political parties. The people then become passive agents whose actions on the political process are relegated to just electing representatives. In fact, from the beginning, democracy in Venezuela was subject to important contradictions. It was necessary to reduce political conflict and social unrest, and to increase the mechanisms and institutions that bring legitimacy to the system. Likewise, a clear mandate was needed to advance public policies that would vindicate the interests of the poorer sectors of society. From the beginning of his government, Rómulo Betancourt tried to develop important plans oriented to satisfy the needs of Agrarian reform, to make improvements on sanitation health, and literacy, and to develop a favorable infrastructure as well as to develop industrial complexes (Latouche, 2003).

Venezuela's political problem in 1958 was the construction of a democracy without pre-existing conditions for it. It was necessary to reduce the political bureaucracy even if it meant reducing popular participation. The Punto Fijo model was insufficient for managing popular participation. Political parties

ended up monopolizing all public offices. Political parties' centralized popular participation, presented candidates and elaborated public policies without public input. It is true that those policies were created in order to improve the lives of the citizens, but it is also true that those parties' interests contextualized citizenship (Levine,2002). With this in mind, Venezuela in 1958 can be characterized as a minimal democracy in which citizens exercised political rights by voting in universal elections or by participating in the organization of the political parties. To be a militant guaranteed access to the benefits of populism.

The political system established in Venezuela in January 1958 ushered in the nation's longest uninterrupted period of democratic politics and unhindered civilian rule in the twentieth century. The operating rules and understandings of politics of this regime were crystallised in the Constitution of 1961, which until its demise was also the longest lasting of any of the country's modern constitutions. The system is often referred to as Puntofijista, after the foundational 'Pact of Punto Fijo' signed in early 1958 between the representatives of major political parties, excluding the Left (Levine, 2002).

The people were a pretext for political action; elections legitimated the real exercise of political power, which favored the interests of the political and economic elite. After a few years, it was possible to establish a very functional political system in which stability was associated with the presence of passive individuals who were not interested in claiming favor for their political rights and who decided to leave political action in the hands of experts (Hillman,1994)

Venezuelan democracy was based on the presence of two important political parties, AD and COPEI, and several small political organizations with very little influence in the political process. Even though the system was

recognized as a democracy in which human rights were respected and people enjoyed civil liberties, from a political point of view, the government was unable to incorporate benefits for a huge majority of the population. Democracy was limited to members of a privileged minority associated with the political parties (Urbaneja, 1995). This situation led to the collapse of the system with the impeachment of President Perez, accused and prosecuted under the charge of corruption in the use of public funds in 1993.

This 'consociational experiment' called for the production of agreements is based on a concurrent majority that would ensure the vital interest of the main political forces. This experiment meant the AD, labor; COPEI, socio-economic elites and the military each had veto power over governmental policies. Although this arrangement constrained policymaking, it also helped to legitimate the system. In contrast to the conflict and mutual distrust between groups who conceived their interest as antagonistic in the Trienio, these pacts were based on consensual agreements between the relevant political and social actors attempting to satisfy their diverse interest.

However, an important question ...can be raised about the extent to which group representation, centralized within the consociational system, allows for any real opposition to elite interests. In fact, the underlying social forces that induced these groups to cooperate with each other may have as much to do with the preservation of self-interests, elite privileges, and power as with the creation of a truly democratic state. Hence, it has been through centralized political parties conforming strictly to the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' that elite interests have dominated operational agreements. Concomitantly, *cogollos*...have used the party structure to distribute patronage to supporters (Hillman, 1994).

Political discontent appeared in Venezuela as early as 1989 with important raids of the population against the government and two attempts of coup d'etat in

1992. The people were asking for a transformation of the system in order to incorporate popular participation and social vindication for the poorer sectors of the population. The Punto Fijo Model entered a very long terminal crisis that led to the destruction of its legitimacy and the reduction of influence of its political parties. After a short transition led by Historian Ramón J. Velazquez in the presidency, in 1994, that year's election gave the presidency to Rafael Caldera, a leader of the original project who already had been president from 1969 until 1974. Caldera had to confront financial crisis, military unrest, and the lack of coherence inside the political system. He was unable to introduce the directives that representative democracy requires to keep functioning. While he intended to do "business as usual," the country required political transformation that he was unable or unwilling to implement. (Latouch, 2003)

In 1999, the people elected Rafael Hugo Chavez as president based on his proposal to make a democratic revolution that would include the poor and would open the political system for participation from the diverse sectors of society.

Chavez surged out of nowhere in the polls, and alternatives coalesced around a pair of personalist coalitions. Institutions were so discredited, the sense of fear so high, and leadership in such disarray that mass publics were as much adrift as elites, and the drift went in Chavez's direction. (Levine, 2002)

Chavez called for a change in the Constitution, and while rejecting the absolute control of the political party over all forms of popular representation, proclaimed that he was going to open spaces in which the public could participate in the political process. The reform introduced the presidential re-election and started a

policy of transformation to the traditional democratic institution. However, in real terms these changes escalated the authoritarian nature of Chavez governmental model (Urbaneja, 1999).

In fact, we do not find in Venezuela, a functional separation of powers, nor can we talk about political parties with the strength to influence the decision-making processes.

What *has* changed? Most importantly, President Chávez has sharpened class conflict and downplayed opportunities for cooperation. The government's line that truth and justice are on the side of the Bolivarian Revolution, and that all who oppose it are enemies, recalls the unilateralism and rhetoric of the Trienio (1945-48). Dogmatism has replaced pragmatism and consensus building and compromise that prevailed during the 1960's, when representative democracy gained wide acceptance. Attempts to tear down and discredit the representative democratic institutions of the Punto Fijo regime have impeded the creation of legitimate replacements. The tactic used by the new ruling elite to replace existing institutions unilaterally with ones intended to establish a direct relationship between leader and citizens, state and society has fueled confrontation. Confrontation has intensified as these newly imposed institutions have been used to effect social change (Myers and McCoy 2003).

Indeed, this regime is very polemic in the sense that it cannot be characterized by the canons of traditional democracy. Chavez's government has introduced important limitations on civil liberties, and more particularly, limitations to free press and free speech. Therefore, Chapter 4 addresses a very important political confrontation about the use of mass media as "space for political discussion."

Mass media in Venezuela

The relationship between the mass media and politics is a relatively new subject that Venezuelan academics have begun to address. Yet, the influence of the media on of the political debate and governmental actions is widely recognized by experts. According to Adolfo Herrera, director of the School of Social Communication at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, the mass media, more particularly private television networks, have determined the scope of social and political debate. The media not only determines the validity of political discourse, but also establishes the standards of acceptable political action, discourse, and the scope of critical commentary of governmental action. Congresswoman Desiree Santos Amaral, former defender of free press and freedom of speech in Venezuela, has introduced an important discussion regarding the mass media, most particularly, television networks on Venezuela's politics. According to her, a very important symmetry can be identified between the situation of state-owned and private-owned television stations. She argues, the former has been unable to compete with resourceful, modern, and well-equipped private networks, so that the public space represented by the mass media has been subject to the oligopoly represented by the four privately owned networks. (Santos Amaral, 2001)

According to Santos Amaral, this inequality of visibility highlights important class differences in Venezuelan society and its inequality of exposure. Privately owned networks are the property of very important and influential corporate groups that tend to control a large sector of the communication market, which

allow them to transmit messages for their own interests, and to a certain extent, manipulate the preferences of society for their own benefit. Santos Amaral has written a critique of the inability of the government to regulate private networks and of the need for the government to diversify as a provider of information, news, and messages to the public.

Television networks cannot be considered the principal socio-political actors, however, they play a fundamental role in processing and transmitting political information to the population. Television networks have become a fundamental mechanism for diffusing political ideas since they have the ability to influence the scope of the political belief of the population (Alvarez, 1995). The mass media is an ideal instrument for political mediation between society and government. In this sense, media have become socio-political actors with interests to satisfy their constituents. It is impossible to identify TV networks as agents of the national State (Venegas, 1997). However, one can identify a close correlation between the interests of the government and those of the owners of private television. In Venezuela, network owners and members of their board of directors, have not, in general, run for office, nor sought political positions; however, they have influenced the construction voter political preferences as much as they influenced the course of public policies by granting or denying legitimacy to governmental action (Canizales, 2004).

Between 1958 and the beginnings of the 1990s, media and government maintained a relatively cooperative relationship that was mutually beneficial for both of them. The government provided private network owners with permission

needed to “run” their businesses, while the networks tacitly supported governmental actions and policies. Additionally, they contributed to the socialization of the population according to governmental interests (Bautista, 2004). It was not until the second government under President Carlos Andres Perez (1989-1993) that the mass media advanced a strong attack against the government, leading actions that turned public opinion against him, destroying his public image and affecting his popularity, especially among the poor sector of the population.

At that time, the political process that led to President Perez’s impeachment produced a substantial transformation in the role that private television stations played in Venezuela: they were considered the fundamental arbiters of the political process since they mobilized the population’s preferences (Observatoria global de medios, 2002). In a public statement, Raul Dominguez, former legal advisor to the Venezuelan attorney general noted that the mass media helped to develop the popular unrest that led to the accusations against Carlos Andres Perez. At the same time, it created the cultural and ideological atmosphere to preserve the essence of representative democracy during that difficult time. According to Dominguez, this support for the concept of democracy was accompanied by a very strong critique on the real functionality of the democratic system. Upon reviewing data from those years, Venezuelans believed that democracy was the best possible political system, but that democracy in Venezuela was not working correctly since it was responsible for

excluding a very important and large sector of the population from the benefits that it had promised the entire population (Urbaneja, 1999).

The general perception of the population was that the system had to transform itself in order to gain more efficiency in attending to the needs of all Venezuelans. Despite several attempts to institutionalize changes in the political system, the deterioration of the political system and its inability to define agreements to substitute old political leadership opened the door for a more radical project to transform the political system (Latouche, 2006). The discussion about transitioning towards a more modern form of representative democracy was confronted by a proposition to completely restructure the political system. Hugo Chavez, a former militiaman, decided to run for president offering a constitutional change as well as replacing the old political class that he accused of corruption and of having defrauded the hopes of the Venezuelan people. It must be noted that the powerful, private television networks, particularly Radio Caracas Television and Venevision, supported Chavez's political campaign, which became part of his political platform by allowing the people to learn about the propositions, promises, and ideals that Hugo Chavez was planning to advance once he became president.

Private television networks controlled the communication spectrum, which reduced access to the common citizen in the "public communicative sphere," and gave network owners the opportunity to represent their interests (Nuño, 1992). Pasquali, points out that there is no "space" for people to express openly their political views (Pasquali, 1992). Television in Venezuela is nothing but a

business (Pasquali, 1967) with a huge ability to influence people's political behavior. Television not only informs, but also allows access to messages and images that influence social conscience (Martinez, 2006).

The mass media allows politicians to transmit their messages to society. It can reach the general population through TV screens. Media, then, has become a political actor directly influencing the political stands taken by society (Alvarez, 1995). The mass media represents public spaces that allow society to be in touch with information and knowledge. It represents a relatively new form of interaction between society and politics that builds social reality (Cañizales, 2004). Television networks are not only a resource for transmitting information but also the place where public policies are developed, which to a certain extent, may question the role of the State in the use and regulation of public space (Cañizales, 2004). Obviously, the networks have the right to inform and to transmit their opinions about politics and public affairs; however, their influence over society is so powerful that they compete with the government on the process of determining the characteristic of public processes and political situations in Venezuela (Petkoff, 1992).

According to Roberto Montoya, political analyst, private television networks assumed political participation in the general strike that the political opposition advanced against the president in 2001. Systematically, they alarmed the population with messages that caused distress and unrest. But, it was not until April of 2002 that the transformation of privately owned TV as political actors

was complete when they called their militants to fight for a new government (Lucien, 2002).

That year the country lived in moments of social, political, and communication instability. The crisis, originated by contradictions between political actors, and more particularly, by the differences between the president, political opposition, and owners of private television (Tremamunno, 2002). The oppositionist built a virtual world in which they communicated to their tele-militants by using TV screens, sending messages and directing the actions of society against the government (Hernandez, 2006). Private television was involved in the attempted coup d'état on President Chavez in 2002. Once Chavez came back to power, private stations decided on a policy of "informative silence," not letting the people know about the facts developing in Venezuela. Ever since this clear confrontation between government and private television, the networks manifested open support to the opposition and the permanent critics who opposed this governmental action.

Chapter III

Social Construction and Objectivity

Social construction

Reality can be constructed socially by creating a collective imagery that, supposedly, must be shared by the majority of the population of a given society (Hall, 1993). The belief system of a society relies on the commitment of its members to its institutions. Characteristics of social interactions result from the process of establishing common ground that allows individuals to identify themselves as members of a particular society, therefore, contributing to its functionality with a collective project and becoming the driving forces of political action and political organization. "Our argument is that ideas influence policy when the principle or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors' clarity about goals or the means to an end, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium, and when they become embedded in political institutions" (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 3). People have their own particular interests and define strategies to help them materialize those interests in the best possible way (Perez Schael, 1998). It is impossible to fulfill the interests of the whole society because of diverse

perspectives and characterizations about the social environment in which we live and interact with others.

A modern, complex society cannot accommodate all of its constituents to be directly involved with every social, economic, and/or political issue that affects the development of the collective. After all, we live in a diverse society that makes it difficult to maintain a direct political and social interaction with each other. We tend to use the mass media as a mediator that informs the public about very diverse, complex issues and to guide them in forming intelligent opinions for taking action (Latouche, 2003).

According to Adolfo Herrera, the importance of the mass media in modern society cannot be underestimated. The media helps society to create a national identity or rally to unify its members on several constitutive common projects (Borges, 1995). In order to accomplish this responsibility, the mass media requires impartiality for transmitting news and guaranteeing a fair and impartial perspective that describes the circumstances and the consequences of actions by supporting all options (Cañizales, 2002). Indeed, the mass media has a powerful influence on the social construction of reality. It can present issues assuming a particular stand and increasing the possibility for the public to know all sides of the story. The mass media can distort perception. It can also influence the likes and dislikes of the people by affecting the decision-making process of society as a whole (Cañizales, 2006).

The mass media is a very important and powerful political player that tends to influence the course of politics by manipulating public opinion toward supporting or confronting the government (Barreto, 2006). The mass media can use the force of imagery to frame information for people, which affects the way people shape their values and perception about the way things are in the social context (Jayyusi, 2006).

James Carey describes the importance of TV in society as the link between democracy, society, and media. In *Communication as a Culture*, he devotes the first part of his article to how democracy and communication channels merge. Indeed, democracy is impossible in the absence of free press. He argues that a democracy has to be large enough to be self-sufficient but small enough that citizens can know one another's character. This is possible, thanks to the mass media. The role of the media in democracy is essential because in modern societies politics and democracy are not conceived without the media (Cootle, 2006). Even though democracy can be synonymous with freedom of speech (Raz, 2001), media must also keep in mind that there are limits to this freedom, and they should not take advantage of their autonomy (Griffin, 1993). Perhaps, that is why Carey says that democracies have to be large enough to be autonomous but small enough to share the roles that constitute self-government.

According to Professor Asalia Venegas, in democratic governments the mass media reflect a pure personification of politics (Venegas, 1990). The media tends to present political news based on the attention given by the personalities of

commentators rather than not on the truth of the actual circumstances. In this sense, they reflect particular interests and not the interests of society as a whole. Professor Latouche has stated that institutions and procedures of politics and government incorporate television as a mechanism for political manipulation of public preferences: the mass media has become the place for discussion on politics. Interaction between government and public opinion is the result of powerful forces that shape democracy based on the media. Television is the principal source of information and public entertainment and an important channel of communication for political leaders (Hernandez, 2003). Since television has become the domineering communication vehicle across the world, its relationship with the government and political parties is extremely important. In many countries, links have weakened between television, other media, the government, and political parties because of increasing media privatization (Hall, 1993).

The increased strength and independence of institutions of mass media have stimulated a similar trend in the informative procedures. Traditional ideological and political commitments are being replaced by a different concept of moral values and social aims that should guide the information given to the public. (Herrera, 1973)

The role of the mass media in the social construction of reality

Ideas are the constitutive elements of politic interactions. People proceed with their actions and interactions in social context based on particular views about

themselves, those with whom they interact and how society functions. People's belief systems and ideas are fundamental elements of social interaction. Ideas are the road maps that determine the way people act in trying to attain their interests in the social context in which their lives have developed and their interactions with others take place.

... when we view politics as an arena in which actors face continual uncertainties about their interests and how to maximize them, the need for ideas to act as road maps become apparent. Ideas serve the purpose of guiding behavior under conditions of uncertainty by stipulating causal patterns or by providing compelling ethical or moral motivation for actions (Keohane and Goldstein, 1993: 16).

The ideas that prevail in a given society are the result of a process of evolution. Members of society learn from their interactions the scope of acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Dagger, 1997). Additionally, because of their interactions, they develop a common belief system that characterizes them as members of a given society. The concept that human rights must be protected as much as the rejection of slavery, for instance, is not limited to the content of a legal statements or to constitutional recognition. On the contrary, their importance transcends the formal legal structure because they are powerful ideas incorporated in the citizens' belief system of modern democracies – to the point that they reject the concept of a human owned by another human being as much as they reject indiscriminate actions against human rights (Sikkink, 1993; Jackson, 1993).

Ideas are not neutral, nor do they appear and develop by chance. As constitutive forces of society, they develop to shape the structure and the content of social interactions. They determine the customs, beliefs systems and

scope of social exchange that characterize a given society (Latouche, 2004). Public speech and public access to information shape the belief system of society. People learn accepted codes of social interaction through social exchange (Antonelli, 2005). In that sense, ideas that guide a belief system are constructed through a process of socialization with moral considerations and patterns of behavior (Elster, 1998). People are the way they are just because they are taught to be so. Therefore, social reality is constructed by a series of mechanisms used by the society in order to develop certain types of 'social codes' by means of which individuals act following determined patterns of socially accepted behavior.

In modern, complex societies, the process of socialization, understood as the creation of civic values, is produced through interactions in school, family, and community influences. People interact with others and learn the scope of the boundaries they have for their interests (Dagger, 1997). Furthermore, they acquire values and attitudes that are reproduced in social scenarios, and that in fact, determine the stability of the social contract. The process of socialization in Venezuelan Society is not limited to the restricted domain of schools or community-based interactions. Indeed, most values, attitudes and preferences are constructed through the impact that messages transmitted by mass media have on individuals as members of a social construct. Family-based or community-based messages cannot compete successfully with television's reach for transmitting messages (Albarran, 2002). Consequently, those who own mass media or have direct access to them would have more opportunity to transmit

information in their own interests or those, at least, would benefit their particular interests regardless of their difference from society as a whole.

Television does not transmit neutral messages; indeed TV programs are loaded with a charge of values and messages that easily reach large populations and affect their ability to process information and construct a personal perspective about social, political and economic problems (Barreto, 2006). There is not a requisite for objectivity in the processing of information. Even though mass communication is required to maintain impartiality in news broadcasting, there are no guarantees that they will. Instead, a fair speculation is that the mass media is likely to act unethically by guaranteeing their own interests at whatever social costs and in the absence of strong governmental regulations. The mass media is likely to foster messages that will impact individual preferences, leading people to consume certain goods and services and to develop certain predetermined tastes. In a complex and extended society, in which there are large distances and a large population, the mass media becomes a factor for the construction of a common definition about the characteristics of society. In the end, society is united when individuals identify with its culture, values, and the institutions, which define society and characterize it as a political body (Searle, 2005).

The mass media has a very important impact on the social construction of reality. They not only influence individuals' preferences, but also constitute a factor for the development and incorporation of certain values on the population, as well as for the acceptance or rejection of certain ideas about the

characteristics and the constitutive elements of the political arrangement. For example, democracy has become, in the last few years, the most desirable type of government worldwide. Almost every political system in the world wants to present itself to the international community as a democracy. The legitimacy of democracy is produced mostly by the rejection of any other model of political organization (Held 1993). This is the result of social construction around democratic values and its reinforcement through the mass media which equates that democracy with respect of human and civil rights. This belief is reinforced by free elections, while any government that does not respond to those basic requirements is not accepted (Latouche, 2003).

If we accept the idea that reality is constructed by means of communicative codes that allow us to interpret the world around us, it becomes apparent that such a construction is possible by means of exchanging messages and interpretations with others and building a common perspective on the contents of that reality (Searle, 2005). In modern societies, the mass media play a fundamental role in the process of unifying and transmitting those messages.

Objectivity

Indeed, the mass media is a factor for legitimatizing public discourse; it has the ability to determine who is considered a valid interlocutor for giving objective views for or against the issues at hand and who represents the preferences and values of the population. The influence of the media is so strong that theoretically, the argument is that transmitting must adopt a neutral, independent, and

objective posture toward the political process. McQuail defines objectivity as “a particular form of media practice and a particular attitude toward the task of information collection, processing, and dissemination. The process of observing and reporting should not be determined by subjectivity, nor should it interfere with reality being reported on” (Mc Quail, 2000 p. 172). Objectivity has to deal with impartiality by having a balance of both sides of the issue and neutrality in personal opinion from the delivering body. Additionally, objectivity is the ability and obligation to inform by giving the truth in relevant statements. Sending the message cannot have limitations, and information must be true in order to be impartial.

The issue of what counts as impartiality in news seems relatively simple but it can also be complex in practice, because there is little chance of achieving a value-free assessment of value freedom. Impartiality is appreciated mainly because many events involve conflicts and are open to alternative interpretations and evaluations (McQuail, 2000 p. 321).

Generally, the standard of impartiality calls for balance in selection and use of credible sources so as to reflect different points of view, and to be as neutral as possible in presenting news, separating facts from opinions, and avoiding value judgments or bias. The freedom to report is obtained only in return for a guarantee of objectivity. “The link with equality is also strong: objectivity requires a fair and non-discriminatory attitude to sources and to objects of news reporting, all of which should be treated on equal terms” (McQuail, 2000 p. 172).

According to Gaye Tuchman, objectivity is a virtue that protects the journalist "against judgments for libel" because it treats all people and their opinions equally. It affirms, "objectivity demands only that reporters make themselves persons in charge for how things are being reported, not of what they are reporting " (Tuchman, 2004).

Robert Hackett argues that "Objectivity is a complex notion; it goes beyond the simple idea of which news should originate from reliable sources." From this derives the affirmation that objectivity is the value of seeing the world as it is, not as we would want to see it. Hackett affirms that when information departs from an exact and certain knowledge and a conscious reflection, impartiality exists or objectivity is absolute.

In 1883, Joseph Pulitzer said that the New York World Newspaper would devote itself "...to the reason of the village instead of that of financial monarchies, to unmask any fraud and hypocrisy, when all the evil and public abuses attack." This is the same as today's journalism, which denounces corruption, which pushes back violence, and defends the force of human rights.

Seemingly, in journalistic practice, too many resources have been accumulated in the finished product to remove suspicion in the reader about journalists and reporters, the ones who are supposed to impose their objective version and validate the certainty of the truth. When eliminating doubt, it is possible to regain the viewer's confidence by delivering objective information.

Nevertheless, Tuchman interprets, "As reporters for their broadcasting agencies, reporters are protected against the calumny and libel, and rhetorical illusion of loyalty...in the veracity of representation." In effect, these resources to the service of objectivity, in fact, are not thinking objectively, but give an illusion of objectivity. It is possible for them to feign impartiality about handling sources by manipulating numbers and percentages and turning these tactics into simple alibis. (Tuchman,2004)

The issue of objectivity is crucial in the study of the influence of the mass media in politics. To observe an objective perspective in social phenomena, journalists need to separate their own preferences from the facts in order to present their viewers and readers with a non-biased view of the problem or situation they are covering. In order to gain objectivity, the mass media would have to be neutral in the management of information, not only in the process of selecting what should be reported and what should not, but, even more important, how it should be reported, that is, from which point of view. In the process of informing others, TV stations cannot guarantee absolute objectivity. The compromise, however, must be impartial in the recollection, processing and presentation of the information, while allowing the receivers to form their own views about the problem they are informed about.

The mass media play a fundamental role In the process of socially constructing reality since they have the responsibility to keep others informed about the scope of current affairs. In this process, the mass media must be

Careful to avoid advocating their particular interests and perspective. Social construction does not mean a biased construction, instead a collaborative development on the constitutive elements (norms, customs, belief systems, ideas, and so on) that conforms society.

Mass media and politics

Freedom of speech is one of the constitutive elements that the democratic system guarantees to individuals. People should be able to speak their minds without fearing retaliation from the State Apparatus. The ability to speak freely must be used by individuals when they speak publicly with others rather than just in private. Democracy requires individuals to have access to the means that allow them to send messages to others and to discuss them. If “public spaces” refers to those places where individuals can exchange ideas and build a common perspective about a particular situation, then in modern democracies, those spaces are represented by mass communication (Kinderm 1998).

Democracy requires the plurality of mass media: there must be different spaces that widely represent the different sectors of society (Kinderm 1998). Likewise, people must have access to the media in order to participate in public discussion. Individuals must become agents instead of simple receivers of the messages elaborated and transmitted by the media. In the case of Venezuela, 80 percent of the mass media belong to private enterprises while only 20 percent are in the hands of the State (Hernandez, 1999). In the case of nationwide television, the State owns only one channel, while private corporations own four. This is a very important lack of informative equilibrium in public discussion. Even

more so, this has allowed private television enterprise to control the characteristics and quality of information consumed by viewers, regardless of whether it accurately reflects the reality.

Our societies consume large amount of false information, without knowing that they are doing so. The key seems to be the system of informing 'instantly' without allowing for the possibility to verify the correspondence between the facts that are being covered and the coverage itself (Aharonian, 2006).

The mass media have the capability to construct social reality, then clearly in Venezuela a domination exists in the management of public spaces where public opinion and political preferences end up being manipulated by private media. This directly affects the performance of a democratic system by manipulating citizens or simply by acting according to the forces of the market despite what effect programming may have in constructing a democratic society. The media tries to impose a biased perspective on the political situation in Venezuela, which does not allow viewers to create an objective perception about the real political situation of the country.

With the victory of Hugo Chavez in 1999, private television by assume a belligerent attitude towards Venezuelan politics. They stop being independent as they assumed compromises with particular political sectors that were contrary to the President. Private television became political agitators and, in many cases, they supplanted information by political propaganda (Dragnic, 2005).

So that in Venezuela, private television stations do not behave as a public service, instead, they are private corporations guided by private interests.

In practice, the redefinition of the public service model requires the development of a plurality of *non- state* media of communication which both function as permanent thorns in

the side of political power (helping thereby to minimize political censorship) and serve as the primary means of communication for citizens situated within a pluralistic civil society. (Keane, 1993).

Private communication networks use their ability to manipulate public opinion and their oligopoly over public space in order to manipulate public opinion against the legitimate government of Hugo Chavez. In Venezuela, privately owned television has perverted its role as intermediary between the society and the news.

In Venezuela, the media has abandoned its 'social function' which has been supplanted by a bias presentation of political facts and information. This has, consequently, cause a total disinformation and evident manipulation of receptors (viewers). In Venezuela, the techniques of informative manipulation are applied permanently by private networks (Aharonian, 2006).

Indeed, private networks have become political actors communicating in order to mobilize the population against the government. Private television is being used to foster a permanent political campaign with the objective of weakening popular support of the government and reduce its legitimacy (Lucien, 2002).

Political instability and social distress in Venezuela can be attributed to the manipulative actions of the mass media (Tremamunno, 2002). Politics is on television screens; adversarial political strategy of the government is limited to manipulating political messages using the mass media as the mechanism for reaching the population. As one analyst has put it:

The oppositionist has long ago forgotten that politics needs to be done in the streets and not on the media. They have constructed a Truman Show-like virtual world. They use mass media to communicate with their 'telemilitants.' There is no need for assemblies, or

activities with the communities, nor visiting small towns, or popular sectors. Everything is being substituted by mediatic communication (Hernandez, 2006).

Not only has public opinion been influenced by media, even traditional political actors have been affected as they have lost their ability to communicate directly with voters; indeed they have been supplanted by television as the planners of political action. The practice of politics has become less formal; particularly, it is not based on the structure of political parties. The planning of political action is being left to private media networks (Njaim, 1998). This implies the reduction of public discussion and the impossibility to influence decision-making processes monopolized by owners of private networks and their associates. In Venezuela, the television sector lacks the necessary plurality to guarantee that people can enjoy the best possible programming, but also that the received information corresponds with the actual facts that reporters and analyst present to their viewers. In a way, television networks have assumed the strategic vehicle for political parties; they pretend to organize the population, to direct public discussion and mobilize the opposition as if they were the militants of a political organization, and the network owners.

The Telecommunication Legislation of Venezuela grants national and state licensing to use the radio-electric spectrum; consequently, private networks are given the approval to operate. Until recently, the latter had not been objects of public regulation in terms of their programming nor the messages to their viewers. Private operators act in favor of their own interests, not responding to social obligations required by law. Indeed, critics of Venezuelan private television have a very large history: In both public and academic discussion, very

relevant observations are found on the role that private television networks have played in Venezuela. Hernandez (2006), demonstrated that during the last twenty years an oligopoly of television broadcasting reduced free competition and reduced the quality and objectivity of programming, making the broadcast of the news more vulnerable, and less credible. Because of the lack of objectivity of other shows then the TV channels relied on that aspect to accept subjectivity on news broadcast. (Latouch, 2003)

In his Diagnostic of the Television in Venezuela (1999), Professor Hernandez tell us how sex, violence, acts of aggression against women and children, political violence, and publicity characterize programs to which viewers are exposed. In fact, private television lacks the quality and objectivity to consider it a public service. Instead, it has manipulated the process of transmitting information that guarantees its private interests, regardless of the interests of the Venezuelan society. As Antonio Pasqually has put it:

The television that is produced by our principal private concessionaries deserves a very severe judgment. During decades, this oligopoly harassed the country with low quality programming and publicity excesses. They tried to destroy the democratic and parliamentary system, which allowed the victory of Hugo Chavez. Later, they attempted to overthrow Chavez himself. All of this by means of the permanent monopolization of 80 percent of the national advertising market (Pasquali, 2006).

CHAPTER IV

A methodological consideration

This chapter looks at the influence of the mass media in Venezuela's current political situation and the effects they have on producing political distress. Private television creates a parallel reality incongruent with the aspirations and expectations of the majority of the population. The results of the electoral process in Venezuela prove that a very large section of the population still supports the presidency of Hugo Chavez. Despite the actions of the media as political actors, and contrary to their expectations, private networks have been unable to affect the belief system and expectations of this sector of the population. Popular support of the president had substantially increased in the last electoral process. Even though the mass media have a very strong influence in constructing perception and expectations, they have been unable to affect the political preferences for Hugo Chavez of those who belong to the popular and poorer economic and social strata of society. That does not mean that the mass media has lost its influence in the political process or with people's preferences. In fact, private networks have certainly been able to divide Venezuelan society. According to surveys by the Observatorio Global de Medios, Venezuelans are divided in favor of and against Hugo Chavez and his government. While approximately 70 percent of the population supports the government, almost 30 percent is against the government according to the Venezuelan National Statistic Corporation. The mass media has directly impacted on the latter by manipulating their perceptions and letting them believe that support for Hugo

Chavez has been reduced (Latouche, 2006). Following is a textual analysis on the contents of speeches posted in prime time by privately owned television networks during the December 2006 presidential campaign. The discourse of political leaders during the two weeks prior to the presidential election demonstrates an attempt to manipulate political perceptions and beliefs that do not correspond with electoral results.

Regarding Venezuelan politics, private networks attempt to build a social construction that contradicts the real aspiration and expectations of the majority. This study deconstructs the oppositionist political discourse via the results of the electoral process and proves that private television has distorted political reality in Venezuela. In an article by Karl Popper, he argues against the role that television plays in modern society. As he put it, "...not only does television steal valuable time individuals may have to develop other activities, it also affects the 'structure and the values' acquired and positively pondered by society: "the structure of values posted by television is completely deficient" (Popper, 1994).

Textual analysis

Traditionally, private television in Venezuela has influenced viewers' preferences. Private networks manipulate political preferences and influence in its construction by creating matrix of opinion that tend to favor certain preferences and contradict others. In the case of the Venezuelan presidential election of December 2006, private television networks played a fundamental role as agents of political opposition to Hugo Chavez's government. During the two weeks prior to the national election of December 4, 2006, very interesting

facts support the argumentation that Venezuelan politics and the mass media created social distress and political instability with media-oriented reality. Privately owned television networks disregard political trust in order to sustain their particular political and economic interests.

The main idea was to analyze privately owned television, focusing basically on two TV channels, Globovisión and Radio Caracas de Televisión, to observe two news shows at a prime time and analyze them. During prime time, when reviewing, it showed that most of the opinion programs and advertisement aired on private television were dedicated to constructing a message that opposed the government and the possibility of re-electing Hugo Chávez as president. In informational news, talk shows, most of the news posted in the three most important schedule times (morning, afternoon, and evening news) on the principal private television networks opposed the government: Globovisión and Radio Caracas Televisión were dedicated to discussing the failures and mistakes of governmental administrations. Information about government success and/or policies that had effectively benefited society was simply disregarded. Most of those invited to participate were clearly supporting the political opposition: sometimes they were politicians, members of political parties, or representatives of the so-called civil society or members of popular organizations. All of them were characterized as members of different branches of the political opposition.

Privately owned television networks tried to create political discourse that openly opposed the government. These messages were constantly repeated

along TV programs in an attempt to create a generalized matrix of opinion against the government, and consequently, in an attempt to affect the political preferences of the voters. They told people not to vote for Hugo Chavez because he was not running a democratic government.

In the final stage of the political campaign, we are telling people to vote for the political option that we are representing. We must vote for democracy, we must reject the policy of hate among the Venezuelans that is being fostered by the National Government (Julio Borges², in declaration to Globovisión 11/26/2006).

Attacks against the government stemmed from both political reasons such as the one we mentioned above as from the alleged flaws of the administration.

According to the General Secretary of Primero Justicia, Armando Briquet:

In this country, no one lives with tranquility; we are victims of delinquency, unemployment, poverty, discrimination, and corruption. The government, definitely, is out of oil, it has nothing to offer to the population. Manuel Rosales is going to be victorious in the national election" (Primetime newscast. Radio Caracas Television and Globovisión/ 11/20/2006)

Private television networks were used as part of the political platform by the opposition and as public spaces for presenting oppositionist discourse. It is important to note that in several opportunities, Marcel Granier, president of Radio Caracas Television, referred to the government of Hugo Chavez as a dictatorship:

"Hugo Chavez is trying to impose a dictatorship in Venezuela. He is plotting against freedom of speech as

² Julio Borges is the National Coordinator of the oppositionist party Primero Justicia and former Presidential candidate.

he attempts to reduce the power of mass media to cover political news. Indeed he expects to impose a single sided perspective of the political situation of Venezuela. He is using political pressure to force the media to favor the governmental perspective. In this sense Chavez is trying to silence criticism by the media. (interview with Miguel Angel Rodriguez in the early morning program 'La Entrevista'. 11/ 21/ 2006).

On the other hand, Alberto Federico Ravel from Globovision accused the government of an attempt against freedom of speech and of reducing the effective functioning of democracy.

Chavez represents a danger for the democratic system. He is attempting to control the mass media, reducing our liberty to transmit the news as we perceive them. He pretended to affect our editorial line. Such a thing is unacceptable in a democracy. (Primetime newscast. Globovisión, 11/ 15/ 2006).

Hugo Chavez has been accused of anti-democratic activities and of using government resources for his own campaign.

We are supporting the candidate of the National Unity Manuel Rosales; at the same time rejecting the antidemocratic measures of the government of Hugo Chavez. We need to vote in favor of democracy and against the authoritative regime that Chavez is trying to impose in Venezuela (Declaration of Enrique Ochoa Antich to Globovisión. 11/19/2006)³.

At the same time, the opposition attempted to create a "matrix of opinion" to tell voters about the impossibility of a clear and honest victory for Hugo Chavez. According to former presidential candidate and current Secretary General of Proyecto, Venezuela, Enrique Salas Romer:

³ Enrique Ochoa Antich is a member of the National Campaign Committee of the opposition candidate Manuel Rosales.

It is mathematically impossible for Chavez to win the next presidential election. Chavez is preparing a fraud against the will of the large majority of Venezuelan that opposes his government (Radio Caracas Television, prime time newscast. 11/21/2006).

Clearly, an attempt to challenge the credibility of the government was an accusation of a plan for destabilizing the democratic political system. The opposition tried to present the government as if it were preparing a coup d'etat in order to kidnap the popular will and to overtake political power before the elections were held. As the President of Acción Democrática, a traditional Social Democratic Party, Victor Bolivar, put it:

The purpose of the government is to destabilize the democratic system. Chavez is not a democrat; he just wants to overtake power and to keep it permanently (Alo Ciudadano, Globovision 11/19/2006).

As part of the opposition's political strategy, representatives used polls that allowed them to demonstrate to voters that Manuel Rosales, the other candidate, was getting closer to President Chavez in votes. On November 15, all privately owned television networks (Globovision, Radio Caracas Television, and Venevisión) presented the results of the international firm Pen, Shoen, and Bertland, according to which:

The lines between Rosales and Chavez are about to cross each other, while people's preferences for President Chavez have been reduced during the last few weeks, people's preferences for Rosales show an increased growth. According to our experience in a situation of polarization, victory is almost certain on the side of the advancing candidate.

Results were very close a few days before they were presented to Alfredo Keller, a very important poll maker widely used by the opposition to support their political stands. Private networks were very careful to not present to their viewers the results of the polls with a favorable support for President Chavez. As Aurora Sanchez the head of ideological formation of the pro-governmental political party Movimiento Quinta Republica has stated:

It is clear that private television network are defending their own interests. They are concealing information from the people in order to create a matrix of opinion against president Chavez. But even more problematic, they are trying to influence public opinion by manipulating the data regarding the popularity of President Chavez. In our polls the President has a substantial advantage over Rosales. We must ask ourselves why the networks donot present this data. (Dando y dando. Venezolana de Television. 11/27/ 2006).

Private television networks overlooked information that did not support their particular interests even if it signified to their viewers that only one side of history was in the making. The political opposition in Venezuela and particularly privately owned television were developing a narrative through which people would believe the political situation was different from what it really was.

A mediatic manipulation over important sectors of the population is in the making. Private television is plotting against the interests of Venezuelans by fostering a communicative conspiracy against the government and against the nation (Jessy Chacón Ministry of Communications. Primetime newscast. Venezolana de Television. 10/30/2006).

A very important sector of the population was manipulated by the information and messages transmitted through private television. They created a sense of political and social distress for the public to study the contents of the

proposal that each candidates was presenting during the political campaign; consequently, their actions affected the public's ability to make properly informed decisions (Latouche,2006).

The political debate was restricted to the false dilemma of democracy against dictatorship. According to editorials from Professor Martha Colomina, university professor and radio, and television host for political opinion programming: "Hugo Chavez is a dictator who has taken advantage of the country's resources in order to benefit his family and his closest collaborators. They are acting against the interests of the country by benefiting only those who are politically identified with the Bolivarian Revolution." In his weekly newspaper article, Professor Manuel Caballero said that 'Globovision' has systematically attacked the figure of Hugo Chavez and his political project; indeed, Caballero frequently accuses Mr. Chavez of being a coward, and to use the military to intimidate political leaders from the opposition and to 'buy' the political conscience of Venezuelans. Prior to the election, Chavez received attacks from political leaders and very important political analysts and intellectuals such as Elsa Cardozo, Elias Pino Iturrieta, Alberto Quiroz Corradi, Humberto Njaim and former General attorney, Ramón Escobar Salom. They participated actively in supporting the political options presented by the opposition, as they were very active in participating in television programs and publicly manifested they support to the oppositionist candidate Manuel Rosales.

A few months before the election, Elsa Cardozo, the head of the School of Liberal Studies at the Universidad Metropolitana, stated in an interview for Radio Caracas de Television:

Old fashion populism, an academic element that has contributed to the new definition of 'political left', that is favored by President Chavez, talks about a populism, which is characterized by the most extreme, perverse and radical elements. That is the 'left' represented by Hugo Chavez. These elements include the centralization of power, the cult of the leader, an authoritative discourse, the transformation of national symbols and the anti-imperialist tendency (El Radio Caracas de television, el observador, 30/04/2006).

Closely following this line of reasoning, political analyst Fernando Mires, stated in El Observador a prime time news broadcast:

As Chavez assumed power in Venezuela, some observers recognized the anti-democratic potential of the 'new populism'. The term authoritative populism, the one most widely accepted by academia, was intended to signify that, different from other populisms, the anti-democratic tendencies of the new political class was very significant (Radio Caracas de television, 30/04/2006).

One can see a clear attempt by a large sectors of the political opposition to create a generalized opinion against Hugo. The message against the administration of Hugo Chavez was transmitted systematically by mass media to their viewers and readers. The most important arguments presented to the people characterized Hugo Chavez as trying to impose a dictatorship in Venezuela and attempting actions against the civil and political rights of Venezuelans. For instance Miguel Angel Rodríguez a very important a widely watched television host, in his program 'La Entrevista' dedicated his editorial to

attack president Chavez and to present him as the leader of a faction who was acting against the interests of the majority of the population. Systematically he used expressions against the president accusing him of corruption; of inability in the management of public affairs, and of using public funds for personal profit. This manipulation, however, did not affect the people's political preferences in support of President Chavez.

In a recent declaration, for instance, Pompeyo Marquez, political leader of the opposition and former member of the National Congress, has argued in an interview for Radio Caracas de Television, that President Hugo Chavez was a totalitarian leader concentrating on political power (03/29/07). In fact, leaders of the opposition imposed pressure on democratic institutions and on public opinion in an attempt to reduce the legitimacy of the political process as well as the legitimacy of electoral institutions. In order to protect the legitimacy of presidential elections, Tibisay Lucena, president of the National Electoral Council (CNE), the institution responsible for the election, responded to critics by saying:

Pressures from undemocratic sectors will not affect the efforts of CNE nor impede the celebration of national elections. In the last few days, several voices have been raised in order to discredit and introduce doubts against the Electoral Council, about its impartiality, to the democratic process. No one will be able to affect neither the course of democracy nor the will of the Venezuelan people (Globovisión, October 30, 2006).

The issue of electoral transparency was most important during the few weeks prior to the electoral process; both the government and the opposition tried to guarantee the will of the people to be reflected in the electoral results.

The Electoral Council advanced contacts with several organizations and governments in order to bring observers to Venezuela in an effort to guarantee precision. For example, the Organization of American States and the European Union were asked to send experts to cover the electoral process. On the other hand, the NOGs such as SUMATE and Ojo Electoral, as well as opposing political parties gave their input for different programs to supervise the development of the elections. Having a legitimate electoral process was considered essential for both political contenders. In this sense, several voices called for the reduction of political distress and for the rationalization of the political debate. The editorial of El Universal opened its edition of November 26, 2006 saying:

Polarization, and many times, criminal violence has characterized the national debate, particularly, the political debate. With more or less strength, conflictive animosity, sometimes, has been extended to provoke dangerous situations of intolerance. This, pitifully, has always occurred.

The electoral process must contribute, not only to materialize the popular will, and to determine the way of life and the characteristics of the government, but also to mark a definitive encounter towards civility and democratic cohabitation between the different political sectors.

Avoiding the temptation to take sides with the government of Hugo Chavez, the country could be seen as reaching a very important and rather crucial and significant level of political polarization for the further development of democracy in Venezuela. Professor Martha Colomina accused Chavez of being a dictator who kidnapped popular will. Anibal Romero, a very influent political analyst accused Chavez of being a 'democratic Caesar' (Webarticulista, dec 26,

2006). However if it is so, it would be necessary to explain the reasons that allowed Hugo Chavez to win the election with a relatively large margin of popular support. The observers present in Venezuela during the electoral event of December 4 of 2006, as well as the candidate Manuel Rosales and his close collaborators' quick recognition of electoral results of the elections, lead us to question the thesis that the results were an electoral fraud, and votes were robbed of their rights by government supporters from the opponent.

The prestigious and politically neutral organization Ojo Electoral responded to the alleged accusations by saying that it had found no reason to think that the electoral results were different from those presented by the Electoral Council:

In a climate of polarization and political distress, Venezuelans participated massively in the past electoral process. It must be noted that despite the alarms for political violence, the electoral process moved forward without incidents. Despite the punctual problems that were on the electoral authorities, there are no reasons that would lead us to think that there was a massive electoral fraud against the will of Venezuelans. Instead, we have reason to think that the results presented by the Electoral Council effectively reflect the popular will." However, it must be noted the general perception that the behavior of the Armed Forces was inadequate; likewise, the norms of political propaganda were not respected by political parties." (Globovision, 05/12/06)

As stated in actual footage coverage on all private channels, Mr. Manuel Rosales, acknowledged in his address, that Hugo Chavez was re- elected fairly with the majority of the votes of the Venezuelans:

We are the maximum representation of the claims of the people. We are not stupid; we risked everything. We will keep doing so. We cannot play dirty to Venezuela, we cannot tell lies. I proudly say what I have to say, and I

announce to Venezuela that starting today I will travel around the country in order to maintain this struggle, eventually our triumph will come. Very soon will be the time of our victory.

I want to thank the trust that you put into us... Today we have been defeated.

I want to announce to the Venezuelan people that we will keep fighting until we guarantee a 'new time' for Venezuela

Our results are different from those from the Electoral Council. We lost by a smaller margin... today they won, but today we start the process of building a new political opportunity for Venezuela (Globovision, 03/12/06).

Rosales reluctantly accepted the electoral results. The research question has greater implications. After all, how was it that a very large sector of the population did not realize that the electoral preferences were in favor of President Chavez, but believed that Rosales was going to win? One explanation is the role that mass communication played during the electoral campaign. Upon reviewing the official electoral results produced by the Electoral Council a majority of Venezuelans actually voted for Hugo Chavez who received 7,309,080 votes, representing over 62.84 percent of the popular vote. Rosales received 4,292,466 votes, 36.9 percent.

The mass media manipulated the political perception of a very large and important sector of the electoral population. They introduced a biased, irrational expectation about Rosales's real chances to win. Private mass media and particularly private television networks created political platforms to support their candidate of choice. Their strategy was to manipulate the public by distorting national reality. Since Rosales was almost unknown, allegedly he moved very quickly in the electoral preferences of Venezuelans. Private polls showed that

Rosales was going to win the election, but the actual results proved otherwise. People supported the government of Hugo Chavez and voted for him, despite the massive information against him and his government. The mass media and, particularly, private television networks played a major role in the recent political process in Venezuela. The majority of the people feel represented by Chavez as they evaluated his actions positively, particularly on the issues of social benefits for the excluded sectors of the population. The sector that rejected Hugo Chavez accused him of working against the interests of the majority.

When redefining the role that the mass media play as political actors in a democracy, it seems clear that politics cannot be done properly through television screens only. Working with people's best interests in mind implies having direct contact with them and encouraging intellectual dialogue to produce solutions with a clear understanding of their needs. Once that happens, then a democracy can flourish with the help of the mass media (Cañizales, 2004).

Private television used broadcast time to create opinions against the president. For instance, on the late night talk show produced by Globovision, *Alo Ciudadano*, representatives from oppositionist political groups were invited 85 percent of the time, whereas, the representatives from the so-called civil society received 15 percent airtime and had no representation in support of the incumbent government. Curiously enough, on Saturday, November 18, just two weeks before the presidential election, Globovision gave airtime for *Tocando Fondo*. Experts, such as Isabel Bacalao, a former bureaucrat from the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Julio Montoya, a former president of the National Assembly

Chamber of Foreign Policy and current leaders from the opposition, among many others were invited to discuss Venezuelan foreign policy under the government of Hugo Chavez. The program dedicated 90 minutes to criticize the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs without presenting discussion on any governmental international actions. Instead, time was used in a campaign for the opposition with experts pointing out mistakes the government had committed. (Latouch,2006)

Chapter V

Conclusions

Along this thesis I have argued that the mass media and particularly private Television Networks have played a fundamental role in the development of contemporary Venezuelan politics. Television has used their capacity to transmit images in order to influence the perception that people have about the characteristics of social phenomena and even on their own understanding of their situation in any given time and circumstance. In modern time television has developed the 'power' to model social interactions. In a sense we can say that television is a determinant factor in the social construction of reality. Then, reality is the result of a permanent process of interaction among persons with different believes, interests and aspirations. It would be expected for people with different perceptions of their interests to affect the shape of reality itself. In our investigation we argued that television has the capacity to affect the perception that people have about their interests and preferences, both related to their consumption of goods and services, and to their political preferences.

Private television networks are able to direct the scope of the messages that are transmitted and, consequently, consumed by the public. This could, practically, manipulate the preferences of consumers by inducing them to prefer some products over some others with disregard to their quality. Instead, the media *seduce* consumers by means of the repetition of the messages and by exposing the viewers to the particularities of the idea that they want, so to speak, to sell to them. Those who are unaware may be so affected by the 'power of the message' that they could even loose their capacity to criticize the quality and the

characteristics of the messages they are receiving. They could be manipulated to the point that their preferences could be 'constructed' not according to an objective perception of the needs everyone may have and would try to satisfy, but instead according to the messages that are transmitted by television networks and according to the interests of the owners of the networks.

In this study I have discussed the very complex subject of Venezuelan contemporary democracy. From the perspective of my research I tried to show that there is a direct relationship between political distress and the role private television networks play as active 'players' of the political game in Venezuela. As I have mentioned before, during the last few years, private television networks have adopted a position of confrontation against the constitutional government of President Hugo Chavez. It is worth mentioning that Chavez gained the presidency of Venezuela in 1998 after a very long process of political instability that produced the deterioration and, eventually, the fall of the model of representative democracy through which the Venezuelan political process was organized.

During the past forty years, the political process was organized through conservative political parties that 'kidnapped' the 'will of the people' and developed a vertical organization that did not allow for the participation of the people in the political process, nor guaranteed a fair redistribution of wealth, not the increment of welfare and well-being of the huge majority of people who were excluded from both the political process as well as from the economic system. The process of gaining the support of the people for the political system was the

result of a very complex process of political socialization that was developed through the organization of the political parties and through the use of mass media. It is important to note, in this perspective, that private television network advanced a process of construction of values that were based in the ideological construction of liberalism, that supported consumerisms and that left aside both the ideas of solidarity and the construction of social support nets.

One of the most important features of representative democracy was its incapacity to guarantee an equivalent development between the promises of well-being and the opportunities that people found to improve their own economic, political and social situation. While the mass media were talking about the opportunities and the possibilities of *living a better life*, that supposedly characterized the Venezuelan political system, the fact was that almost 80% of the population lived in a state of poverty. Even more serious, the access to alleged benefit of the political system were restricted to those who were associated to political parties. Indeed the problem with the Venezuelan system of representative democracy was that it was unable to deliver economic or political benefit to the majority of the population. In fact, there was a very important gap between the political discourse and the actual situation of the vast majority of the people. In a sense poor people were included in the public discourse as they were exposed to the ideas and the promises for a better live that were 'constructed' through the political discourse and delivered through mass media, but they were excluded from the materialization of those promises.

Hugo Chavez won the elections of 1998 by using a political platform that criticized the characteristics of representative democracy and its incapacity to include poor people in the political discourse and in the formal functioning of the economy. His electoral discourse elaborated on the idea that there was a need for the transformation of the political structure of the country. Once he won the presidency this process took place through the convocation of a public assembly for the transformation of the Constitution of the country. In my research I have found that, somehow, Chavez simply was showing the people the weaknesses of representative democracy as he was calling them to participate in the redefinition of the political system and the restructuring of the political game. This, in my opinion, was the beginning of the confrontation between private television networks and the government of Hugo Chavez. We must recall that Chavez has, from the beginning of his presidency, rejected liberal values and liberal discourse. In fact, he has started a process of redefinition of the political discourse based on the ideas of socialism and revolution, which imply not only the redistribution of wealth and the reorganization of the institutional structure of the country, but also the redefinition of the content of political discourse.

This produced a contradiction between the discourse of the traditional political class, which was supported and transmitted by the monopoly represented by Private Television Networks, and the political discourse of the new revolutionary political class that took power by means of an electoral process and has as its primary objective the reorganization of society. It is worth mentioning that this process has implications for the interests of the privileged to

be affected. During the last eight years, Hugo Chavez has been the target of very strong attacks that affected his administration and him personally. These attacks have been launched through the use of the media, as they have been trying to affect the political preferences of the majority of the population.

During my research I found that Private Television Networks attacked systematically the government of Hugo Chavez, they accused his administration of trying to impose a dictatorship that was suppressing the systems of liberties and which implied the concentration of power in Hugo Chavez. Private Television Networks were manipulating information, by presenting a bias perspective of reality. One of my findings is that private television coverage privileges news that negatively affect the government. In this sense, they try to show the shortcomings of the administration, managerial problems and political difficulties. There is a systematic attempt to demonstrate the lack of quality of those who work in public administration. I clearly understand that the media has become a mechanism for the control of public administration: the temptation the government may have to act beyond the mandate it received from the people is reduced when the media transmit information and allow people to know how the government behaves. The problem in Venezuela, as I have identified, is that media is biased against the government, so that it is not impartial in the way it presents information.

As my research shows both newscast and opinion program in Private Television during the presidential campaign were oriented towards the support of the opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales. There was a clear attempt to affect

the public image of Hugo Chavez and to diminish his effects on the public, particularly among the poor. In this sense, private television networks have become major political actors. Not only did they campaign against the president but they actively worked to to obliterate the popular support of President Chavez. Private Television has developed a public discourse that tries to mobilize people against the president and his government. It is not by chance that the important manifestations that the opposition was able to organize in the years 2001 and 2002 resulted in a coup d' etat against the president in April 2002.

Ever since then, the government has advance an important counter offensive that contemplates the development of communitarian and public television in an attempt to reduce the influence of private media on the population and to reduce the capacity of media driven political manifestation to reduce the stability of the political system and to guarantee the democratization of information and access to the media. The government is guaranteeing that the communities can reach public media and, using it as platform, can participate in political discourse.

In my research I have found that media have a clear impact on politics. They takes advantage of its capacity to transmit images and messages in order to affect in certain ways the preferences of the people. In the case of Venezuela, Private Television Networks used that capacity to affect political behaviour in an attempt to redefine the characteristic of the political preferences that during the last few years have been developing around the figure of Hugo Chavez. I believe that although freedom of speech is one of the most important freedoms in a

democracy, it can not be unlimited, in the sense that this right cannot be used to affect the performance of public administrations or to create distress in the population. By introducing a biased perspective on politics, Private Television Networks in Venezuela manipulate information trying to guarantee their interests, but acting against the interests of the majority of the population.

Finally I have to conclude this study living open the following questions:

Did the media make a strategic blunder by not crafting their messages in a way that could be heard by the lower class in the hope of persuading them about how incompetent Chavez was in running the country? Had the media alienated the population with negative campaigning that encouraged this large population to defy the media? On the other hand, did the media preach to its own followers, and that is why the country was blindsided by Chavez's victory? This study focused on the particular role that these select media have played over the contemporary Venezuelan political process during Hugo Chavez's government. Television networks have become a fundamental mechanism for distorting and interpreting political ideas since they have the ability to influence the scope of the political belief of the population (Alvarez, 1995). Since mass media is the ideal vehicle for political mediation between society and government, media have become socio-political actors who convey the interests that satisfy their constituents.

In closing, there is no "space" for people to express openly their political views because television networks in Venezuela are nothing but a business with the huge ability to influence people's behavior the way they see fit. Television

allows access to messages and images that influence social conscience by those who are willing to pay well for their coverage. The mass media allows politicians to transmit its messages to society. It can reach the general population through TV screens. Media, then, has become a political actor directly influencing the political stands taken by society.

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