The media use of diaspora in a conflict situation – A case study of Venezuelans in Finland

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Introduction

Diasporas are often living in a vague limbo of time and space. Immigrants are geographically in a new place but political, cultural and emotional connections spread across borders to the country of origin and other diasporas through family and friend connections (cf. Aranda & al. 2014). Media in its many forms functions as a messenger transmitting and fashioning the information (cf. Morley 2000; Cohen 2008). Moreover, diasporas as minority groups form their own (social and community) media groups that offer alternatives to identities and forms of participation presented in the mainstream media of the host country and this way they offer an opportunity to research connections of media users in different public areas (Siapera 2010).

Plural and transparent media is one of the pillars of democratic society. In a conflict situation media's role is even more essential because people's need to gain information increases (Loveless 2008). Actively seeking information in an unstable situation helps a person to gain a feeling of control and this way helps to deal with insecurities and risks (Voltmer 2013, 113). However, in a conflict situation access to reliable information is more difficult because different power holders of a society may instrumentalize the use of media (cf. Mancini 2012) and use them as a tool for their own purposes, or the media may become bias towards power holders in a situation of scarce resources (cf. Salojärvi 2016).

One country that has had a large wave of emigration is Venezuela. According to some estimates about 1.6 million persons have left the country during the last 15 years

1

(Quintanilla Muñoz 2015). Some of the problems in the country are a deterioration of public finance with shortages of public goods, high inflation, general power cuts and growing violent crime rates[1] (Kurmanaev & Russo 2014; Pons 2014). For these reasons many have decided to seek new opportunities abroad. Venezuelan society is highly polarized and the politics has penetrated all the sectors of life (Bisbal 2009, 16). The mainstream media is not an exception and during the presidency of Chávez they were divided between government- and opposition-minded mediums and there were only a few exceptions to this (Salojärvi 2016; Samet 2013).

This situation affected also the citizens, i.e. users of the media. Both international organizations, Freedom House and Reporters without Borders, have lowered Venezuela's position in their ranking during the 2000s, so much so that in 2016 Venezuela's press was rated as "not free" by Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org) and ranked 139 out of 180 countries in the press freedom index of Reporters without Borders (https://rsf.org) in 2016. Compared to the statistics of previous years, these indicate that the freedom of expression situation in the country worsened during 2000s. Thus, in this context of restricted press freedom the question of what kind of impact the overall political and economic conflict have had on the media use, is investigated in this case study of Venezuelan diaspora in Finland by using social media ethnography.

Instrumentalization of the media in a conflict

Immigrants are not rooted just in one location and the media play a part in this process of living in a limbo as a settler and a visitor (Basch & al. 1994). Also a large number of immigrants "continue to participate in the political and economic lives of their homelands, even as they are incorporated into their host societies" (Levitt 2001, 3). The media have an ability to create "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) especially through common mainstream media. However, in a conflict situation this idea of mainstream media changes and, thus, their

ability to create collectivities may also be fragmented and questioned (Salojärvi 2016).

It is difficult to define a conflict because it may be thought that all the social life consists of conflicts. In order to make sense of it, it is defined here by Mouffe's (2000; 2013) term of antagonism as opposed to agonism. As long as the different parties have some kind of common rules and they see the opponent as an equal adversary the situation is agonist. When the opponent becomes an enemy and there is no respect to the common rules we have entered antagonism. (Mouffe 2000; 2013.) This way we can think that a larger conflict consists of smaller and even separated conflict situations and places (Salojärvi 2016, 185-186). One of these spaces is for example in social media where there may be struggles over meanings around different polarized events.

According to articulation theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discursive structures construct and organize social relations, and thus, are a result of articulative practices. However, this does not mean that the world would be contructed only of language (cf. Hall 1986) but articulation gives meaning to the events and this way participates in constructing them. Using rhetoric it is possible to articulate identities, ideologies, communities, publicity and culture (DeLuca 1999). For example in the case of Venezuela the security situation of the country is weak according to statistics but what it means, why it is so and what the consequences are may be subjects of debate and this way it is possible to construct meanings over the events. Using articulation theory we can, thus, examine how diaspora constructs meaning over the events of the country of origin using media and how they construct themselves as political actors.

Media's role in society is varied. Here the media is understood as a broad field including so-called traditional media and alternative and social media. Media deliver information to publics; they may transmit the message of the power holders or search

3

information and edit it. Media also offer an arena for public discussion. When a citizen has access to the needed information, he or she is able to make decisions regarding his/hers own life based on the information. In a conflict situation access to this transparent and reliable information becomes more difficult even though the information need increases (cf. Voltmer 2013, 113). Moreover, also each country's specific context should be taken into account. For example in Latin America political parallelism and clientelism have strongly affected the media culture (Guerrero 2014; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2002; Mancini 2012; Salojärvi 2016).

There are several opinions (e.g. Bisbal 2009a, 17; Delgado-Flores 2006) when the actual conflict started in Venezuela between the so-called Chavistas i.e. President Chávez and his followers, and the opposition parties. Chávez came to power in 1999 and in 2001 he started to steer his politics towards what later was known as socialism of 21st century or Bolivarian revolution. One of the turning points between the opposition and Chavistas was in 2002 when there was a coup attempt and later that year an oil industry's strike. In these events the private media took a stance against the government and as a result during the following years the government started to strengthen state and community media. Thus, in Venezuelan context both political parallelism where the media is openly bias towards certain political parties and instrumentalization where outside actors seek to control the media in order to intervene in politics (Mancini 2012) are important concepts (Salojärvi 2016).

In countries with political parallelism the media do not serve as mediators of information for citizens but are more likely to function by acting as intermediaries between the different elites of society that have the same or similar levels of knowledge and information (Mancini 2012, 267-268). In this kind of public sphere different elite groups use the media as a forum to discuss within the decision-making process (Curran 1993, 31). The

problem with external pluralism that usually prevails in political parallelism is that it does not provide a platform for integrating different points of view into the discussion, which may result in even further polarization. Thus, in political parallelism the journalists and media outlets do not have a neutral role but aim to participate in the general political and cultural debate. In this system the citizens have the possibility to read the news from the media, whose view they share, or if they choose, they can also read the news from other points of view and different sources, which is enabled by external pluralism. (Mancini 2012, 269, 276.)

Politics and business may exercise their power to control the mass media. This is media instrumentalization, which implies the phenomenon of outside actors seeking to control the media in order to intervene in politics (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 37). In instrumentalization "the mass media becomes part of the political struggle and the decision-making process because they reflect the often-contingent interests of groups, individual politicians, individual business persons, and so on". These different groups may use the media to "intervene in the decision-making process, to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances". Instrumentalization does not aim for a socialization process where a well-informed and active citizen would be produced. It focuses on pushing specific goals and interests. (Mancini 2012, 271, 277.)

Thus, the study explores how this affects media consumers. One indication of distrust towards the mainstream media is that even though television is the main medium it does not have total credibility. Of the radical Chavistas, 66 percent believe everything that is said on the state channels; the percentage being 33 percent among moderate Chavistas, and less than 4 percent among moderate and extreme opposition sympathizers. Equally, 78 percent of the extreme opposition supporters and only less than five percent of the radical Chavistas trust all the information coming from the private media. (Quiñones 2012.) The

numbers show the affect of the "media war". It may also be considered indicative of the media problems that 49 percent of Venezuelans believe that there is censorship in the country. Only radical Chavistas believe that there is no censorship. (Quiñones 2012.)

The previous research (Salojärvi 2016) already indicates that the citizens in Venezuela have adapted to the situation in many different ways. Here we will explore these results more in depth and in a context of diaspora. The research indicates that also the civil society actors have learned to "play the game": They have for example learned to organize events to gain media's attention; approach certain mediums when they want certain kind of publicity to their cause; to use technology such as video material, Twitter and Facebook to circulate information; evaluate reliability of information using various platforms; and to produce and distribute information, including community media and other citizen media projects, which has gone hand in hand with the feeling of awakening as societal actors. (Salojärvi 2016.)

Venezuelan emigration

Venezuelan emigration has been exceptional in Latin America in a sense since the persons leaving the country have been mostly educated with social capital rather than the poor. Because of this it may also be assumed that they have some kind of skills to look for and evaluate information for example from the Internet. In addition to that they have learnt to mingle among different information sources and evaluate the credibility of them as a consequence of the political conflict situation of Venezuela where the media is involved as well (Salojärvi 2016).

This research focuses on the small group of Venezuelan immigrants living in Finland. In 2014 there were 184 people living in Finland that were born in Venezuela (Tilastokeskus.fi). 102 of them were men and 82 of them were women. The number of

Venezuelans has increased during the last few years since for example in 2009 there were only 86 people born in Venezuela living in Finland. The majority of the Venezuelans are between 25 and 44 years old (68 % in 2014) (Tilastokeskus.fi). That is also why the research focuses mainly on them.

However, there is an increasing interest among Venezuelans to move to Finland. An indicator of this is the Facebook page of "Venezolanos en Finlandia"[2] (692 members in July 15, 2016) that still in 2015 used to have more or less one joining request per day from Venezuelans who desire to move to Finland but in 2016 the number increased up to 7-10 persons per day (Admins of the site 15.7.2016). Also once accepted[3] these persons post on the page actively asking for advice on what is the easiest way to move to Finland, the legal procedure etc.

Finland offers a good case study to investigate diaspora's media use because Finland is socio-economically less polarized country than many other places Venezuelans have moved, e.g. the U.S. This is also reflected to some extent to the Finnish Venezuelan community since because of the small size and surrounding society Venezuelan community is less class based than elsewhere (cf. Aranda & al. 2014). This enables interaction between persons who would not necessarily even know each other in the country of origin.

Data and social media ethnography

Since there are complex connections between the country of origin and the host society there are some strong arguments to study media use of diaspora on a local level and especially using ethnographic methods (Murphy & Kraidy 2003), especially because this way we can study the influence of the conflict situation in every-day life.

Social media has often been researched by web content analysis of large data sets (Honeycutt & Herring 2009; Oulasvirta & al. 2010) and social network analysis (Gilbert &

Karahalios 2009; Java & al. 2009). However, for this research using large data sets was not suitable for two apparent reasons. First, since Facebook proved to be the most important platform, it is not possible to study the content of private persons without their permission. And second, only by using online/offline approach it was possible to understand people's behaviour since the focus was not only on the posts of social media but the reasons behind them. Thus, the focus is on the content, not on the platform.

Therefore, the data consists of ethnographic material. It includes semi-structured in-depth interviews of nine Venezuelans who all have left the country either during Chávez's or Maduro's presidency and are currently living in Finland. They had been in Finland between 6 months and 6 years and had moved specifically to Finland either because of having a Finnish partner, getting a job or looking for a better life. However, more than half (5 persons) had first moved to another European country. The age ranged between 22 and 35 years old. The most of the interviewed were male (78 %) so it is slightly more than according to the demographic structure of Venezuelans in Finland (55 % male). The interviews were conducted between June and August 2016 and they were gathered through snowball sampling initiated through personal connections. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes.

In addition to the interviews the data consists of several shorter interviews, observation and Facebook content of the interviewed persons (permissions asked) gathered in November and December 2015 around the time of the parliamentary elections held 6th of December, and between March and June 2016 when for example the opposition was trying to organize new presidential elections in order to question the policies of President Maduro, and there were Copa América (America Cup) football competition in June.

As mentioned, Facebook proved to be the most important platform for the persons interviewed and that is the reason why the main focus, content wise, is on it. Only one interviewee preferred Instagram, even though not being an active user. However, many persons used several different platforms side by side such as Whatsapp and Skype. Twitter was used to gain information from others, not to post.

Social media ethnography combines these online and offline realities and enables following "ethnographically the discontinuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face and social media movement and socialities" (Postill & Pink 2012, 124). Thus, we are able to understand digital as an element of something wider including also other elements and domains of the research topic, site and methods (Pink 2015, 11).

The importance of Internet is growing in Venezuela as a source of information even though only 9 percent stated news websites and 8 percent Twitter or Facebook as their main source of information in 2011. However, not all have access to Internet, especially in lower socio-economic classes. Persons with academic education and/or males are more likely to use Internet in Venezuela as a source of information. (Quiñones 2012.) This should be kept in mind when studying Venezuelan emigrants since a characteristic of Venezuelan emigration is that it is more the educated than underprivileged that have left the country. Therefore, also the majority of them tend to be sympathetic towards the opposition (cf. Quiñones 2012).

Since diasporas are far away from the country of origin the importance of Internet becomes crucial. Moreover, access to Internet in Finland is widespread since the penetration of the Internet is 94 per cent of the population (in 2015)(www.internetworldstats.com). This is possible since in addition to domestic broadband connections there are free computers and Internet accesses in all the libraries and several free wifi spots. The Internet enables following different pieces of news shared by

friends and family in social media, certain (mainstream or alternative) news sites or even watching television broadcasting from the country of origin. The possibilities to use the media are immense. However, the main source of information seems to be social media in a sense that people share, read and comment different links.

Yet, it should be remembered that posting in social media is not so straightforward. Individuals may have many reasons and hoped outcomes and it should be remembered that publicness of the posting varies between platforms, which affects to the way people express themselves. Previous research has found out that some of the forms of political posting are expressing support, sarcasm, concern and indifference. Also by posting something on social media a person may express for example a desire to be or become someone or to show one's personality. (Miller & al. 2016.)

The media use of Venezuelans in Finland

According to statistics (Weisbrot & Ruttenberg, 2010) even though normally Venezuelans watch private or cable television, they switch to the public television channel Venezolana de television (VTV) that normally has quite low ratings of just a few per cents, in the times of political turmoil or when the conflict escalates. This implies that they are seeking information from different sources. In addition to that it is also normal to read several different newspapers and/or Internet sites in order to gain information (Salojärvi 2016). This all implies that since Venezuelans have learnt these patterns already in their country of origin they continue to have these kinds of patterns and a certain doubt towards the media also when they have emigrated. Also this encourages alternative and active ways of using mediums for example using various Internet sites, and producing your own material (alternative and community media, blogs, YouTube, social media posts etc.).

As indicated by previous research (Shumow 2010, 385), this hypothesis is also

verified in this research since many immigrants have created a system of verification of the information where family and friends via Whatsapp and Skype play a crucial role. Here the background of the person matters and his/her remaining connections to the country of origin. If the person still has family living in Venezuela he/she is more likely to be interested in the conflict situation. This also enables confirming the information received from different mediums and asking the family members: "Is this true? Is it like it is told in the Internet?". These findings confirm Madianou and Miller's (2013) find of "polymedia". They found out that people tend to use several different platforms rather than just depending on one (see also Miller & al. 2016). This research on Venezuelan diaspora emphasizes the aspect of social and personal connections behind the platforms.

The persons compare the information received from the Internet, especially social media, to the information given by family. They may also actively ask for verification for certain events. Of all the Internet content especially videos and images testifying the events are valued by some. Also some Internet news sites are used but with a sense of doubt. This information is verified by comparing with other news sites and if the information is circulated more widely it may be considered more authentic/real.

This process of verification of news is important also in construction of personal (online) identities because all the interviewees considered it extremely important that they personally re-post only news and commentaries that are verified to be real so they would not add up to the cycle of rumours. This extended also to family and friend connections since if they see a close family member or a friend posting something that interviewees considered being not "true" they immediately notify the person about it.

Shumow (2010, 385) found in his study of Venezuelan diaspora's media consumption in Florida that Venezuelans tend to actively follow the events but still keep

critical-analytical stance towards the media they use. This research has similar results but intends to explore more on this. Background in political activism in Venezuela and the time a person has spent outside of Venezuela does not seem to matter so much in media consumption. As mentioned the crucial element is the remaining family members in the country of origin. Even the persons who seemingly are not interested in the situation meaning that they say that they do not usually want to talk about Venezuela online nor offline with other Venezuelans or post nor comment on social media, do follow the news, conversations and talk with family members about the conflict. Thus, they have created a non-political or politically indifferent identity towards the conflict, which however, is not necessarily reflected in every-day life.

These persons prefer to concentrate on positive posting on their country since they feel that they do not want to add up to the negative cycle of bad news. They also may have loser connection with the country of origin as the most of the family members have already moved abroad or they have lost contact with them. However, it should be noted that despite the created identity they seemed very passionate and willing to share their political opinions when asked. Thus, they were following the events closely even though not showing that publicly for example in Facebook. This is a way to keep some distance to the conflict.

Since the conflict situation has lasted already for so long, more than 17 years, this has fashioned the relationships between friends and family members. That is also why publicity of personal comments does not seem to be a big issue for the most of the interviewees. Some say that they have already during the years deleted friends on Facebook that represent opposing political view and the ones who still have friends representing the opposing view have made clear the rules that they do not comment the opposing side's links

and leave the politics aside from their relationship in social media. That is why the persons feel they do not need to think twice what they can or cannot post in this sense.

One aspect of posting on Venezuela is that some concentrate on posting positive issues of Venezuela, e.g. nature, food or posts about success of the Venezuelan team in the Copa América. This seems to have two functions. The persons may this way demonstrate their personal national identity and construct it in a positive sense. They articulate being Venezuelan in a different way than is shown in the most of the news; Being Venezuelan is not just about the conflict. This way they challenge the image the news offer. This is also emphasized by the aspect that the same persons also talk about how they post links to show or tell to their friends other than Venezuelans how the situation is. They also feel that they are equally Venezuelans even though they have left the country.

Internal and external factors behind the media use

The purpose of this study has been to research what kind of impact a conflict has on the media use of diaspora and how the persons living in diaspora interpret events shown in the media. The results of previous research (Behrouzian & al. 2016) are confirmed in a sense that in a situation of restricted information the citizens tend to look for alternative sources of information, especially online. This however, has expanded around early 2010s among the Venezuelans when persons have started to use more and more social media. Before this many of them were still following mainstream media. However, it should be remembered that one of the factors behind this change away from the mainstream media may be also because several media outlets identified as non-government media, e.g. Globovisión, Cadena Capriles (the publisher of *Últimas Noticias*) and *El Universal,* changed their owners in 2012-2013 (Neuman 2014). Thus, their new political stance and editorial line were questioned and this limited the variety of media considered as less bias.

The research found both affective and cognitive reasons (Behrouzian & al, 2016) behind the media use. Cognitive reasons come from the believed censorship and instrumentalization of the media by different power holders that prevail in Venezuela. The citizens have learnt to doubt information flows already living in Venezuela and external pluralism has made them to use various information sources. However, one of the consequences of the external pluralism is that the situation has escalated even more since everyone is able to receive the information from sources that support their own political stance and there is no dialogue like in internal pluralism (cf. Salojärvi 2016). Also the expansion of different media sites and circulation of the news in social media has made it possible to follow several different sites and not just count on certain sources. Therefore, many describe following the news time consuming since it involves also offline connections and Whatsapp and Skype messaging with other Venezuelans.

Affective reasons for the media use rise from family connections and identity construction concerning nationality or political activism. If the person has still family in the country of origin it is natural to be worried about them and follow the news also because of their wellbeing in order to gain the feeling of control (cf. Voltmer 2013, 113). Other reason is that the persons use media to rearticulate themselves as Venezuelans or political actors. Venezuelans still living in Venezuela may sometimes question how "Venezuelans" the emigrants are or what is the right way to be "Venezuelan". Emigrants, however, need to recreate their Venezuelan identity, which is often competing with views of other Venezuelans. Thus, posting may be a way to show one's identity (cf. Miller & al. 2016).

Creating an identity of political actor is done by expressing support, sarcasm, concern and indifference like also found in previous research on social media (Miller & al. 2016). Also re-posting and deciding what to re-post and share is a way to construct oneself as

a political actor. In this manner the media users create parallel journalism, which may be defined as a process where the meanings of newsbeats and links change as they are commented, cited, re-posted and changed. This way individuals make ideological and political articulation over the meanings and significance of the societal events and how one should think about them. (Hatakka 2012, 351-352.)

Moreover, surrounding society matters. Even though in Finland also the mainstream media has some newsbeats on Venezuela this does not have a significant impact on Venezuelans since the majority of them do not speak Finnish fluently enough. However, many of them consider it important to post general things about Venezuelan situation in order to tell friends on social media what is happening in their home country. Therefore, augmenting information about the country is one motivational factor and this way the persons also build their identity as political actors.

Second aspect that comes from the surrounding society is due to a small Venezuelan community in Finland. Other studies have found that the diaspora's own community media has a growing importance in connecting members and creating exile identity among the diaspora (Shumow 2010). However, while this factor does not exist in a small community and the lack of Spanish language media or reporting on Venezuelan conflict in English in Finland, e.g. compared to Miami, Florida (Shumow 2010), may emphasize the importance of social media platforms and family and friend connections with fellow Venezuelans.

Third, living in Finland, which is experienced as a democratic country that respects human rights, including freedom of expression, offers a comparison to the country of origin. This is very much in the background since many of the persons do not feel so much connected to the Finnish society or the Finns. However, Finnish society offers them a

framework that shows how things can be organized. Even though many of the interviewees criticize several aspects of Finnish society and especially Finns, they all recognize the importance of democracy and the free flow of information.

End Notes

[1] The capital, Caracas is the second most violent city in the world. Also other Venezuelan cities are ranked high. Moreover, there are most firearms per capita in the world. (www.osac.gov.)
[2] In English "Venezuelans in Finland"
[3] They are not automatically accepted to the group

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