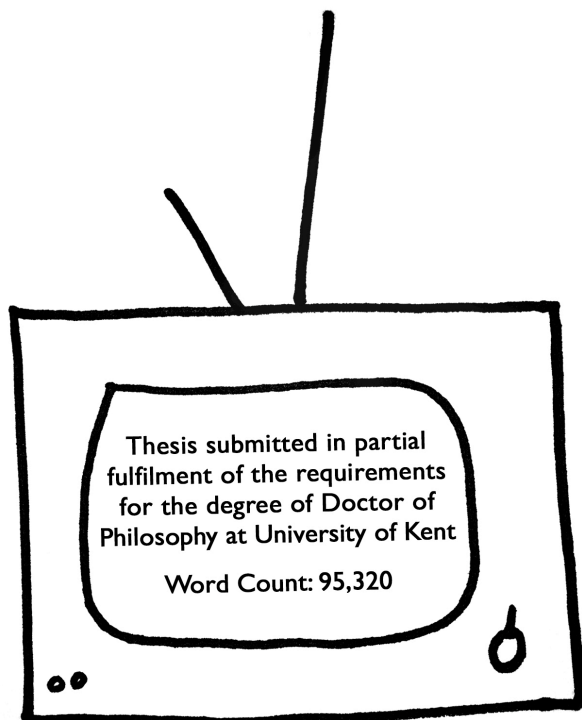


**THE  
POLITICAL  
COMMUNICATION  
OF  
HUGO CHAVEZ**

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**THE  
EVOLUTION  
OF  
ALO  
PRESIDENTE**

**BY  
SUNTHAI  
CONSTANTINI**



**THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF HUGO CHÁVEZ:  
THE EVOLUTION OF ALÓ PRESIDENTE**

BY  
SUNTHAI CONSTANTINI

THESIS

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## Abstract

*Aló Presidente* was a weekly television programme anchored and produced by Hugo Chávez during his presidency in Venezuela. The show, a version of a phone-in, was broadcast live on national television at 11am on Sundays and lasted on average six hours. It followed the presidential agenda to a new location every week, where Hugo Chávez would inaugurate factories, read Latin American poetry, interview Fidel Castro, and sing *llanero* songs. This thesis investigates the role that *Aló Presidente* played in the making of the “Bolivarian Revolution”, Hugo Chávez’s political project. Through a critical reading of the transcripts of the show, it explores the 378 episodes, or 1656 hours, that aired between 1999 and 2012. *Aló Presidente* was the cornerstone of Chávez’s political communication, replacing press conferences and interviews. Chávez was known for his continuous presence on radio and television and his daily presidential addresses. However, only on the Sunday show could the audience phone the president and share their ideas, emotions and everyday life concerns. This thesis reviews the narratives that underlined the relationship between the audience/electorate and the host/president on *Aló Presidente*. It is argued that *Aló Presidente* played a fundamental role in articulating the identity of a public that shared the values and ideas of Chávez’s hegemonic project. Moreover, it is argued that the show *Aló Presidente* and the ideological process called the “Bolivarian Revolution” can be read as two co-related arms of a same project, and that they informed and defined each other throughout Chávez’s presidency. In this context, this thesis assesses the evolution of the programme in light of the political events taking place in Venezuela during that time. *Aló Presidente* is thus seen as a repository, or “black box”, of the discourses that articulated the Bolivarian identity and constructed the legitimacy of Hugo Chávez as the leader of a populist movement in Venezuela. Finally, the core of this thesis is that the co-relation between the show and the hegemonic project evolved over time to strengthen the authoritarian tendencies of Hugo Chávez’s regime. Following the activities of *Aló Presidente* over 13 years, the investigation charts that evolution in three different stages: 1) participation, 2) education, and 3) obedience, arguing that what started as a seemingly participatory space, progressively became a platform that presented Hugo Chávez’s figure as the ideologue of a populist movement, and ultimately secured his position as the indisputable leader and sole authority of Venezuela’s “Bolivarian Revolution”.

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As the first full-time PhD student at the Centre for Journalism, finding a community had seemed difficult at the beginning. My first lesson was quickly imparted when it was made clear that communities cross boundaries and that intellectual curiosity makes for an inestimable bond. I would like to thank my colleagues and friends from the Centre for Critical Thought. Our reading groups and activities filled my PhD years with excitement and interest.

Some ideas had to be explored for weeks, sometimes months, before two plus two finally equalled four and tiny neural pathways connected in my brain. Others came from a distance, going around the world before subtly, almost imperceptibly, landing on the page. This process has been as much human as it has been intellectual. It is with a heart full of gratitude that I would like to dedicate this work to Devin, Patricia, Luis, Luis Emilio, Nayeli, Julia, Collin, Jordan, Mélanie, Charles, Kathryn, Mélisa, Kim, Marie and Safya.



The first episode of *Aló Presidente* at Radio Nacional de Venezuela, 23 May 1999.

©VTV Archive

On 27 August 2000, *Aló Presidente* moves permanently to national television.

©VTV Archive



Chávez inaugurates a supermarket from Misión Mercal in San Cristobal, Táchira. Episode 198, 18 July 2004.

President Chávez on horseback, in Mantecal, Apure. Episode 338, 23 August 2009.



President Chávez addresses his cabinet. Episode 299, 6 January 2008.

A production assistant wipes Chávez's forehead while the cameras are turned away.

©Reuters





“How can you not understand [politics]? The President is there to explain every single point of every single idea. That is why all Venezuelans need *Aló Presidente*”<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Unfortunately, for the time being, our objectives have not been reached in the capital, here in Caracas. We were not able to take the power. You have done very well over there, but it is now time to prevent a blood bath, it is now time to reflect (...) Before the country and before you, I take full responsibility for this Bolivarian military movement (Chávez 1992).

It all started on television. On 4 February 1992, previously unknown Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frias appeared on all Venezuelan channels to deliver a speech aimed at urging his comrades, accomplices in an attempted coup d'état against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, to lay down their arms and abort their mission. In front of the cameras, one of the commanders of a country-wide operation deliberately surrendered to the authorities in one of the most defining moments of Venezuelan television. Earlier that day, shortly after midnight, 6000 troops had attacked Caracas and three other major cities in an attempt to topple the president, who had been facing low levels of popularity. His administration had been believed to foment corruption, and his neoliberal measures considered to protect the economic interests of the Venezuelan oligarchy and the IMF. In a daring move against what had been the longest democracy of Latin America, the insurgents had attempted to install a civic-military alliance based on the nostalgic values of the *Libertador* of Latin America, Venezuelan-born Simón Bolívar.

This thesis is about the evolution of a television programme that took place in the midst of a political revolution in Venezuela during the first decade of the 2000s. The reason why this programme caught our attention is that, for 13 years, the main guest/anchor of the show was the elected president of the country. This was no typical phone-in in which the head of the executive manages to dodge a few questions for an hour or so. Neither was it the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Rojas, Maria. Interview by Sunthai Constantini (January 16, 2013).

show where politicians face each other in debates aimed at earning the votes of their audiences. This was more like one of those talk shows where politics meets entertainment, where the host mentions the latest occurrence in foreign affairs right before he welcomes on stage the band responsible for the latest summer hit. Except that it was more than that. Sometimes, the host of the show would pick up a pen, write down a cheque and instruct specific guests among the audience to get started with the development of some form of public works, like a school perhaps, or an electric plant. Indeed, sometimes, important things, things of immediate material relevance would take place on this show. In that respect, this was like those talk shows where the audience never knows what will happen to them on that episode: a new car, some scholarship, a trip to Australia, or one of their relatives perhaps, a long-lost friend? People's lives could be changed on this show. Such was its scope that even the lives of those who did not directly participate in the programme could change. People lost their jobs on the show, their property, or social benefits. People's representatives were moved, demoted, left without a budget. But most of the time, this show addressed current affairs, challenged the papers' reading of certain events, explained the logic behind public policies, instructed government officials, and also provided a sense of stability to a political landscape in constant flux. In a way, this show was a staple Sunday show, partly engaging and partly background noise, an addition to family lunch.

The guiding reason behind this work is that this show seemed to occupy a place in the Venezuelan household that was not traditionally allocated to political affairs. *Aló Presidente* was a television programme, like those that enter our everyday lives and occupy a place in our social activities. It was like those programmes we might talk about during our lunch break the next day or research on YouTube after it has aired. And yet, the president of the country anchored it. By definition, in its name, in its very nature, the *Presidente* occupied the screens for hours on end. Nothing in this show, not the entertainment value of it, the casual conversational tone, the informal attire, the personal anecdotes, the locations, the cheers, nothing could take away the fact that Hugo Chávez was the president of Venezuela during the entire time he conducted this show. That was actually the whole point of it: the president would pick up the phone (*Aló?*) and engage with the members of the electorate on live TV.

The core of the analysis focuses on three main objectives: 1) to theoretically assess the structure of the programme in order to locate it among the wider landscape of television

genres. 2) To link the television programme to its political context in order to establish its relevance in the overall political project being developed in Venezuela under the presidency of Hugo Chávez. 3) To analyse the evolution of the Bolivarian Revolution by illustrating the content being produced in *Aló Presidente* at the different stages of its 13-year run. The third objective, or the “empirical” part of this work, is divided into three phases. Because trends and processes do not happen in a vacuum, pinpointing dates may seem artificial. However, for the sake of clarity, each of the three phases have been designed to correspond to key political events that influenced both the course of Chávez’s political project and the structure of the show. The first begins with his investiture as Venezuela’s president and the launch of *Aló Presidente* in 1999; the second with the attempted coup d’état that resulted in Chávez’s absence from power for 48 hours in 2002; and the third after Chávez’s re-election in 2007 and the “socialist turn” in his political programme.

#### *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*

A few years prior to Chávez’s attempted coup in 1992, Carlos Andrés Pérez had tried to stimulate the economy with a series of neoliberal measures aimed at reducing public subsidies, devaluating the bolivar, privatising state-owned companies, and opening the economy to international capital (Urbaneja 2007, p. 84). The measures had ignited a strong sense of dissatisfaction among the population that saw in it an unfair redistribution in oil revenue (the Venezuelan economy was heavily reliant on oil production, accounting at times for up to 90 per cent of the national income) and an increasing gap in social inequalities. But one measure in particular had sparked an unprecedented reaction among the working classes. On 27 February 1989, commuters from the Caracas suburb of Guarenas had walked to their usual bus stop only to realise that the cost of their ticket had doubled. Because petrol was subsidised, public transport fares had been extraordinarily cheap. This measure was affecting the most vulnerable layers of the population and what followed was a wave of student-led mass protests and riots known as the *Caracazo*. On 1 March 1989, Carlos Andrés Pérez had dealt with the uprising by sending the armed forces to the streets, and the confrontation resulted in bloodshed that claimed over 300 lives and 1000 wounded in what marked one of the bloodiest struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Venezuela (López Maya 2005). Back in the barracks, along with two other officers, Chávez had started a political movement called MBR200 in the early 1980s that aimed at combating the political status quo. Weary of the abuses of the *Punto Fijo* pact, a de facto agreement of alternation of power between Christian

Democrats (COPEI) and Social Democrats (AD) since 1952, the movement had sworn to put an end to what they considered to be a never-ending suite of corrupt regimes. After witnessing the bloodshed of the Caracazo, and the role that their comrades had had to play in it, Chávez and his colleagues began to prepare the ground for a fully-fledged coup d'état.

The putsch was aborted after the original plan to capture Carlos Andrés Pérez on his way back from the airport fell through. Fleeing the presidential palace, the president had made his way to the studios of *Venevisión* in the early hours of the morning, where, in front of the cameras, he instructed the armed forces to control the area, and gave a collected speech to reassure the population hoping to undermine support for the coup. Having failed in his objectives in the capital, Hugo Chávez unilaterally decided to surrender on the condition that he also be able to address his troops on national television. At noon that day, for a total of 72 seconds, Hugo Chávez addressed the nation with a clear message: he was taking full responsibility for a military coup that had failed and was condemning any bloodshed as a result. Except that one detail seemed to have captured the attention of the population. Dressed in his pristine uniform, with his red beret on the head and a freshly shaved face, Chávez had apologised to his fellow soldiers and to the people of Venezuela for not having met their goals *por ahora*, for the time being. Far from giving the impression of a failure, the image that transpired that day was that of a new public figure, a solemn and committed David that had not yet managed to defeat Goliath. With what was perceived as pride and serenity, the lieutenant colonel accepted his arrest, leaving behind an air of hope for change to come. After that morning, Hugo Chávez went from being an anonymous military lieutenant colonel with political ideals to the promising face of an alternative way in Venezuela. Letters of support and of admiration flooded his prison cell. A new Venezuelan hero was born.

This moment was to become the turning point in Chávez's political career. He awaited trial in prison until president Rafael Caldera pardoned him in 1994. By then, Chávez had become a household name and a political figure that embodied the desire to change the Venezuelan bipartisan system. He toured the country spreading the ideals of his civil-military alliance and winning the hearts of towns and villages across the land until his organisation, MBR200, was officially registered as the political party *Movimiento Quinta Republica* (MVR) in 1997. This crystallised the leadership figure of Hugo Chávez and, backed by the constant spotlight of a

supportive media, propelled him to the public eye when he became the party candidate for the presidential elections of 1998 (López Maya 2005, p. 177).

The conjunction of socio-economic crises and weariness of the traditional parties propelled this former military, self-proclaimed “revolutionary” and pacifist, to the presidency with 54 per cent of the votes. Loyal to his programme, Chávez convened a Constitutional Assembly that was to write the Constitution of 1999. Among the main changes were: the country was named “Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”; the addition of 2 powers (Citizen and Electoral) to the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary; reduction of two parliamentary chambers to one National Assembly (abolition of the Senate); protection of national resources (opposition to neoliberalism); decentralised federalism; social justice; and, importantly, the notion of “participatory democracy” defined as the means to ensure that “all Venezuelan citizens have the right to participate freely in public affairs, directly or through their elected representatives (...) this is the way to develop Venezuelans as protagonists, both individually and as a nation” (art. 62).

Thus started the process called the *Bolivarian Revolution*, a democratic movement aimed at surpassing the oligarchic power characterised by the caudillos of the 19th century and the political parties of Punto Fijo (López Maya 2005, p. 177). And it is within the context of the Bolivarian Revolution and the desire to foment his *participatory democracy* that Hugo Chávez launches the TV programme, *Aló Presidente*.

### *Aló Presidente*

There I was, wondering how to communicate directly with you men, women (of Venezuela). That is when I got the idea for *Aló Presidente*. (Episode 1, 1999)<sup>2</sup>

No a las máscaras. No al carnaval. No al engaño, vamos a batallar por la verdad.<sup>3</sup> (Episode 1, 1999)

On 23 May 1999, one month after his original investiture as Venezuela’s president, Hugo Chávez Frias appeared in front of national cameras for the first episode of what would later become the most original and recurrent element of his political communication. That Sunday

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes from the show are translated from Spanish.

<sup>3</sup> « No masks. No carnival. No lies. We will fight for the truth »

morning, the President of the Republic of Venezuela premiered an unprecedented space for direct communication called *Aló Presidente* (Hello President) a weekly live series anchored by Chávez himself. Despite its evolution and changes in format, for the next 13 years Hugo Chávez would conduct a television programme, until, due to health reasons, it was postponed indefinitely fifteen months before his death in 2013. The show, a version of a phone-in, aired at 11am on Sundays and lasted for an average of 6 hours. Until the forced hiatus in January 2012, Hugo Chávez had completed 378 episodes of live broadcasting in thirteen years, and a total of 1656 hours during which the president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela received phone calls from the audience, dictated new legislation, interrogated his Cabinet, introduced local folklore, and read Marxist literature, among other things.

Originally intended for radio, *Aló Presidente* evolved from a phone-in conversation with the president in its first episode, aired on 23 May 1999, to a vibrant itinerant talk show, broadcast live from different locations around Venezuela. The programme was anchored by and developed around the figure of Hugo Chávez and generally portrayed him at a desk in front of a live audience on ad-hoc stages spread across the country. Many things happened on the set of *Aló Presidente*, and the format of the show has inspired different spin-offs from other Latin American leaders. But, in addition to inaugurating new factories, singing *llanero* songs, and reading Simón Bolívar's biography, the head of the state also interacted with members of his Cabinet, reinforcing an impression of transparency, in the context of what resembled an informal discussion in a public space.

What made *Aló Presidente* a unique platform for political communication was the fact that citizens were invited to discuss everyday life matters with the head of the state himself. There seemed to be no intermediaries between Chávez and the audience, no boundaries. On the set of *Aló Presidente*, the President of Venezuela appeared to be in direct contact with members of the electorate.

Today, I wave the flag of freedom of expression. May freedom of expression be welcome in this country and may we all be free to say and write what we want! (...) This is a democratic revolution and we are all here to seek the truth, to tell each other the truth. (Episode 1, 1999)

At the time of its broadcast, Blanca Eeckout, minister for communication and information, had described *Aló Presidente* as “changing the communication paradigm. It is a space for dialogue and proximity that breaks with the traditional state of isolation of Venezuelan leaders. It is [part of] a horizontal model, an affective model, a battle of ideas” (Eeckout, 2007). This statement is quite interesting, for it raises a series of questions that inform the underlying focus of this work, namely, what exactly took place on the set of *Aló Presidente*? For one, it suggests that a television show had opened a somewhat endogenous virtual space where the Executive would interact with the electorate in a so-called “battle of ideas” (Episode 1, 1999). This certainly resonates with the Habermasian ideals of a public sphere where, emancipated from the limitations of systemic interests, individuals engage in a rational exchange of their opinions and ideas about matters of common interest. Secondly, it makes inferences about the design of a political system in Venezuela based on a “horizontal model” that, as shall be discussed in more detail later, implied a paradigmatic shift in the distribution of powers in Venezuela with the development of a so-called “participatory democracy”. Thirdly, it highlights the importance of communication between political representatives and their voters and puts special emphasis on the affective dimension of this relationship. Yet, it also reveals an interesting semantic choice in calling this representative a “political leader”. In a way, this statement contains the seeds for what has led this investigation: it tightly packs a series of assertions that reflect the articulation of what *Aló Presidente* was seen to mean and, to a certain extent, was meant to do. The goal of this work will be to unpack these questions against the actual discourse of the show and to gauge their different impact during the 13 years of the show.

### *Chávez and the Media*

Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution have attracted a lot of attention from many disciplines in the Latin American and Western scholarship: his charismatic presence, the globalising nature of his political project, the socialist turn of his administration, his impressive capacity hold forth on stage for hours on end, the atypical tone of his discourse, the relentless attacks on the “Empire” and the capitalist world, etc.<sup>4</sup> With regards to his political communication, much attention has been paid to the use of metaphors in his

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3 for an exhaustive review of the literature on Chávez’s discourse and his political process called the “Bolivarian Revolution”.

discourse, the different characters and roles he embodied when addressing different audiences; the degree of courtesy of his rhetoric and the place of insults in his political communication. Chávez has been called a messiah, a populist figure, and a charismatic leader. Such was the importance of his communication strategy—both through his Sunday show and, most importantly, because of his habit to give weekly, sometimes daily, speeches simulcast by law on all national broadcasts- that Cañizales (2012) has conferred to Chávez the title of “telepresident”, because of his tendency to conduct politics on camera.

By the time of his death, in addition to his usual weekly show, Hugo Chávez had accumulated 1700+ hours of compulsory *cadena*<sup>5</sup> deemed of critical relevance for the nation. Chávez undoubtedly became a household name in Venezuela, occupying the airwaves several times a week for more than thirteen years. In fact, all airtime combined, Chávez spent the equivalent of 10 *EastEnders* episodes per week during his time in power. He also sparked highly polarised reactions at all levels of the debate. The politicisation of everyday life was such that themes like Chávez’s recall referendum were integrated into the plots of Venezuelan traditional *telenovelas*. Acosta (2007, 2013) illustrates this point in her analysis of the Venezuelan soap *Cosita Rica*, where she describes the parallels between the show and the political context of the time, in particular the role of Olegario Pérez as the fictionalised version of Hugo Chávez.

This melodrama presented a mix of romance, realism, humor, and political and sociocultural commentary that included characters allegorical to real political figures. The character of Olegario Pérez, in particular, was an opposition-tinted metaphor of then President Hugo Chávez. The *telenovela* was a huge success while it paralleled the rocky road Venezuelans travelled towards the Presidential recall referendum of August 15, 2004. (Acosta 2013)

The intertwining of entertainment and politics witnessed in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez is not a new phenomenon, and the increased presence of politicians in talk shows, morning television, live televised events, etc., is a global trend. Often with regards to the general concern about the democratic deficit of contemporary politics, political communication is accused of failing to tackle the widespread disinterest in the democratic game. To Richards

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<sup>5</sup> Compulsory simulcasts of Presidential speeches on all national channels.



(2004), the main reason behind this failure is that political parties and public figures have maintained an obsolete format that gives priority to efficiency and rational argumentation over any form of emotional representation. This “emotional deficit”, as he calls it, furthers the distance between political leaders and the electorate, for it overlooks the audience’s emotional needs (Richards 2004, p. 342). And, in a way, *Aló Presidente* seemed to bridge this emotional gap by staging an informal conversation between the president and the electorate in which Hugo Chávez would often tell personal anecdotes about family members, marital problems, or his professional life. However, the case of *Aló Presidente* is important because it detaches itself from the regular interactions that take place between politicians and the media in two different ways. The first is that, in *Aló Presidente*, institutional politics seemed to take the leap and *become* entertainment. On Sunday mornings, the show saw politicians sit in Cabinet meetings, new laws being announced, and foreign guests discuss new deals. Politics seemed to happen in front of the audience’s very eyes in a format that recalled the familiar tone and space of reality television. The second difference is that Chávez and his government would only appear in the media on government-led shows such as *Aló Presidente*, during the regular cadenas, or in pro-Chávez talk shows such as sharp-tongued “la Hojilla” (Razorblade). Chávez did not hold press conferences or question time; he also seldom attended interviews and never accepted invitations to non-Chavista television stations. In fact, although his presence on the air was fundamental during his time in office, Chávez’s relationship with the media reflected the antagonistic landscape of his administration.

Part of the polarisation and reluctance to interact with non-Chavista media may be inherited from the Punto Fijo years. Chávez’s initial interactions with the media after his first election set the tone for the way this relationship evolved under his administration. Former MP, leader of Venezuelan communist party Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), and founder of opposition newspaper *Tal Cual*, Teodoro Petkoff denounces what many scholars have called the “telecracy” that used to govern the country whereby the media, and more specifically TV channels, had tacitly supported the Punto Fijo system enforced by AD and COPEI. According to Petkoff, in exchange for the main parties’ blind eye in terms of TV regulation, the media had agreed to reproduce in their programming the status quo of the bipartisan system. This agreement resulted in the absence of political content from national broadcasting and, consequently, the media’s tacit support for the governments in place. Moreover, this “pretend political neutrality” reinforced the impression that the natural state of politics was the

alternation in power between AD and COPEI, leading to a ban on representation of a “third way” in national TV production.

The concurrence between media and politics reached its peak between 1989 and 1993 when, under the mandate of Carlos Andres Perez, the print press had developed their own parliamentary groups accessing Congress through the official ways of the two traditional parties (Petkoff 2005, pp. 104-105).

On one occasion, when I was the candidate for the presidential elections for MAS --one of the parties excluded from the pact-- I received a phone call from one of the country’s most powerful media barons. He said that he already had a yeoman as parliamentary candidate with AD, and one with Copei, and he wanted to add one to our lists. My categorical, and angry, negative response was followed by threats (“await the consequences”), and the “consequences” happened to be one brutal campaign during the last two months leading to the elections in which I was presented on a daily basis as the author of all the evils that had happened during the armed confrontation of the 1960s in Venezuela, accompanied by a profusion of macabre photographs, despite the democratic reconciliation process that the country had previously undergone. (Ibid, pp. 105-106)

In Petkoff’s view, during the 1990s, the media had persistently portrayed the political sector as inefficient and corrupt in a neoliberal idealisation of the efficiency of free enterprise. But, when in 1998, former coup leader Hugo Chávez, now absolved, suddenly emerged as presidential candidate; the media saw in this photogenic soldier the perfect representative for their “apolitical” project. Convinced that Chávez embodied their ideal of “anti-politics” and would facilitate the era of managerial governments preached by the media barons, for the first time in Venezuelan history, television channels abandoned their political neutrality and openly supported the independent candidate. The overwhelmingly supportive campaign of the print press and television propelled Hugo Chávez to the forefront of the presidential race. (Ibid, pp. 107-108). It is within this context that Hugo Chávez entered the political scene as an independent candidate willing to break with the bipartisan tradition of *Puntofijismo*<sup>6</sup> in Venezuela. By electing Chávez, Venezuelans stated their willingness to break away from the

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<sup>6</sup> See Punto Fijo pact p.8

de facto participatory that had ensured a status quo, and had, with the help of the media, earned the resentment of the majority of the population.

The ties between the media and the newly elected president were strengthened during the first year following Chávez's investiture when the former director of *El Nacional*, and the newspaper owner's wife were appointed to the Cabinet. But the honeymoon came to an end when, surprised by their protégé's actions, the press became critical of his decision-making. Infuriated by what he considered "inaccurate reporting", Chávez engaged in a frontal attack against newspapers and journalists, thus beginning an escalation of hostility between the two sides (Ibid, pp. 110-111). Eventually, the media's enmity towards the Chávez administration took an unprecedented turn during the attempted coup<sup>7</sup> against Hugo Chávez on April 11, 2002 that resulted in the 48-hour takeover of power by Pedro Carmona, head of Venezuela's business association *Fedecamaras*. Most national TV channels and printed press were accused of fomenting a national strike that had been supported by the opposition, and of misinforming the population in order to overthrow Chávez in what some call the "first media putsch in the world" (McChesney 2007). In fact, according to Andres Izarra, former minister for communication and information in Chávez administration, who at the time of the coup d'état was Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) evening news anchor, the board of most TV channels had given very strict directives concerning the broadcasting of the event. That day the editorial instruction was to exclude images concerning Chávez or his followers.

After days of journalistic hardship, during which we tried everything in our power to broadcast the news, we were suddenly immersed in an information blackout, self-censorship imposed by editorial lines (...) on the morning of April 12, the board sent me the order not to transmit any information regarding Chávez, his location, his actions, his MPs or any supporter: "zero Chavism on the screen!". (Izarra in Tremamunno 2002, pp. 83-84)

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<sup>7</sup> The events of April 11, 2002 have been subject to much polemic in Venezuelan politics. Government officials claim that Chávez was overthrown in a coup d'état orchestrated by the "oligarchy" with the support of Venezuelan armed forces, whereas members of the opposition allege that he resigned his mandate and was replaced by a transition government in response to a series of protests aimed at calling for new elections. The ins and outs of this debate surpass the scope of this chapter but, from now on, the events will be referred to as the "attempted coup" against Hugo Chávez.

Chávez considered the media as instruments of the opposition and accused them of supporting the coup. After that episode, he encouraged the media barons to “behave” and “resume their journalistic ethic in order to allow the return of dignity and respect of information” (Episode 102 2002). However, shortly after the coup, Hugo Chávez began a long series of measures aimed at regulating what he considered to be the “wild behaviour” that was characteristic of Venezuelan media. In 2004, his administration passed a controversial bill aimed at assessing the “degrees of language, health, sex and violence” in televised programming. The law, concerning the “social responsibility of Radio and Television” allowed the government to control the quality of the programming as well as the schedules of national television channels. It also included a clause that allowed the chief of the Executive to broadcast for up to 15 minutes a day on all TV and radio stations. According to Human Rights Watch report of 2008, this law “presents vague allusions around the notions of “incitation””, especially in its article 29 that permits the revoking of television or radio concessions for channels that could be found guilty of “promoting, endorsing, or inciting war (...) or (that could) endanger national security” (Human Rights Watch 2008, pp. 75-79).

In addition to this law, the government proceeded to change Venezuela’s criminal code in 2005 in order to punish libel, or “delito de desacato”, of public servants. “Defamation, mockery, or insult” of a Member of Parliament; member of the Moral Power; the National Electoral Council; and the High Military Command, are susceptible to heavy fines and up to 4 years of imprisonment. “The intensity of the charge will be proportional to the hierarchy of the functionary” (art. 442 of the Criminal Code). Similarly, “insult, offend the honour, reputation and decorum of a person without hard evidence to prove the accusations” (art. 444) could cost up to 2 years. The Human Rights Watch report warned against the “latent threat” (Ibid, p. 82) for journalists and freedom of expression embedded in these legal reforms.

Hugo Chávez’s resentment against national broadcasting companies reached its peak when in 2007, invoking the law for “social responsibility”, the government refused to renew the license of one of Venezuela’s popular national TV channels, Radiocaracas Television (RCTV). The channel, criticised for its involvement in the “coup d’état” of 2002, had refused to “abide” by Chávez’s requests of neutrality and had sustained its campaign of ruthless criticism against governmental policies. The reasons behind the non-renewal of RCTV’s

licence were deemed ambiguous as Hugo Chávez's relentless threats towards its owners in the years preceding the decision gave way to what was interpreted as a legal means to "get rid" of the country's most influential TV channel. Nevertheless, the official explanation for the decision was to free RCTV's airwaves in order to favour state-sponsored communitarian media.

I repeat for those who haven't heard it -or maybe I haven't said it clearly- RCTV's concession comes to an end on May, 27 (2007), and it will not be renewed. It will not be renewed (...) Test me and you shall find me. (Episode 283 2007)

The only remaining opposition channel, Globovisión, accused by Chávez of being "media terrorists", was the target of a dozen administrative proceedings from Conatel, the Venezuelan equivalent of UK's Ofcom. In October 2011, Globovisión was charged with a two-million-dollar fine<sup>8</sup> for fomenting "anxiety and disturbance of public order" as well as broadcasting "hatred and intolerance due to political reasons", after the channel covered a series of riots that caused over 20 deaths in the state prisons of El Rodeo I and II in June of 2011. Moreover, the channel's principal shareholder, Guillermo Zuloaga, had fled the country in 2010 after being accused of usury. Zuloaga insisted that the prosecution was politically motivated and, in a letter addressed to Hugo Chávez, proposed to settle the case in front of the Inter-American Court on Human Rights in order to secure political neutrality. The channel was eventually sold to alleged government front men in May 2013. After RCTV went off the air in 2007, the Caracas-based news outlet had been the last broadcasting television channel to maintain its strong editorial line against the government.

In reaction to the opposition encountered in national channels such as RCTV and Globovisión, Chávez invested in public broadcasting channel Venezolana de Televisión (VTV); he also inaugurated in 2007 VIVE TV, a channel aimed at propagating Venezuelan culture and at developing national production; and sponsored the development of TELESUR, an international station shared by the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Venezuela. Chávez also created ANTV, the Venezuelan parliamentary television, and stimulated community-based media (Mujica 2009, p.20). These

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<sup>8</sup> According to Globovisión's website, this represents 7.5 per cent of the channel's gross income for 2010.

channels, in addition to regional independent Catia TV, and a large number of radio stations, became the bastion of Chávez's political communication. They also broadcast Chávez's show, *Aló Presidente*, both regionally and nationally.

### *Locating the Thesis*

Popular culture and politics seem to have been at odds for quite some time. The emotional and oral aspects of the former are often believed to contradict the expectations of rationality and literacy of the latter. Whereas one speaks to the basic affects of human beings, the other appeals to the higher aspirations of the social realm. However, the rise in media technologies and their omnipresence in our daily lives have brought these universes closer than ever, blurring more often than not the limits between the former and the latter. The media inhabit our lives, they act as connectors, they offer windows into distant realms. The media belong to us, they occupy our intimate space, they wake us up, inform us on the weather, remind us of our plans for the day. The media hold our thoughts for us, act as caretakers of our collective memories, they establish links between what we like and what we might like, between our current selves and our future ones. Our relationship with the media is so intricate that speaking about it, assessing its place, identifying it, can be a challenging task. Locating the presence of media in our lives is akin to locating our nervous system or our sense of smell: definitely there yet seldom identified. No wonder that the media have been seen as “extensions of man” (McLuhan 1994), both crucial in our interactions with the world and highly influential in our perception of it. Whether on a large scale through the identification with an alter ego in avatar games and online communities, or in small inquiries about the best recipe for focaccia bread or the time of our next train, the media fulfil an important part in constructing modern life, as we know it.

From this perspective, it seems unthinkable that the part of our lives so intrinsically connected to the media be separated from the activities of our modern public life. To Thompson (1995), it is precisely because of their capacity to establish an “intimacy at a distance” with individuals and places outside of our physical reach, that the media have become a key component in the process of self-formation in modern societies. By reducing time and space, they offer a wider range of symbolic materials that enhance the individual's experience of the world and expand the possibilities for formation of the self. Simultaneously, by reducing distances, the media open a space of “mediated publicness”, or

the potential for individuals to engage in “quasi-interactions” with distant others. The main characteristic here is that the media abolish previous requirements of co-presence for public engagement and that, by making them visible, “[a]ctions or events can acquire a publicness which is independent of their capacity to be seen or heard directly by a plurality of co-present individuals” (p.126). Seen in this light, the development of the media has been central in our understanding of what constitutes modern public life, for it is by being open to witness in a mediated landscape that individuals both create and enter the public domain.

Benedict Anderson (1991) captured the instrumental place of the media in constructing the public in his seminal work on the role of print media in consolidating the “imagined communities” of the early nation states. Although these populations were spread across the land, their access to print media introduced them to the notion that, beyond the differences of space, experience, and the fact that most of these individuals would never actually meet, they became aware of their belonging to a larger group and, through the media, developed a sense of common identity. The public is thus both a mediated space and a mediated identity. It is rendered visible by the media as well as witnessed by those who are brought together across different locations. To Hartley, the public domain and the public can only be encountered in mediated forms:

Television, popular newspapers, magazines and photography, the popular media of the modern period, are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being. (Hartley 1992, p. 2)

This also means that public conduct, and public acts, need to respond to the exigencies and limitations of the mediated grounds. As Thompson puts it “a public act is a visible act, performed openly so that everyone can see; a private act is invisible, an act performed behind closed doors” (Thompson 1995, p. 123). If visibility is a trait of the public domain, public acts must take place at the media level and, as such, conform to the norms and practices of the medium. Publicness must therefore be performed.

The place of television in the process of self-formation has been the source of much intellectual thought. Television’s capacity to break the boundaries of time and space grant it the potential to bring individuals closer together, provide visibility to faraway events (Thompson 1995), offer a tribune for the witnessing of others (Coleman & Ross 2010). It

bridges the gap between the familiar space of the home and the infinite possibilities of the outside world (Silverstone 1994). It allows for the display of everyday life activities and invites its audiences to a continuous dialogue. The agency required for members of the audience to engage in the process of self-formation varies according to the ontological reading that one adopts. Bringing the media into the discussion inevitably rises questions of effects, uses, performance, inferences, and more. Because of the permeable nature of time and space through the membranes of the media, agency is here understood as the voluntary engagement of audiences with their mediated landscapes (McQuail 2010). Individuals actively engage with the wide array of mediated experiences in the process of interpellation and of formation of the self.

### *The Structure of the Thesis*

*Aló Presidente* was first and foremost a political institution. It served a purpose in the development of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. In fact, it will be argued throughout these pages that *Aló Presidente* played a fundamental role in constructing and maintaining the support necessary for this Revolution. The place of *Aló Presidente* in people's homes, the familiar narratives of its activities, and the continuous corroboration of Hugo Chávez's figure as the leader of the Bolivarian movement, all performed in parallel ways important conditions for the consolidation, reinforcement, and guidance of the grassroots' support. Political campaigns are commonly believed to construct public opinion, in the case of *Aló Presidente*, the show served as a continuous campaign aimed at constructing a public and an identity.

It is important to stress the complex nature of the show, as the originality of *Aló Presidente* also makes it difficult to describe the full extent of its scope. A way to approach *Aló Presidente* is to accept that, as part of the Bolivarian Revolution, or as the televisual leg of Chávez's political project, the show was also a "work in progress". In other words, just like the Bolivarian Revolution evolved over the years into a *Socialist* revolution, articulating and rearticulating itself during the process, *Aló Presidente* adapted its format to the changing circumstances, evolving with the technological and political advancements over time and adjusting its narratives to the political and cultural circumstances it traversed. Fully embedded in the political scenario of Venezuela, the television show and the Chávez administration shared an organic bond. As such, the approach I have taken in this work understands *Aló Presidente* as a blueprint of the political process that took place in Venezuela



from 1999 to 2013, a “black box” of Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. This also implies that the reading the content of the show must be done in parallel to its political context, for the development of the programme is seen as intrinsically linked to the political events taking place in Venezuela at the time.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 comprise the bulk of the empirical analysis. They assess the chronological evolution of the programme in light of the political context occurring at different stages of the Bolivarian Revolution and offer a critical reading of the discourse of the show according to the different times or “trends” that occurred throughout Chávez’s administration and the different televisual narratives that the show employed. Reading through the transcripts of the episodes, these three “stages” in Chávez’s political project are informed by the decision-making and political landscape that accompanied it over time. In order to introduce the different elements that inform the analysis, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide the theoretical foundations that help navigate the empirical body of the text.

Chapter 2 pays close attention to the format of *Aló Presidente* in light of other television genres and, more specifically, in light of the literature on talk shows. Looking into the wide array of segments and activities that took place on the show during its 13-year run, it will seek to unpack the dynamic of the programme, locating the roles of the host, members of the audience, and other potential actors in *Aló Presidente*. The fact that the Sunday show lasted 6 hours on average, that it was broadcast live from different locations every week, was hosted by the president of the country and included the presence of Cabinet members, local politicians and the general public, the fact that it also received phone calls from the audience and staged school plays, poetry readings and factory inaugurations, make for an interesting specimen of television. The chapter offers a first introduction to the immense wealth of data accumulated over 378 episodes and provides a detailed reading of the different television genres comprised the format of the show. Combining entertainment, family topics, variety segments, political commentary and much more, *Aló Presidente* is seen as a unique hybrid of talk, reality, and public service television with an interesting political twist.

Following the detailed dissection of *Aló Presidente*, Chapter 3 zooms out of the specifics of the show in order to look at the wider picture and explore the place of television in everyday life. It is in this chapter that discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) sets the grounds for the subsequent empirical analysis of the show and provides the tools for understanding the

subject as being “interpellated” in the field of subjectivity. Laclau and Mouffe’s departing idea is that discourses are meaning-making articulations that construct our understanding of identity and of the social world. But discourse is not limited to the text. For Laclau and Mouffe, language is seen as a system of signs (or discourses) that are in relation to one another to form meaning. These constructions, or articulations, can differ according to their contexts, making language fundamentally instable and suggesting that meaning is in fact never fully “fixed”. From this perspective, different discourses construct different understandings of the world and, in order to fix their meanings and stabilise the conflicts that opposing constructions might create, they attempt to accomplish “hegemony”, or dominance over other worldviews. This approach is of particular use for the analysis, for it allows for the understanding of *Aló Presidente* as a meaning-making discourse that constructed a certain understanding of the world. It also establishes an important parallel between what was taking place on the set of the show and the political events that informed these articulations. *Aló Presidente* is thus seen as the televisual leg of a discourse aimed at articulating the political project that was unfolding in Venezuela called the “Bolivarian Revolution”.

Embracing this social constructionist perspective, the chapter also explores how the very medium in which this discourse was articulated played a role in the meaning-making process. Television is here understood as a transitional space (Silverstone 1994), or a safe platform for the creation, distribution and performance of discursive articulations of the self (Thompson 1995) that contributes to the discursive landscape with its narratives and flow. Because of its capacity to reduce time and space, and because of its role in everyday life, television is seen as producing a sense of intimacy and socialisation as well as a space for the articulation of identity. This encourages the formation of a public with a shared sense of identity and a willingness to engage in the support and reproduction of the common worldview. This chapter sets the grounds for the understanding of, television, and of *Aló Presidente* in particular, as the locale for the hegemonic articulation of a Bolivarian public in the construction and maintenance of Chávez’s political project in Venezuela.

Before applying the frameworks of Chapters 2 and 3 to the case of *Aló Presidente*, Chapter 4, outlines in more detail the different theoretical and methodological tools of the research. It also gives a precise account of the different empirical steps and the difficulties and challenges encountered while conducting fieldwork in the highly polarised context of Chávez’s

Venezuela. On a more personal note, the chapter discusses my position as a Venezuelan researcher attempting to untangle the analysis from the highly emotional tone of the show, the antagonising response of contributors from the field, and the overwhelming amount of data available. With over 370 episodes of an average of 6 hours each, the sheer volume of television accumulated over the years of *Aló Presidente* required a methodological choice. Insofar as the thesis wanted to assess the parallels between the Chávez's political project and his television programme, it was decided that I would conduct a descriptive and interpretive reading of the transcripts in light of their political context.

Chapter 4 begins with the first episodes of *Aló Presidente* only a few months after Chávez's first election in 1999. It follows the show from its radio format and through its transition to television, and corresponds to Chávez's re-election in 2000 after so-called "mega elections" were called for all public offices due to the redraft of the Constitution. The chapter accompanies Chávez's administration until opposition forces took over the presidency in 2001 for 72 hours during a disputed vacuum of power/ coup d'état. In terms of the political landscape, it introduces the first measures of the Bolivarian Revolution after Chávez's arrival to power, the change of the Constitution and the subsequent introduction of the adjective "Bolivarian" to the name of the country, the first nationalisations, and some of the most important new legislation. Special importance is given to the rhetorical concept of "participatory democracy", invoked time and time again both in Chávez's discourse and in many projects advanced by the Revolution. As for the format of the show, the chapter explores the type of interactions between the president and the electorate as well as the other activities that would be developed on the set of the show. Part of the discussion is aimed at unpacking the dynamic of such dialogue in the light of the "participatory" tone of the project and at understanding the role of participants on *Aló Presidente*. This introduces the hypothesis that, through the familiar narratives of talk shows and other television genres, and the performance of both members of the audience and the president himself, the show brought together a public around the articulation of a common "Bolivarian" identity.

Chapter 5 then surveys the events of the national strike and the attempted coup d'état that marked a new turn in Chávez's project and brought special attention to the social welfare aspect of the Revolution. Along with the development of the Bolivarian *Misiones*, it is argued that the tone of the show emphasised the ideological foundations of the political project and

allocated different roles to its actors. Firstly, through long “chains of equivalence” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), Hugo Chávez and members of the public were associated to historical figures of the Venezuelan imaginary such as Simón Bolívar, Don Quixote, and Jesus Christ. Secondly, following the series of protests and strikes from the opposition, the Bolivarian public was interpellated in antagonistic subject positions against articulations of the opposition as enemies, traitors and, ultimately, non-citizens of the motherland. It is also argued that, during this middle period of *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez’s figure progressively detached itself from that of a member of the Bolivarian public to that of a pedagogue or general ideological guide of a process that is defined both in terms of its own fragility vis-à-vis the threatening “other” and as a “work in progress”, a product of the common will. It is also during this period that Chávez introduces for the first time the term “Socialism” into the Bolivarian discourse and sets out the foundations of what he will call *Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* as the new leg of the path for the Revolution.

Chávez’s key role in defining and developing the Bolivarian Revolution then gains full attention in Chapter 6 when, after his third election in 2007, most activities on the show were geared towards staging Chávez’s decision-making on the air. Because of the legislative requisites of the socialist turn, as well as Chávez’s need to extend the maximum legal number of terms in order to aim for re-election, the first few years of this third stage are aimed at re-drafting the Constitution for a second time. *Aló Presidente*, by then a staple Sunday programme served as a platform to reinforce the powerful figure of the president and showcase the centralising measures taking place under Chávez’s rule. A United Socialist Party and its satellite trade union see the light under the strict leadership of Hugo Chávez; regional and local governments are informed of competences and budgets reductions on the air; new nationalisations and land seizures are announced on the show; all candidly announced in front of the live cameras of *Aló Presidente*. Insofar as the public had internalised many of the behaviours and routines articulated through the show over the years, and it is important to note that similar measures had been present on *Aló Presidente* throughout the years, the response was that of sustained support for a legitimate office holder, regardless of the authoritarian tone of the host. Chávez’s figure in the Bolivarian Revolution was so fundamental that, like during his first campaign in 1998, he had come to embody the project itself. His role in the formation and reinforcement of the Bolivarian identity was such

that his legitimacy stemmed not from his political office but from his place as the sole leader of a populist group.

### *Conclusion*

It is in this context that *Aló Presidente* and Bolivarian Revolution became intertwined in the discursive formation of a common identity and the development of a political project aimed at turning away from the bipartisan agreement that had brought the Venezuelan democracy to a deadlock. In an complex suite of articulations, television and politics informed each other in a process that would transform the way in which host and audience, president and electorate interacted with each other, the way in which a Bolivarian identity was formed and, the means through which the legitimacy of a populist leader was consolidated. On *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez performed the role of a friend, an educator and a trusted guide. He brought down the boundaries between everyday life and politics in a constant rearticulation of the Bolivarian Revolution and turned the familiar space of the television screen into a platform for identity formation and electoral support.

The approach to this work is therefore threefold. Firstly, as part of our everyday lives and our general landscape of Western modern societies, the media are engaged in continuous production, reproduction and distribution of meaning; they are both a source of discourses and a locale for discursive struggle (Torfing 1999, Carpentier 2011). Secondly, at the epistemological level, meaning is understood as constructed through discourse, constantly articulated in an attempt to fix the formulations of social relations and, ultimately, of the self (Hartley 1982, Laclau & Mouffe 2001). And thirdly, as an ontological dimension, the political encompasses all levels of social life, beyond institutional politics and into the everyday lives of political subjects (Mouffe 2005). Such an approach implies that a certain degree of flexibility was necessary, traversing a wide range of disciplines in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. A lot of ground needed to be covered in order to investigate the evolution of the television show against the background of a political process, and different levels of discourse required untangling in order to shed light onto the relationship that was being articulated on the show.

“‘[T]elevision’ is inexplicable” (Newcomb 2010, p. 27)

## Chapter 2

### The Production and Genre of *Aló Presidente*

*Aló Presidente* started on Radio Nacional de Venezuela as a phone-in starring the President of Venezuela on 23 May 1999. It soon moved to television on its 40<sup>th</sup> episode on 27 August 2000 and lasted for 378 episodes until a few months before Hugo Chávez’s death in 2013. Despite a series of changes, the show kept its original title and assumed as its main feature the interaction between the President and his audience. However, *Aló Presidente* was a stage for manifold activities, and, often, political decisions made on the set of the show were directly implemented as presidential decrees. This type of event surpassed the participatory or entertainment value of the programme, imparting a certain sense of institutional authority to it.

This chapter will introduce the television programme in its broad lines, locating it among television genres and establishing an overview of what could be expected during its five-hour episodes on Sunday mornings. It will discuss the structure of the show and its most famous moments. Most excerpts will highlight the most original characteristic of the show: the interaction between the President and the people of Venezuela. At times, the involvement of other political officials, as well as some elements of political decision-making will be introduced in order to give a broader picture of what used to take place on the show. These elements will be developed further in subsequent chapters when an in depth analysis of the evolution of *Aló Presidente* will examine the different elements of the show. But a first introduction is necessary in order to assess the “mechanics” of this particular television programme, classify its televisual genre, and familiarise the reader with what used to be Hugo Chávez’s main means of communication.

#### *Introducing Aló Presidente*

#### *Aló Presidente as an Itinerant Show*

*Aló Presidente* was an itinerant show: its set varied according to the location of that week’s episode. The choice depended on the President’s agenda: factory inaugurations, local

elections, community developments, school openings, etc. all worthy of an official visit. Sometimes, Hugo Chávez broadcast from the presidential palace in Miraflores (Caracas) where the official set of *Aló Presidente* was constructed after the show moved from radio to television during its first year. However, the programme was mostly nomadic and, when on location, the stage would be set under gazebos close to the event that was being celebrated. Hugo Chávez sat in front of a desk on a stage facing the audience. He was sometimes surrounded by television screens and blackboards, but often the background overlooked the landscape. The audience sat in front of the president, on rows of chairs arranged for the occasion. Outside, beyond several rows of security guards, members of the public awaited to see the president. On 29 January 2012, the last of 378 episodes was broadcast, completing over 1600 hours of live broadcast. The shortest episode (number 1) lasted 1 hour and 8 minutes and the longest (number 295) 8 hours and 7 minutes. Episodes lasted on average 6 hours and had no commercial breaks.

One of the underlying aims of the show was to offer a continuous overview of the state of affairs in the country. For that purpose, episodes of *Aló Presidente* paid special attention to the characteristics of the regions in which they were shot. As a result, local populations were invited to participate with demonstrations of local craftsmanship in which groups from the local communities danced and sang to the tunes of their folklore. The atmosphere was always relaxed in what appeared to be an informal gathering: outfits were casual, language conversational, the audience joyful, and the President well spirited. Indeed, *Aló Presidente* was a family-oriented show; it aired on Sundays at 11am and made for a Sunday lunchtime variety show.

Before Alo Presidente, Sunday afternoon television used to be about horse races. From 1pm onwards, people would play domino, drink alcohol, and bet on horses (...) Alo Presidente replaces gaming with a family programme that talks about politics, geopolitics, and Venezuelan history<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, access to *Aló Presidente* was subject to invitation; the list of guests, participants and interviewees was tightly controlled and it was common knowledge that members of the opposition were not welcome on the show. Even among supporters of the

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<sup>9</sup> Maria Josefina Quijada, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas (July 27, 2011).

regime, access to *Aló Presidente* could be difficult to achieve. Similarly, journalists from television channels that belonged to the opposition were not granted accreditation to the programme (León 2004).

Members of the government have to be officially invited in order to enter the set. There have been cases where governors of the states hosting the show have been denied access to the audience. If the President is upset with that person, there is no going in<sup>10</sup>.

### *Aló Presidente as the Political Communication of Hugo Chávez*

Hugo Chávez was known for his regular interventions on national television and his continuous presence in the media. The budget for the Ministry for Information and Communication (MINCI) for 2012 was of 764 million bolivares<sup>11</sup> (177 million US dollars). Of this, only 10 per cent were directly intended for *Aló Presidente*. Moreover, thanks to the “Ley de Telecomunicaciones” passed in June 2000, Hugo Chávez could invoke the right to “suspend the programmes of telecommunication networks when judged useful for the nation, or when addressing matters of security or public order” whenever he deemed necessary. This allowed the President to carry out numerous public announcements and speeches on a weekly, sometimes daily basis, and exercise what some call “governmental censorship”.

When Chávez goes on all national airwaves, he is in fact silencing any other sources of information. The country is in a news vacuum for as long as he talks<sup>12</sup>.

Between 1999 and 2010, in addition to his Sunday show, Chávez accumulated a total of 1300 hours of national “cadenas<sup>13</sup>”, an astonishing average of 195 interventions a year (Mena 2010). However, *Aló Presidente* was the only outlet in which the President engaged directly with the citizens. Due to its participatory nature, the show presented itself as a space where two-way communication took place, allowing the electorate to provide feedback and become active in a dialogue with its government.

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<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Villegas, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas (July 18, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Venezuelan currency.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Lucien, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas (July 21, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Simultaneous broadcasting on all national channels



(With the show), we will be here, chatting with you, hearing you, and taking note of your criticisms, your advice, and your ideas. For, in the end, the reason [behind the creation of the show] is the pressing necessity for the President of Venezuela, just as any other citizen of Venezuela, to be in touch with the majority of Venezuelans (...) We are here at your service, we are here to tell each other the truth, to communicate, and to build together the path for a new Venezuela. (Episode 1 1999)

The following excerpts from the archive will demonstrate the originality of the show by presenting a range of situations encountered on the stage of *Aló Presidente*. It will offer a brief overview of the show's dynamic and will argue that, underneath the light tone, more serious issues are addressed. In fact, under the scrutiny of the public eye, Hugo Chávez announced public bills, evaluated Supreme Court statements, examined matters of foreign policy and instructed members of his Cabinet in front of live cameras. The goal is to provide the reader with a broad sense of what happened on the set of the show.

#### *Aló Presidente: Setting the Agenda*

*Aló Presidente* did not follow the typical schedule of a television programme: its episodes were not restricted to a limited allocated slot. Most episodes started at 11am but the length of the programme depended on what was on the agenda. Also, the regularity of *Aló Presidente* was determined by the President's schedule, episodes were not divided into series. Since its premiere in 1999, the show had two main hiatuses: the first was part of a "communication strategy aimed at strengthening the State media" that took the show off the air from 24 October 2004 to 9 January 2005. The second took place during Hugo Chávez's diagnosis and subsequent treatment for cancer in June 2011. The show resumed on 08 January 2012 after six months of silence, and was suspended later that month due to Chávez's health, eventually marking the end of the programme.

Behind the scenes, the week started on Mondays with the definition of that Sunday's theme: Hugo Chávez and his communication team would agree on the topic and proceed to research the location. Access to the production and location of *Aló Presidente* was heavily restricted, as Prensa Presidencial, the President's communication team, did not disclose information on the subject.

First, the President meets with his close collaborators to decide on the topic of that week's episode. They come up with a proposal and start calling all the people involved around that theme. If it is around housing for example, they call the relevant Minister and see what he has to offer: "there is a neighbourhood being developed in X area, and a series of apartments in Y city, but the best is probably complex Z that will be inaugurated very soon". The show will then be broadcast from there. Once the President and his inner circle have chosen a location, the military commission in charge of the President's communication (Prensa Presidencial) contacts the television channels, the ministers and so on in order to organize the episode. They are in charge of the logistics of the show and distribute to VIVE and VTV the different segments of the broadcast. Prensa Presidencial manages the script, and we deal with the technical elements of the show<sup>14</sup>.

If the theme for that week was oil production, for example, ministers, civil servants, and local communities were contacted in order to scout refineries that had recently achieved some kind of breakthrough. The case of *Aló Presidente* 361 illustrates that example: in June 2010, Hugo Chávez was celebrating the third anniversary of the nationalisation of the Orinoco oil strip. For the occasion, the President broadcast the show from the industrial complex PetroAnzoátegui, one of five companies that followed the annexing of the strip to PDVSA, the national oil company. After enquiring about the state of progress of the plant, the episode's agenda concerned the production of coke developed in the plant. Large amounts of coke were produced as an output. Such production was introduced during the show as the perfect incentive to create thermo electrical plants based on the combustion and gasification of the coke. The focus on electricity led Hugo Chávez to discuss the forces of the "contra revolución" and their impact of the electrical rationing that the country was undergoing at the time. The President considered that the creation of new thermo electrical plants in the area would indeed put an end to private control of energy and limit "the powers of the oligarchy". (Episode 361 2012).

Once the location and themes were defined, the *Aló Presidente* team, under the scrutiny of Prensa Presidencial and the umbrella of the Ministry for Communication and Information

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<sup>14</sup> Carlos Mogollón, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas: Phone Interview (July 20, 2011).

(MINCI), was responsible for researching the topics of the script and providing the relevant evidence and support for the development of the episode. According to the website, a team of producers, economists, anthropologists, and sociologists was in charge of laying the foundations for the week's episode, as the President relied on their research in front of the cameras on Sunday. The final version of the script contained the exact location; list of guests; number of pases<sup>15</sup>, and guidelines for the activities taking place on the set, etc. although most of the President's interventions were notoriously improvised. "The script is there but often the President decides to improvise. He goes off camera, or asks to speak with someone from the crowd during a pase"<sup>16</sup>.

### *Alopresidente.gob.ve*

The remit of the *Aló Presidente* team covered more than the Sunday show; the editorial board of *Aló Presidente* was in fact in charge of managing the website of *Aló Presidente*, a platform that offered a follow-up to the themes discussed on the show. To continue with the example of episode 361, the article "200 empresas petroleras se han transformado en propiedad nacional"<sup>17</sup> was issued after the show. It read: "the President underlined in his Sunday show that he will continue with the recovery of these key sectors of the economy" (Chacón 2010). The website also provided continuity to the work done on the set: it published interviews with those involved in projects broadcast during the show; reports about the sites that were visited; maps of the areas; transcripts of the show; galleries of photographs; and publications in tune with the ideas discussed by Chávez.

As the programme evolved, it became the job of the department of *Aló Presidente* in the Ministry of Communication and Information to deal with the phone calls received through the free line. It is difficult to obtain information regarding the behind-the-scenes of the show and the management of the 0800-ALÓ2001 but, according to the website, the *Aló Presidente* team answered hundreds of calls each week. The service also provided follow-up to the requests addressed to the president through phone calls, letters, tweets and email. At the time, the mission statement of the website was according to Torres, to "manage humanitarian aid (...) in terms of medicine, surgical material, ophthalmological (requests) and medical

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<sup>15</sup> Live two-way

<sup>16</sup> Carlos Mogollón, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas: Phone Interview (July 20, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> « 200 oil companies have been nationalised»

assistance. It also channels requests regarding pensions, employment, housing, building material (...) to the relevant governmental entities”(Torres 2011).

### *Aló Presidente as Presidential Address*

The Sunday programme was also the place to keep the electorate informed of the activities of the President. As stated on the website of the show: “the head of state (...) engages in national and international analyses, contributing to the training of the people” (Cova 2011). An example of these analyses can be found in this excerpt from the episode 283 in which the President discussed the founding of “Mercal”, a chain of state supermarkets that provide subsidised foodstuffs to remote communities.

President Chávez: In a state of capitalism, Mercal could not exist. Because capitalism means free market, “every man for himself”. Capitalism is based on the savage idea of the invisible hand of the market; that means that if you produce a kilo of sugar, and you sell it for whatever value you have decided to sell it for, no one can interfere with that. The free market does not have mechanisms for regulation, for the protection of the community. And in the neoliberal and imperialist phase of capitalism, the State is reduced to its minimal expression so the private sector can occupy all areas. This is what was happening here. I keep insisting on this so you don’t forget that we need to support the socialist stance, we need to build socialism. Mercal is an instrument, and it must be (an instrument) of fair trade, of socialist trade. (Episode 283 2007)

In order to inform the audience on the weekly commitments of the president, “National Agenda” videos were broadcast during the show to explain the nature of Chávez’s duties and goals. The week was illustrated in images with a detailed account of the Executive’s schedule; the meetings he attended that week; public works that were inaugurated; figures and statistics from Venezuelan economy; summaries of his speeches, etc.

(Commentary) Within the context of the building of an alternative model called “New Economic International Order”, the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frias inaugurated this Saturday the Presidential Commission for the Mission Mercal in an act that took place in the Ríos Reyna

Room of the Teresa Carreño theatre. This initiative, as stated by the chief of the Executive, is paramount for the alternative Bolivarian model. (Episode 177 2004)

But the programme was also considered to be the source of the President's decision-making activities, and many announcements made on the show were presented as official rulings. The presence in the audience of Chávez's cabinet, as well as the vocabulary employed on the show, portrayed the solemnity of an official meeting headed by the chief executive. Beyond the expert's guidance of the pundit show, some interventions on *Aló Presidente* were more reminiscent of a Presidential Address. Oscar Lucien, Venezuelan journalist and cinematographer, tells the story of a diplomat who had been sent to his first official location under the Chávez Administration. After months of silence, the young ambassador was feeling uncertain about his duties and contacted the Chancellor for further instructions. In response, he received the transcripts of *Aló Presidente*<sup>18</sup>.

The set of *Aló Presidente* was indeed a platform for official announcements. On 7 April 2002, following repeated protests within Venezuelan civil society and a general strike in December 2001 calling for the resignation of Hugo Chávez, the President made an announcement that would spark a second general strike the following Wednesday (9 April 2002) and result in general unrest and the absence of Chávez in power from April 11 to April 13, 2002. That Sunday, on the set of *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez ordered the dismissal of seven executives of Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) after the Venezuelan state oil company had taken part in the general strike and was exerting political pressure for his resignation.

President Chávez: (...) the elite [members] of PDVSA stepped over the line. We have tried to dialogue, to negotiate, to show good intentions, but they are going too far and I have decided to dismiss them. I announce the dismissal of the following people: Eddy Ramírez, Managing Director of Palmaven until today, you're out. (...) Mr. Juan Fernández, Manager of Planning and Finance Control, thank you for your services, you are fired from Petróleos de Venezuela (...) These people have been sabotaging a company that belongs to all Venezuelans. You are out! [The list goes on until the 7<sup>th</sup> person] (...) My instructions are clear:

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<sup>18</sup> Oscar Lucien, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas (July 21, 2011).

from now on, any member of PDVSA calling for the strike will be automatically fired from the [Venezuelan] oil industry (...) Enough! (Episode 101 2002)

Another symbolic moment in the history of *Aló Presidente* happened on 8 March 2008, after the killing by Colombian armed forces of top FARC member, Raúl Reyes, in Ecuador. The Colombian government, lead by Álvaro Uribe, had allegedly responded in defence when its forces came under fire from across the border. Rafael Correa, Ecuador's President, had claimed that the guerrillero's hideout had been the target of a Colombian operation in their war against the FARC. In reaction to what he considered a "violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty by Colombia", Hugo Chávez ordered the deployment of Venezuelan tanks to the border with Colombia, as well as the complete withdrawal of diplomatic representatives in the country.

President Chávez: President Correa has informed me that he is withdrawing his ambassador from Bogota, and that he is sending troops towards the North. I told him "count on Venezuela's [support] for anything you need, under any circumstances". Minister of Defence: move ten battalions to the border with Colombia, immediately (...) Tank battalions. Deploy the air force. We don't want a war, but we won't allow the North American empire and its puppet President Uribe, with the Colombian oligarchy, to weaken us. We will not allow this (...) I am also ordering the immediate withdrawal of any personnel that remains in our embassy in Bogota. Our embassy is closed. Mister Chancellor Maduro: close the Venezuelan embassy in Bogota. (Episode 306 2008)

### *The Genre of Aló Presidente*

*Aló Presidente* was thus an important channel for the communication between Hugo Chávez and his electorate. The show was broadcast nearly every week for 13 years and it included an immense array of activities, guests, news, and entertainment. It is because of its eclectic nature that *Aló Presidente* is a fascinating case of political communication and television studies alike. The fact that it started as a phone-in with the president suggests that it might have followed the traditional route of talk shows, presenting the political guest with a few questions for an hour or so. But the fact that Chávez very soon became the sole anchor of the show made it more reminiscent of pundit shows, in which the host benefits from some form of expertise with regards to the topics discussed. Adding the fact that Chávez would conduct

the activities for three, four, five hours at a time certainly gives an interesting twist to the show, pushing the boundaries of talk show activities and making it difficult to place it in a specific genre category. And it was its capacity to touch upon different genre narratives that made *Aló Presidente* a highly televisual programme, constantly evolving to adapt to its technological and political context. As stated by Livingstone and Lunt (1994): “because television is constantly looking for new programmes, genre boundaries are fuzzy and evolving, resulting in diverse genre overlaps and subtypes” (p. 37). This is echoed by Jones (2005) when he argues: “television talk is now beyond genre because contemporary cable programme actively works against any stable notion of what constitutes talk as a distinctive category” (p. 158). And in a similar way, Ilie (2006) addresses the difficulty to define the genre by emphasising that “forms of talk endlessly reconstruct themselves by violating and transgressing their own discursive conventions” (p. 490). It is in this context of televisual adaptability and boundary flexibility that the following part of the chapter will explore the literature on talk shows and television genres in order to locate the different strands of narratives that composed the discourse of *Aló Presidente*.

#### *Aló Presidente as a Talk Show*

With special emphasis on the United States, Shattuc (1997) differentiates between daytime and evening talk shows. She characterises “issue-oriented” talk shows as daytime chat shows oriented towards discussing contemporary social issues. These are constructed around the active participation of the audience with the help of a moderating host, and often include the presence of an “expert” who provides legitimacy to the discussion. Offering a stage for personal experience, these shows resemble evening talk shows in their emphasis on the effect of public issues on the private sphere. However, late night chat shows tend to find human-interest stories in current affairs, thus focusing more on political events. The current case encompasses a mix of both, gaining legitimacy by the very fact that the host was the president of the country therefore adding a political tone to a more family oriented daytime talk show.

Including the presence and live participation of members of the audience provides the grounds for discussion around matters ranging from taste, or manners, to current affairs. Starting in the US with the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1967, the genre expanded in the 1980s and 1990s with flag names as the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (1984) and the *Jerry Springer Show*

(1991). At the time, the popularity of the genre was such that presidential candidates would include appearances in their national campaigns (Timberg & Erler 2002). But talk shows are as versatile as their cultural context will allow.

Although the fundamental characteristics of talk shows are easily recognizable across cultures, it seems possible to identify cultural nuances that distinguish talk shows according to their country of origin. (Ilie 2006, p. 492).

It is also commonly agreed that the talk show brings about a multiplicity of voices in a context of audience participation by emphasising both the “rational emancipatory potential” and the “emotional public spaces” of its dynamic. It is on this last criterion -the degree of involvement of the audience- that Haarman (1999) attempts to categorise the genre into three subtypes. In her division, while including a strong level of participation, the evening (or “celebrity”) talk shows and issue-oriented shows offer a setup in which the audience is separated from the panellists, host, or experts. She adds a third category: that of the audience discussion, for those shows where the talk is entirely conducted by the audience members. And, indeed, discussion programmes may also be divided into studio debate, phone-in debate, and single-issue debate (McNair, Hibberd & Schlesinger 2003).

According to Timberg and Erler (2002), the principles of the television talk show are that: 1) “it is anchored by a host who is responsible for the tone and direction and for guiding and setting limits on the talk that is elicited from guests on the air”; 2) “it is experienced in the present tense as a ‘conversation’” and that “the talk show’s daily present-tense immediacy is its present-tense intimacy (...) the intimacy of the moment is tied to the history and continuity of the host’s relationship with the audience”; 3) it is a commodity; 4) while it must appear to be spontaneous, it is highly structured. Contrary to many talk shows, in the case of *Aló Presidente*, the role of the audience, callers and panellists was often limited by the predominance of the host’s interventions. In this context, *Aló Presidente* seemed to favour the place of Hugo Chávez as that of the “expert” as well as the host, reminiscent of another subgenre of television: the pundit show, where the presenter holds an expert position, proposing a reading of current affairs.



### *Aló Presidente as a Pundit Show*

This last subgenre, the news/talk magazine, is also a common version of the talk show. Mostly based on interviews, the shows favour discussions with politicians or other experts over the participation of the audience. Derived from Sanskrit, the term ‘pundit’ refers, in contemporary India, to a “learned person or teacher who is not only an authority but also a renowned political figure” (Nimmo & Combs, 1992, p. 6). This double connotation perceives the bearer of information not only as knowledgeable but also as relevant in political affairs, active in their management of information. Additionally, the pundit may also be regarded as a teacher, publicly accepted for his role in imparting the knowledge.

Political talk such as that found in pundit shows “has always assumed one crucial point: that those doing the talking should have direct ‘insider’ knowledge of what they are talking about”. Contrary to other functions of political communication, among which the participatory ideals advanced above, the assumption of expertise “is built on the belief that such speech is designed primarily to inform or educate”, therefore understanding the audiences of these programmes as “only interested in hearing expert opinions” (Jones 2005, p. 35). Longer than newsmagazines, the pundit talk show addresses current affairs under the expert guidance of its presenter, often a journalist reputed for their insider knowledge of the political world and at ease in its dynamics and complexities. The journalist-pundit acts as guide and commentator and explains to the audience how to navigate the world of politics and what affairs to value in it. Considered to be an authority in political affairs, he acts as “a source of opinion-formation and opinion-articulation, agenda-setting and agenda-evaluation” (McNair 1995, p. 79). In fact, the very significance of news is often relayed to the expertise of the pundit-journalist, whose choice of current affairs will portray a reality deemed relevant and carefully selected for the viewer’s consumption and political education. To some extent, the production team and the viewership, whose similar views are often implied in their choice of programme, have agreed upon the editorial selection.

Pundit talk shows feature individuals whose primary purpose is to establish for other insiders (and political junkies who subscribe to this way of thinking or who simply enjoy monitoring power) what the event of the week ‘really means’.  
(Jones 2005, p. 152)

Interestingly, the audience of the pundit talk show is composed of insiders, or “political junkies”, rather than the wider target of the daytime talk show and its previously mentioned emphasis on the layperson and “common sense” interpretation of events. Intended for an expert audience, the pundit show reflects the more politically oriented content of our case study. This is perhaps more reminiscent of an inquisitive role of the media, challenging the accountability of the political realm.

But something is lost in this format, for the pundit show does not attempt to give voice to different interpretations. Focusing on providing a blueprint for what “matters” in current affairs, these programmes are designed to clarify issues, not raise a space for debate. Distancing itself from the talk show in terms of its accessibility, pundit television incurs the risk of alienating an audience that finds it hard to connect with the realities portrayed on the show. Partly because of its high political content, often reminding its public of “what they do not (though perhaps should) know”, and because of its failure to provide voices that are familiar, the genre caters for an “insider” audience. In order to overcome the seriousness and lack of accessibility that reduce the ratings of certain political talk shows, many programmes have sought to add comedic traits such as satire or parody to their scripts. Jones (2005) claims that in their attempt to provide solace for the complexities of political affairs, shows have replaced the original serious tones of pundit TV with forms of entertainment: “wit mixed with seriousness of the wise fools has perhaps offered an alternative (or better) means for making sense of political life” (p. 94).

Coleman (2003) compares the viewership of political programmes and reality television and argues that the importance of representation, as well as the value that the audiences give to authenticity of the participants lie on the “ordinariness of their activities”, or the fact that their responses to everyday life situations and concerns about mundane events reflect things the audience can easily relate to (p. 754).

The immense popularity of reality TV formats of many kinds is linked to this desire of the public to witness themselves as a central actor in their own drama.  
(Ibid, p. 476)

In order to address the gap between representatives and citizens, Coleman suggests that both politicians and audiences need to “see the world as the other experiences it” (p.757). In an era

of mass communications, new media, and continuous political advertising, he argues, the accelerated pace of message dissemination strengthens the common impression that politicians speak for themselves and reproduces a world that does not reflect the majority. In order to establish a connection, or a “reconnection”, between politicians and citizens, he argues that it is paramount to take peoples’ *experiences* into account.

On *Aló Presidente*, Chávez would often breach those boundaries between the political realm and the everyday life human experience. In the following example, he describes his experience with presidential summits,

President Chávez: To tell you the truth, when it came to presidential summits, I often felt like a loner (...) I remember the first summit that Fidel had also attended. It was in 1999 and, after one of my interventions, Fidel Castro sent me a handwritten note saying: “Chávez, I feel like I no longer am the only devil in these summits”. We both looked out of place. (Chávez 2012)

#### *Aló Presidente as Reality Television and Public Service Broadcasting*

Elements of these interventions are evocative of the dynamic of the reality genre, with its claims about authenticity, staged reality, voyeurism, and public engagement. More than simple announcements, the President would often include his Cabinet, or members of the local governments, in a display of live decision-making similar to parliament television. Murray and Ouellette (2009) define Reality Television as an “unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (p. 3). In their view, while its claims to an “entertaining real” and depiction of “unmediated” “authentic personalities” separate it from fictional television, important notions of profit and popularity are associated with the genre. Indeed, much literature on reality television has linked the genre to neoliberal practices of individualism, providing the viewer with DIY, charitable and lifestyle programmes that reinforce the idea that individuals are in charge of acquiring the necessary tools for the satisfaction of their needs, emphasising personal initiative and responsibility (Ibid).

*Aló Presidente*, however, did not seem to follow that pattern. On the contrary, it highlighted the role of the state in providing services and managing society’s needs. In this sense, segments of *Aló Presidente* combined the familiar entertainment of reality television with the

serious tone of public service broadcasting (PSB) programmes. As such, it relates to truth claims and educational purposes of the news and documentary formats of the PSB tradition. Indeed, *Aló Presidente* set out to inform the population of Venezuela of the activities of their elected representatives. Its claim to truth can be confirmed by looking at the new legislation that often resulted from the show.

In one episode, Hugo Chávez was visiting the municipality of Ortiz in the Venezuelan province of Guarico. The audience was partly composed of Claudio Farias, vice minister for Planning and Infrastructure; Diosdado Cabello, Minister of the Popular Power for Public works and Housing; William Lara, Governor of the Province of Guarico; General Subaran, Garrison commander; and General Nuñez, air commander. On this occasion, President Chávez enquired about the state of advancement in the region in terms of public works. The first two lines of Venezuela's rail network were being developed in the area and Chávez asked Public works minister Diosdado Cabello to create a town at the crossing point between the two lines. In the following excerpt, Chávez talks to the president of the "Institute for State Railways" (IFE); the Ambassador of China in Venezuela; the president of "China Railway", Chinese state railway company; the governors of the states Aragua and Cojedes (states crossed by the railway lines); and two Italian contractors in charge of the works.

President Chávez: Where will these two lines cross paths?

Minister Cabello: Between Ortiz and Dos Caminos, for approximately one kilometre.

President Chávez: Giordani (Minister of the Popular Power for Planning and Development)! Come here "compadre", (...) how is the technological transfer going? I have spoken to my friend Berlusconi, for he is a friend of mine, and he told me that it was not a problem, he is happy to help with that. Can you confirm this information? So (addressing the contractors), this tunnel that you are dealing with, from San Juan to Fernando de Apure, we shall call it "Roberto Vargas", after the great Venezuelan Revolutionary buried in the area.

Minister Cabello: (showing a point on a map on the stage) the lines will cross here.

President Chávez: Can you see here, five kilometres from this point, [there is] a series of slums? How can I accept that a project that is worth millions of dollars be invested in an area where people live in slums while we proceed with our works pretending that they don't exist (...) So what I intend to do is I want to create an urban area right at this point (pointing at the map). A new city, bordering the railway, at the crossing point of these two lines (...) Have you written that down?

Minter Cabello: Congress has taken note.

President Chávez: What about you from the IFE, have you?

President of the IFE: We have "Comandante". (Episode 328 2009)

This combination of reality genres with educational undertones is not a new phenomenon. According to Ouellette and Murray's categorisation, one of the aspects of reality television is that it challenges low ratings by fulfilling an "educational" purpose that is both profitable and popular. This claim is set up against a view of PSB and documentary programming that lacks attractiveness for a large audience (Murray & Ouellette (eds.) 2009, p. 4). For Corner (2002) this antagonism has been overcome by a "postdocumentary culture" where formats and genres are redefined with stronger emphasis on affective narratives and "diversion" (p 264). From this perspective, much like the talk show, reality television is seen as composed of a variety of formats, adjusting with time to the needs of the audience. Carpentier and Van Bauwel (2012) call this phenomenon "trans-genre", rooting the reality claims of reality television in the "transgression of the boundaries between different formats" (p. 11). Much like a hybrid of non-fiction genres, Biressi and Nunn (2005) argue that reality television and postdocumentary culture belong in a "radically altered cultural and economic setting which includes an imperative for playfulness and diversion and the erosion of the distinctions between the public and the private sphere" (p 2).

This hybridisation can be witnessed in the way *Aló Presidente* combined the familiar tone of entertainment programmes with what can be seen as an educational purpose. In many instances, the space of *Aló Presidente* was a time for explanations; the opportunity to shed light onto topics that were of civic relevance and social welfare. In this excerpt, Hugo Chávez discusses the dietary value of different Venezuelan agricultural produce with a nutrition

expert. The aim was to support local production and curb nutritional deficiencies and food intolerance among the population.

Diana Calderón: Wheat has a protein called gluten that can cause allergic reactions. Rice, on the other hand, is completely gluten-free. If you combine rice noodles with beans for instance, you are creating a high content in protein.

President Chávez: Wow, that's like an atomic bomb! It gives you wings. But what about people who are overweight? Can you compare wheat noodles and rice noodles for me?

Diana Calderón: Yes, indeed, we recommend rice for people who want to lose weight because it is much easier to digest than wheat-based pasta.

President Chávez: What's more fattening: pasta or rice?

Diana Calderón: It is people who put on weight.

President Chávez: You are right, it is the people who consume too much wheat or other things (...) I used to be one of those. I used to love baguettes. Now I stick to rice, like the Chinese. Have you seen a fat Chinese? (Episode 333 2009)

#### *Aló Presidente as a Talk Show Hybrid*

As can be seen, *Aló Presidente* was therefore composed of many ingredients characteristic of the “talk show” genre (Ilie 2006) such as 1) a host, who happened to be the President of Venezuela and had full control over the evolution of the programme, 2) a live audience, 3) a panel of guests (both experts and lay participants) who were sometimes invited on stage; 4) callers or “vox populi”. But it also included elements reminiscent of the reality genre, and the pundit show. Additionally, one of the main aspects was the participatory nature of *Aló Presidente* and the fact that people could contribute their thoughts and everyday life concerns on the show. Very often, when answering phone calls or emails on the air, the attention of the President was directed towards requests, encouragements, expectations, or testimonials of members of the audience. The first transmission of the show set the tone for what would become a weekly engagement with all sorts of interventions. On May 23, 1999 the President answered a series of phone calls aimed at enhancing the political agenda.

Jorge Luis Teran: I am calling to ask you if you can give me an audience. I have four fundamental propositions that I have elaborated for you (...) First, how to achieve the stabilisation of the Bolivar. Secondly, how to reform public administration with a cut in staff of 66% without any dismissals. Thirdly, how to tackle inflation, and fourthly how to humanise our prisons. (Episode 1 1999)

And:

Argenis Salazar: Good morning citizen President, my respects. I am from the Civil Association for the Development of the Community in Jabillito. I am calling because I would like this to be known on a national scale and what better way to resolve this problem than telling you about it! Here in the Community, we have a very big problem (...) contracting companies come to do works that the community itself could easily do. (Episode 1 1999)

Or, again on Episode 32:

William Veliz: I would like to propose a project for sports; this is an idea for the Ministry of Education. It is very simple: let us assume that there are seven high schools in Catia, well, all of these schools should develop a volleyball team; basketball; swimming, etc.. We should offer the possibility to these kids to compete within the framework of school. So if all the schools compete in basketball for instance, the winning team can then represent high schools in the local championships. (Episode 32 2000)

And on very rare occasions, guests from the audience questioned the nature of the show by addressing their grievances about the programme to the President, or to members of his administration. In episode 287, Nelson Mora, provisional developer of communal councils, accused Hugo Chávez of “being misinformed” regarding the community’s management of risk factors in terms of land planning in the informal settlement “Federico Quiroz”. He claimed that the information the President had been provided with was “deliberately false” and asked for the opportunity to “inform him on the injustices that were taking place in the sector and truths that [he] didn’t know”. After interrupting him, Hugo Chávez assured to Mr. Mora that he certainly was not “misinformed”, and asked the participant to wait for a later slot in the show in order to posit his argument in a more appropriate context.

(4 hours later)

Provisional developer of communal councils, Nelson Mora: Good afternoon, Mr. President, I am a social developer with Sucre (area). I have been managing a working group of all of the territorial committees and the National office for the organisation of urban territories. (...) We know about the strategic and critical situation of our sector (...) What I come here to say is the following: how is it possible that we, as a community, are being told what to say in this [episode of] *Aló Presidente*? We are in a free and democratic country where we should be able to say what we feel; and what we feel is that, as an organised community, we want to be heard (...) there are things I would like to tell you Mr. President, but we can't talk [in this context].

President Chávez: (...) what you are saying is impossible (...) it is impossible that we force anyone to say in *Aló Presidente* what we want them to say (...) The Venezuelan people have come out of their lethargy (...) My belief is that you are in a long process of maturing and from what I hear you are still far, far away [from this goal](...) You are the one lying when you say that I am being lied to (...) (Episode 287 2007)

### *Talk and Commonsense*

The political relevance of talk television and participatory spaces has been analysed in many ways. Some argue that, by shifting the attention to “common-sense”, “authentic voice of the everyday people” (Carpignano, et al. 1990), this format offers a space for the representation of everyday, ordinary life. Others value the genre for its “confessional” role, or its capacity to allow public ritualisations of conflict and scandal, and bridging the “tension between commercial tabloid exploitation and the politicisation of the private sphere” (Shattuc 2001, p. 81).

Much academic literature has praised the participatory space that television has offered to the “citizen viewer”, arguing that “ordinary people” are “seen as participating, potentially at least, in democratic processes of the public sphere” (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, p. 19). Borrowing from Habermas’ ideas on the public sphere, and the emancipatory potential of his theory of communicative action, much of this work seeks to find in the media a space that



could break from institutional control and facilitate the formation of a rational-critical consensus. According to this view, by distancing itself from the self-interested structures of the political and economic systems, the media would provide a stage for the representation of different lifeworlds and therefore construct a space for unfettered political debate. Although criticised for its normative demands and emphasis on the critical-rational aspect of communication, this approach regards the media as potentially constructing an ideal communication situation (Habermas 1991, 1984, 1987). This view emphasises the central role of public participation and the prevalence of lay knowledge over expert input.

For those who have traditionally been defined as outside of public discussion, whose lives were, until recently, kept private by both choice and coercion—people marginalized on the basis of gender, sexual nonconformity, economic status, physical ability, race, and so on—talk shows have been a crucial site of entry into public view and, at least to some degree, public conversation. (Gamson 1999, p. 195)

However, not all interactions taking place in the public sphere are seen as based on rationality and public debate. According to Landes (1992):

[I]n Arendt's public sphere individuals perform deeds and narrate stories; they are not just talking heads but embodied, suffering subjects who move in the world in relation to others (...) Arendt addresses the performative dimension of human action and human speech. She implies that insofar as persons display themselves in public, they do so as storytellers, revealing aspects of their selves by acting in and through their bodies (pp. 114-115).

Often associated with domesticity and the private, daytime talk shows, particularly in the US, have been found to appeal to the intimate, personal narrative of people's experiences, focusing on testimonials and social issues. Rather than focusing on the rational-critical discussion of the Habermasian sphere, a considerable portion of the audience's performance in talk shows is marked by emotional expressions, and portrayals of their everyday lives. The genre can thus be seen as supporting a "multiplicity of public spheres" as it legitimises the "primacy of emotion-based public discourse" (Gamson 1999). Many examples of such interventions can be found on *Aló Presidente*. On 19 September 2004, for example, Hugo

Chávez answered a call from Mrs Claudia Espiño in which the participant addressed a series of issues she hoped to solve with the help of the President.

Claudia Espiño: Hello? Hello M. President, I am calling because I teach in a Bolivarian school and, although I have a job, I am the single mother of two, and, well, I don't have somewhere to live.

President Chávez: (after 6 minutes of monologue regarding a meeting he had with collaborators a few days earlier; Lula and Latin American integration; Venezuelan baseball little league; and the criticism he got from Venezuela daily "Últimas noticias") Tell me Claudia, do you know anyone from the housing programme in your region?

(...)

Claudia Espiño: I wouldn't want to criticise, I know that the (Bolivarian) process is long and that there are many things and people to take care of, and that it slows down the [Bolivarian] process, but I will be quite honest: the paperwork is very complicated; the requests are practically impossible; and there is nothing in my council. I work, I am single, and when I manage to find the time to go to the offices, there is either no one there, or no paper left in the printer, no forms, etc. So, yes there is a "housing programme", but I think that in the end, it won't make any difference for me.

President Chávez: Claudia, listen, I still have faith in the Bolivarian process, and with the new stages of the Revolution we will improve efficiency, that is why I created the Ministry for Housing aimed at avoiding the bureaucracy. So, here it is, I will give your number to the Minister of Housing, Julio Montes, and he will take care of your case. (...) Have faith, "mi reina" (...) and they should fear my whip, over there in the Cabinet, because Bolivar said "you need to demand a lot for people to give a bit" and it looks like our culture forces me to have the whip in my hand in order for things to get done. (Episode 204 2004)

The following examples illustrate these types of contribution. At the time, the format of the programme had adjusted its channels of participation to include, in addition to phone calls, an

email and twitter account. In this excerpt, Mr Marcelo Alvarez had contacted Chávez through email:

Juan Barreto (co-anchor on the radio): Mr Marcelo Alvarez is contacting the show via email. It says “ Dear M. President: I listen to your show *Aló Presidente* every Sunday. Please hit all of those who are against the “Yes”<sup>19</sup> (vote) hard. A Venezuelan citizen is asking you.

President Chávez: I will follow your advice on this and I will fight with everything I have.

Juan Barreto: And he asks if you can, please, comment on article 80 of the new “Carta Magna” on pensions and retirement. He says: “to those who are from Adeco and Copei<sup>20</sup> (...) read the new chapter V of the new Constitution, especially articles 75-96 and 80. Those who are against the “yes” are against the elderly and their benefits”.

And the President could also be reached through his Twitter account, @Chavezcandanga:

President Chávez: I was looking at my messages here on @Chavezcandanga: Ibana22 says “Chavezcandanga we love you Comandante, thank God you are [feeling] better”. Let me answer this very quickly (...): “I love you too @Ibana22”. (Episode 374 2011)

As can be seen, the type of interventions on *Aló Presidente* would often include an emotional tone. This emotional dimension also contributed to an important aspect of the genre: its claim to authenticity. Because of the performative environment of television, audiences can adopt a cynical approach to anything they see on the screen, expecting what they are witnessing to respond to demands and interests of an industry instead of a truthful performance. According to Annette Hill, authentic emotional responses and displays of vulnerability may enhance the degree of trust afforded by the public (Hill 2005). To take one example among many others, on 15 June 2008, Chávez read a personal letter that his daughter had addressed to him while

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<sup>19</sup> This episode was aired during Hugo Chávez’s campaign for a referendum on the change of Constitution in 1999. The participant is alluding to this vote.

<sup>20</sup> AD (Accion Democratica, centre left) and Copei (Christian Democrats, centre left) are the traditional parties whose agreement of “Punto Fijo” established a bipartisan system for over 40 years in Venezuela.

he was waiting to be sentenced for an attempted coup d'état that he carried out in 1992 against then president Carlos Andres Pérez. Midway through the letter, Chávez stopped the reading and remained silent for almost a minute amongst applause from the audience, with tears rolling down his face. In reaction to this outburst, members of the audience declared: “this demonstration of emotion is soothing for us, for our leader is one of us, our leader is not an isolated, ethereal entity that cannot hurt; he is a human being, like any one of us” (Jose Roberto Duque in *Contragolpe* 2009).

Indeed, one Chávez's most prominent features as the host of *Aló Presidente* was his capacity to include emotional touches and humorous overtones to his interventions on the air:

There I was about to go on television hours after leaving jail (...) I am in the studio and they [wanted to] take me to makeup. I was resistant, I declined (...) Makeup, me? What will they think in my town? Me? Wearing makeup? (laughter) That was the kind of macho attitude I used to have back then. And then they explained [the reasons], because of the shine and so on. Why not? If one's shining, you should let them right? Let them radiate! (laughter) (Episode 331 2009)

This naturalised intertwining of politics and entertainment has raised a debate around what some call the fetishism of “existential banality” (Baudrillard 2005) or “culture industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002): “excessively personalized and trivial approach, tone and content of entertainment programmes have now also become standard features of news programmes to the extent that factual entertainment is now used as the title of television company departments” (Taylor and Harris 2008, p. 155). Alternatively, for some, the satirical tone and digested knowledge of political talk shows and the blurred boundaries of documentary and ‘infotainment’ have come to impoverish political discussion (Hirsch 1991). To Jones (2005), entertainment politics facilitates a return to “common sense thinking, with values, beliefs, and experiences at the forefront of the analysis” (p. 14), much closer to the characteristics of the talk show, with its safe space for everyday life experience and emotional displays, than to the meaning-making, agenda-setting discourse of the pundit show. The mixing of humour and politics, he argues, opens spaces of citizen interaction around narratives outside of the seriousness of current affairs and into the multiplicity of voices of the cultural landscape: “entertainment politics offers a cultural site where new

issues, languages, approaches, and audience relationships to politics on television are occurring” (Ibid).

Akin to the participatory function of the talk show, the wide range of entertainment is seen to promote what Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) call a “shared emotional connection” (p. 36). Supported by a hybridisation of entertainment and politics, many argue for a notion of “cultural citizenship” where the boundaries between what appeals to the public and what provides the grounds for citizenship are increasingly blurred. The idea is that popular culture may provide valuable material for engaging the political public and offer a wider range of outlets for diverse political voices (Hermes 2005, van Zoonen 2005, Hartley 1999, Hill, 2005, Coleman 2005).

A relationship between politics and popular culture is certainly not a novel combination (...) in recent years politicians have chosen to forego the style of interview associated with the public inquisitor in favour of the entertainment talk show (...) ‘sofa programmes’ (...) [Talk shows] give access to those not inspired to watch conventional political programmes. (Baum in Higgins 2008, p. 49)

### *Folklore and Storytelling*

So far, it has been argued that, in addition to responding to many characteristics of the talk show format, *Aló Presidente* included, or highlighted, elements from the reality genre, the pundit show, and, the pedagogical tone of PSB. To these, it is interesting to note the influence of other more traditional television formats. For instance, elements of the “variety” genre such as dance performances and circus segments were included in the show. Originally a remnant of the popular music hall in Britain and vaudeville in the United States, entertainment activities such as popular songs, comedy sketches, and speciality acts have pervaded much of popular television (Dauncey & Cannon 2003). Traditionally family-oriented, the genre peaked at the time when channel choice was limited and, like *Aló Presidente*, variety shows would often occupy prime-time weekend slots for a family-friendly social experience. For Father’s Day in 2008, the episode of *Aló Presidente* went to a small community to attend a circus act. Surrounded by children, Hugo Chávez attended an outdoors performance filled with magic acts, acrobatics, contortions, fire breathing while the President

congratulated parents for their important role. Chatting with the artists, Chávez praised the agility and skills required for such an accurate performance:

That magic of yours is incredible! And you perform it right here, in front of our very eyes. Anyone could suggest that with distance [it is easier] but half a meter from us! [Can you] make me disappear? (Episode 314 2008)

In a similar way, during that episode, Chávez danced to the moves of rapper duo “Rodbexa y Romeo”, following the break dancer’s lead and entertaining an audience with a “revolutionary” hip hop song:

We all have freedom of expression,  
Let us please make a difference between it and abuse,  
We all have freedom of expression,  
Let us please make a difference between it and abuse (Ibid).

In fact, most episodes of *Aló Presidente* would end with a musical act, often accompanied by Chávez.

I tend to sing in the programme- I am a bad singer but believe me I sing nonetheless, I love singing even though I am bad at it, it does not matter. But then, Teresita [*Aló Presidente* producer] recorded me and this happened [Chávez grabs a CD]. And here I am singing rancheras, singing ‘Mexico Lindo’ with backing music! (Episode 295 2007)

Often, the artistic segments of the show would include some form of local dance, or carnival re-enactment, a demonstration of traditional sports, or of local craftsmanship, combining radio hits with town folklore. The boundaries between popular culture and folklore are difficult to navigate. Folklore is often understood to function as a repository for a body of knowledge embedded in the social context of a particular group, a “mode of thought”, or a “form of art”, communicated through a variety of different media (Ben-Amos 1972). In this view, popular culture is seen as being in the making, current, and folklore as an archive for continuity: “a social reference group will demand or evolve its own adaptative patterns of response for usual interactional situations encountered in relation to popular culture, and

folklore defines those patterns of response as they become ‘traditional’” (Narváez and Laba 1986, p.16).

Insisting on the communicative effect of folklore, Bauman (1975) describes it as “artistic verbal communication”, highlighting the oral aspect of the genre. He moves from the perception of folklore as a collection of objects, stories and traditions to regard it as practice, or a “mode of verbal communication”. Rather than looking at it as “disembodied superorganic stuff”, he focuses on its cultural foundation and the lived experience that is created and transmitted through its forms. As such, his focus shifts towards the notion of “oral storytelling” and the intertwined nature of stories and lived events.

Oral narrative provides an especially rich focus for the investigation of the relationship between oral literature and social life because part of the special nature of narrative is to be doubly anchored in human events. That is, narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and the events that they recount. (Bauman 1986, p. 2)

In the case of Venezuela, González Muñoz (2013) talks of the “immaterial culture” of the savannah as an account of lifestyles, habits and stories that encompass a philosophy of life and cultural identity. In her article, she uses the example of the ghost stories that make up much of the imaginary of the Venezuelan flat lands, arguing that this is a dynamic process, perceived through the oral tradition as a “living book” that is “created and recreated” by the people who recount it (p. 574).

Interestingly, Hugo Chávez would often share anecdotes or memories during the show. He would relate stories about his youth, his family, his experiences in Miraflores (the presidential palace), etc. On many occasions, the set of *Aló Presidente* would become the stage of an internalised play, each character carefully depicted by Chávez in stories that would recount his arrival to Caracas for the first time as a young officer, his dealings with politics during his adolescent years, or his latest baseball game with Fidel Castro.

Many narrators create their accounts based on everyday life events, these are commonly called “stories” or “cases” and they are narrated in all [Venezuelan] regions...These kinds of accounts are regarded with pride as valuable instances of local culture. (Mato 2003, p. 113)

Such is the wealth of stories recounted by Chávez on the set of *Aló Presidente* that an edited collection called “Cuentos del Arañero” (Stories of the Spiderman) was released in 2012 by the Venezuelan publisher *Vadell Brothers*. Based solely on anecdotes narrated in the show, the book navigates Chávez’s life from birth to presidency through the eyes of its hero.

I used to sell spiders, you know. Since I was a little boy...as soon as my grandmother would finish making the [papaya-based sweets called] “spiders”, I would shoot out of the house...I would sell the first half in the plaza, by the pin, and the other half outside the cinema. After church, also, there I was: “hot spiders” I would say, and I would add a verse: “hot sweets for old ladies with no teeth”, that kind of thing... (Chávez 2012, p. 11)

For Hannah Arendt, storytelling “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt 1968, p. 105). It is a means of experiencing different perspectives without attempting to define the circumstances, a way of “visiting” other peoples’ perspectives. Borrowing from Benjamin, the storyteller is perceived to provide their audience with a form of “experience”: “the storyteller takes what he tells from experience- his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin 2011, p. 87). The idea is that, by allowing the spectator to occupy their place in the recalled experience, the storyteller provides a new angle of vision. This is not to imply that the experience happens via “empathy”, or that the spectator sees the world through the eyes of the narrator, abandoning their own identity in order to become another person. Rather, as Arendt proposes, storytelling invites the spectator to “visit” a new perspective, looking at their own selves from a different position, as if shifting their world in order to look at themselves in another light (Disch 1993, p. 687). *Aló Presidente* thus invited the audience into an intimate space of encounter with each other. Reminiscent of the Venezuelan folklore and campfire storytelling, the show integrated into the format of television a series of cultural narratives familiar to its audience.

One of the main characteristics of *Aló Presidente* was also the unpredictable and unusually long duration of every episode. By ignoring ratings and excluding commercial breaks, the show seemed to defy the economic pressure faced by PSB stations in Europe or North America (Sarikakis (ed.) 2007). Not only did *Aló Presidente* refuse to abide by the imperatives of commercial television, but also by doing so, it seemed to break with some of



the consequences of traditional programming, the main aspect being the sense of haste and fast consumption generally associated with television. Because the economic imperatives of television did not seem to apply to *Aló Presidente*, the pace of commercial television was altered for as long as the show was on the air. In fact, *Aló Presidente* seemed to adopt a different type of rhythm, a sequence of events that, albeit reminiscent of other television genres, addressed the spectator in a different logic of time.

How many hours has this been? It's been almost four hours and we're only dealing with the second topic of the day. How about that? This location is beautiful, it is the kind of place where *Aló Presidente* can last for twenty hours, we can be here until midnight. (Episode 218 2005)

According to Munson (1993), talk shows emphasise the oral tradition of interpersonal conversations, making a mass-oriented, ephemeral, medium as television more present in time. Ong calls this oral element "second orality". For him, modern culture is technologically defined and largely influenced by electronic media. Second orality, he argues, has "striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment" (Ong in Silverstone 1994, 93). Interestingly, the format of the talk show instils a different impression of time, bringing through the staging of interpersonal conversation the attention to the present moment. If temporality is thus altered in oral settings, the addition to it being broadcast live cannot but reinforce this sensation, contributing to making the space of *Aló Presidente* a slow-paced, co-present event.

Much like daytime television, *Aló Presidente* seemed to invite its audience into a space of conviviality, a conversation that would last for much of their Sunday. Finding itself comfortably in the background of a family day, the show conceded to its audience intermittent lapses in interest, freeing it from the otherwise fast pace of fiction television, with its regulated bathroom breaks and highly demanding "flow" (Williams 1974). The combination of this element with the lack of economic imperatives made *Aló Presidente* unusually long and even, at times, uneventful. For, seemingly infinite, the show made a point in prolonging itself until necessary, as if immune to the usual constraints of the medium. In fact, everything surrounding Chávez's political project was portrayed as everlasting, and this idea was repeated on the show time and time again.

I feel so much love for you, for this people, for this land, that I will never leave. Because, when there is true love, one doesn't leave, one stays forever. (Episode 133 2002)

I think I need to be here beyond 2012. I won't have time to finish the cycle in 2012 and I want to finish it. How long? Maybe 2019 or 2020. Continuing until 2021 would be a gift, or 2027, I will be old by then. (Episode 292 2007)

We have started on a new path, and we are going against a global current, but this project is medium to long term (...)(Aló Teorico Episode 1 2009)

[About the opposition] The best thing you can do is accept that this Bolivarian Revolution is here to stay (...) We cannot let them back ever again. (Episode 355 2010)

Furthermore, *Aló Presidente* and its stories were immediately transcribed, uploaded onto the web, published in annals and edited volumes, and compiled in “best of” episodes for reruns. The combination of all these factors gave *Aló Presidente* an aura of permanence. Undoubtedly, it was not aimed at being forgotten as an entertainment programme. *Aló Presidente* was an entertainment space that took its time, a storytelling time that broke with space limitations and touched a widespread audience. It was slow entertainment, campfire storytelling. There was nothing ephemeral about *Aló Presidente*.

### *Conclusion*

*Aló Presidente* was a television programme that brought together audiences, representatives from local communities, communal councils, trade unions, and local celebrities. Most members of Chávez's cabinet were requested to participate to the show. Civil servants were involved in the episode's agenda; political decisions were announced live; the President sang, lectured, and dictated party lines. People were fired on the set of *Aló Presidente*, or got jobs when they called the president. People praised the virtues of the Revolution, or were reprimanded when something went wrong. But *Aló Presidente* was also a space for storytelling, entertainment, folklore, and education. It was a timeless space and constant companion, a televised supplement to politics and yet also a familiar entertainment programme.

It is not easy to understand the dynamic taking place on the stage of *Aló Presidente*, for over 378 episodes, 13 years, and 1600 hours, the show presented a space for promises of political transparency, presidential legislation, demonstrations of emotion, entertainment, and pure propaganda. It is difficult to gauge what happened every Sunday under the legitimising effect of live television, especially when the protagonist benefited from high levels of popularity and a political mandate. With *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez produced an original outlet for politics and, at the same time, for great television.

The originality of *Aló Presidente* is such that it has in fact inspired other Latin American leaders to produce their national equivalents to the show. Indeed, fellow Bolivarian Rafael Correa inaugurated in 2007 “Enlace Ciudadano” in Ecuador, a radio “cadena” comprising 54 stations. And Evo Morales premiered a solo radio programme in 2012 aimed at “telling nothing but the truth to the people of Bolivia” (Noticias 24 2012). In an interview published on the website of the programme, Lorena Parada, former director of *Aló Presidente*, states: “in addition to being a platform that enables direct communication between the President and the Sovereign<sup>21</sup>, [the show] is also an open window through which all Venezuelans can access information regarding their country and its daily management; those news items which would have otherwise remained clandestine”. Andrez Izarra, Minister for Information and Communication (MINCI) under Chávez, adds “without *Aló Presidente*, there is practically no political agenda for the following week (...) what the President treats on the show will be the “hit” of Monday morning newspapers (...) *Aló Presidente* is the reference point for all the media” (Cova, 2011). To this, Vladimir Villegas, former president of Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), responds: “*Aló Presidente* compensates the limitations of the official means of information (...) the President does not like press conferences, and his Ministers need official approval to speak to the press. Instead, Chávez prefers the stage of *Aló Presidente* (...) the link between Chávez and his electorate is an emotional link, it is not rational”<sup>22</sup>.

So, what happened on the set *Aló Presidente*? And what impact did the show have on the Venezuelan electorate? *Aló Presidente* was undoubtedly a political programme. It was anchored and produced by the President of Venezuela and it discussed matters of high

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<sup>21</sup> Sovereign, or “Soberano” stands here for the “People of Venezuela”.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Villegas, interview by Sunthai Constantini, Caracas (July 18, 2011).

political relevance. The interesting aspect of *Aló Presidente* is that it formatted its content in a combination of deeply familiar television narratives. Symptomatic of its time, the show was developed as a hybrid of many genres of factual television, appealing with each sequence to the familiar rhythms and activities of a familiar object. As famously stated by Silverstone (1994): “we take television for granted in a similar way to how we take everyday life for granted” (p 3), and part of the appeal of the show was its capacity to speak the everyday language of television.

This chapter has provided a first introduction to *Aló Presidente*, locating its parts in the variety of genres that it encompassed, and presenting the innumerable activities that could inhabit its six-hour slots. Overall, although its hybrid nature forfeits any attempt to locate the programme in a specific category, it is also because of this hybridity that the fluidity of its content had the potential to make it accessible for a usually disengaged public. *Aló Presidente* allied Sunday morning talk shows with Saturday night entertainment, primetime reality TV, and commercial-free PSB education. Moreover, *Aló Presidente* invited the President of Venezuela into Sunday family lunchtime and managed to make a solemn address feel light, like storytelling summer nights. By combining all these elements, *Aló Presidente* can be seen as a purely televisual programme, evolving over the years to fit both its political content and the advancements of its television format.

Having thus given familiarised the reader with *Aló Presidente*, the following chapters will look into the political context of the show and the evolution of its content in more detail. The idea being that analysing the transformation of the show will assess its role in building the overall project called the “Bolivarian Revolution” and shed light onto the actual state of politics in Venezuela. As the Bolivarian project evolved, so did the form, length, activities, and vocabulary of the show. Much current literature has analysed elements of the discourse of Hugo Chávez (Cañizález 2012, López Maya and Lander 2010, Molero de Cabeza 2002, Reyez-Rodriguez 2009)<sup>23</sup>, but, so far, no study has seen how *Aló Presidente* evolved over time. Yet, *Aló Presidente* can be regarded as a blueprint for the overall Bolivarian process, for the archives of show offer inestimable access to the memory of the Venezuelan political process. Because *Aló Presidente* started only months after Hugo Chávez took the presidency, and because it enclosed the equivalent to press conferences, Prime Minister Questions, and

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<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed literature review on Chávez’s discourse, see Chapter 3.

cabinet meetings, *Aló Presidente* also allows for the study of Hugo Chávez's political communication from one single source. The following chapters will investigate the different "moments" in the history of the show and the course of action taken by Hugo Chávez in the making of his political project in Venezuela.

“[Identity is] the meeting point, the point of suture, between the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, and the processes which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’” (Hall 2000, p. 19)

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Role of Television: Discourse, Identity and Public Formation**

This chapter will be concerned with the place of *Aló Presidente* in its context: the media. While the previous chapter discussed the different narratives employed in *Aló Presidente* and the sense of familiarity obtained through such a “flow”, the current analysis will emphasise the medium in which the show is embedded, and the relationship that this medium has with the individual, the role it plays in helping construct the sense of “self”.

Television, it will be argued alongside Thompson (1995) and Kavka (2008), is the platform of a “mediated experience”. It bridges the limits of time and distance in order to offer a wider, richer vision of the world. It can overwhelm and confuse the individual, as well as provide a system of expertise to facilitate the interpretation of what is experienced. But, if appropriately handled, it can also help expand the possibilities of being. To the object of television, Silverstone will attribute the potential of a “space”, a locale for transitions in which the individual can become a social subject and understand the realm outside of itself. As such, television will be regarded as a trusted space of transition for the exploration of the self as opposed to “the other”. Interested in the epistemological foundations of the social subject, reference to symbolic “meanings” and “materials” that circulate around the individual during the (lifelong perhaps) process of self-formation will be discussed. Special attention will be paid to the role of television in enhancing, accelerating and sometimes even permitting the circulation of these symbolic materials.

The first part of the chapter will deal with the very nature of these symbols, identifying their origin, their context, and their validity claims. What is knowledge and how does it affect us? Ontologically speaking, the notion of the self will be grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory, where the Lacanian subject is “interpellated” in the field of discursivity. This will provide the theoretical foundation of the subject and introduce the notion that the process of self-formation of the individual is anchored in a constructivist, flexible, field of

discursivity. The second part will explore the role that television plays in the construction of this identity. Considering a subject that is interpellated by varied and sometimes conflicting articulations, the chapter will explore the relationship that the individual establishes with television in engaging with these discourses. Television will thus be presented as a staple in modern daily life, having become a part of the phenomenological experience of the world as much as an extension of the individual's immediate environment. It will be argued that, because of the nature of technology and the presence of television in the life of a subject that is in constant development, the medium provides an intimate secure environment in which the individual encounters the diversity of meanings that fluctuate in the field of discursivity.

### *Discourse, Subjectivity and Group Formation*

The current chapter locates itself in the social constructionist approach, understanding discourse to be the foundation of social relations, identities, and, more generally, our understanding of the world. Rather than reflecting a fixed reality, it is argued that language occupies a central role in creating and changing the meanings that we attach to objects, relationships and situations. This approach entails an epistemological position that connects discourse, as understood by Laclau and Mouffe, with the construction of the "subject".

As such, several premises, as suggested by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) are considered: 1) knowledge of the world is not objective nor fixed but embedded in discourse, 2) knowledge is socially and historically contingent and therefore prone to change, and this also applies to the social world, 3) knowledge arises from social processes, it is created and formulated in competing conditions, 4) due to its social foundation, different realities will lead to different actions (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, pp. 5-6). According to this view, discourse occupies the primordial epistemological position and constitutes the grounds for the construction of the subject, their understanding of the world, and the actions that they will make. It also implies a form of clash, or "discursive struggle", in which different visions of the world will compete in the subject's eyes. This leads to a form of fluidity in meaning and a constant reworking of the world.

This is not to say that objects and places and people are not real, but it is to say that the meaning of objects and places, and what people are understood to be -their identities, their relationships- all is understood through the channel of discourse. Words, therefore, or "signs"

or “materials”, construct the grounds on which social relations, social identities, and the world are presented.

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of “natural phenomena” or “expressions of the wrath of God” depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 108)

Borrowing from Saussure’s structural linguistics, discourse is understood in Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory (DT) as a system of signs that acquire meaning in relationship with each other. Pushing this notion further, the poststructuralist tradition regards these signs as ambiguous and mobile, changing meaning according to different perspectives. Again, far from being fixed in their relationship to each other, signs may acquire different meanings according to the conventions and negotiations of their social context. Language is understood as a “social phenomenon”, where signs are being negotiated in a constant struggle to “fix” their meaning (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 25).

Because they are variable and mobile, all of the possible meanings that signs can uphold belong to what Laclau and Mouffe call the “field of discursivity”. This represents the potential content that can be given to a sign. In order for this sign to be “fixed”, albeit always temporarily, it needs to exclude all other possible meanings. This happens through a process of “articulation”: the process of reducing the ambiguities of “elements” - signs that are not yet filled with meaning- in an attempt to construct meaning in competing domains. In fact, articulations are expressions, sentences, “any practice establishing a connection between elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 105).



Simply put, the procedure is as follows: a series of elements belonging to the discursive field are articulated in a certain order of meaning. Certain signs have privileged positions in the discursive field, for they find themselves at the center of the articulation where other signs acquire their meaning by association. These are called “nodal points”, or places where meaning is partially fixed. Examples of nodal points are concepts such as “democracy” or “people”- in our case study “Venezuelan”- around which other signs such as “elections” or “nation” may be articulated. Often, nodal points are at the centre of the discursive struggle, where their meaning is disputed by different claims. In those cases, they are called “floating signifiers”. In this light, discourse can be understood as an “attempt to transform elements into moments by reducing their polysemy to a fully fixed meaning” (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 28).

Expressions and social actions are constantly in the making, tapping into the potential meanings of signs and articulating them into a coherent narrative. The logic of flexibility and struggle of discourse not only applies to expressions and concepts, it also applies to the social and political realm. From notions of what these structures are to the very sense of identity that are drawn from them. If, for Laclau and Mouffe, reality is not an “objective” and “fixed” truth, neither is society nor the place individuals occupy in it. Instead, the concept of society is an articulation, or an attempt to define what society is. Indeed, not even subjects are understood as ontological realities, for identities are also contingent on a given articulation. They are the result of a discursive structure and therefore also prone to discursive struggle and change.

Whenever we use the category of ‘subject’ in this text, we will do so in the sense of ‘subject positions’ within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations- not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible- as all ‘experience’ depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility. (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 115)

Laclau and Mouffe reject any notion of an autonomous subject and, although sympathetic with the Marxist project of critique and emancipation, they also dismiss any reduction of the subject to an economic class. If subjects are products of discursive struggle, their identities are not only not “fixed” but also confronted with different discourses at the same time. Always “interpellated” by different discursive positions, the subject is “fragmented”,

occupying different subject positions according to different contingencies. The subject may embrace contemporaneous identities such as that of a “voter”, a “wife”, a “worker”, a “woman” and so on.

Since they perceive of the subject as adhering to a “multiplicity of identities”, Laclau and Mouffe borrow the Freudian concept of “overdetermination” to suggest that some of these meanings are destined to be conflicting and cannot but challenge the subject and its obtained identity. Because they cannot claim an objective subject position, the individual is bound to face situations in which different subject positions contradict each other. Laclau and Mouffe argue that it is because individuals are both “fragmented” (having several identities at once) and “overdetermined” (confronting clashing subject positions) that, through exclusion of unwanted meanings, groups come into being. The reduction of possibilities allows for an identity to be constructed in contrast to other identities, and other possible interpretations. The place of “the other” thus becomes primordial in the identification process, for any differences between members of a same group can be ignored in favour of the common rejection of outsiders. In the media realm, the extreme of this position can be related to the idea of “fan” who, recognising themselves in the others and sharing practices of their common interest, define their identity in opposition to those who do not (Thompson 1995).

This sense of difference is of paramount importance in discourse theory, for it introduces the idea of antagonism as necessary for the process of self-formation. In that context, the social cannot but also be political, for the idea of a society as a totality (what Laclau and Mouffe call a “myth”) becomes the object of discursive struggle, where competing understandings attempt to attribute meaning to it and, ultimately, induce action in consequence.

In discursive group formations, ‘the other’- that which one identifies oneself is excluded, and the differences within the group are also ignored. Thereby all the other ways in which one could have formed groups are also ignored. (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 44)

Antagonisms are positions that cannot be reconciled within a group in spite of all attempts to accommodate differences. In order to articulate these conflicting stances, they must be defined in relationship to negative identities. Two mechanisms, or “logics”, participate to this process: “chains of equivalence” and “logics of difference”. The former bring different

identities together by association against a negative identity. Without ever cancelling differences, it structures them in such a way that they are positioned against a common horizon. The latter do the opposite, breaking the antagonistic premise into more differences, accentuating the multiplicity of subject positions and highlighting the impossibilities of common ground.

But not all subject positions are challenged on a daily basis. In fact, quite often, certain understandings of ourselves, and of the world that surround us, seem so widespread and fundamental to our social organisation that it would be difficult to imagine them as not being objectively “true”, let alone open to challenge. In discourse theory, these moments reflect “naturalised” articulations, or articulations that have gained longlasting fixation. They become a social imaginary, understood by many to be “objective”.

Except that, according to Laclau and Mouffe they are not. Because of their fundamentally contingent nature, meanings are, according to discourse theory, always flexible and subject to change. Under certain circumstances, for instance “woman” and “voter” can belong to a similar discourse, whereas changes in the political context may affect this articulation and interrupt their compatibility. The discourse becomes then “dislocated”. The discursive structure is no longer able to hold a coherent foundation for the different identities resulting in crisis of identity. This is what Laclau and Mouffe call a “lack in the structure”, a moment in which the individual is compelled to act in order to reconfigure their sense of identity.

Antagonisms arise when discourses collide. The naturalised, dominant, discourse becomes endangered, identities are challenged by conflicting demands, and another articulation is needed in order to stabilise the differences. Intrinsically divided, the individual must look for an articulation that will reframe the symbolic order and provide a new meaning to which they can identify. It is through the identification with a new symbolic order, dislocated because of the contingent nature of the structure, that political subjectivities are created.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the practices that aim at stabilising the dislocated structure are called “hegemonic”. These are by nature political: they take place in a social terrain permeated with antagonisms and aim at articulating different subject positions into a common project. The idea is to provide a coherent horizon within which nodal points can be stabilised and thus

construct “a field of intelligibility” able to support “the possibility of the emergence of any object” (Carpentier 2007, p. 269).

The major aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilise the *nodal points* that form the basis of concrete social orders by articulating as many available elements -floating signifiers- as possible. (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000, p. 15) (Italics in original)

Given that the idea of a social totality is an impossibility in discourse theory, individuals are always at risk of a structural dislocation. Antagonisms are created, hegemonic practices are developed, and rearticulations of the social order arise. This is what makes, for Laclau and Mouffe, political agency possible and necessary.

### *Group Identity and Populism*

How does this discursive articulation of subject identities translate on the day-to-day dealing of political demands? For Laclau, political structures are constructed by social demands. These demands correspond to the expectations that members of society have with regards to their needs and how those needs should be satisfied by the structure in place. In all political structures, participants express their social needs in the form of requests. They also act under the assumption that the higher instances operating their requests have the legitimacy to make a decision. The nature of the system is not questioned, for both participants and institutions recognise each other's legitimacy and function. At this point, according to Laclau, two possibilities arise. The first is that the institutional organs meet the different demands satisfactorily. This logic presupposes that all legitimate demands are satisfied by the system in an administrative way and that differences are recognised and dealt with individually. In Laclau's terms, the model follows a “logic of difference”, of heterogeneous demands that are addressed on an individual basis.

In the second case, the system fails to respond to each individual's demands, and a sense of frustration develops amongst all those whose needs have not been satisfied. This is what Laclau sees as a “shared negative dimension”, or the fact that different demands from different individuals share a common lack, the negative characteristic of not being satisfied. Instead of a logic of difference, here the demands follow a “logic of equivalence”: personal demands are transformed into an aggregated dissatisfaction against the institutional system.

Laclau calls the subject of this *equivalential chain* a “popular subject”, as opposed to the “democratic subject” of a differential one. Therefore, a situation in which the institutional system is unable to deal with heterogeneous demands will transform the democratic subject into a popular subject, aggregating dissatisfaction and leading towards a breaking point. The system fails to cater for all of its members, and internal antagonisms between subjects start to arise.

Equivalential popular discourses divide, in this way, the social into two camps: power and the underdog. This transforms the nature of demands: they cease to be simple requests and become fighting demands (*reivindicaciones*)(...) there is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy. (Laclau 2005, pp. 38-39)

But the important shift happens when the chain of equivalences is stretched to a point in which the subjective demands are transcended in favour of a universal demand. At this stage, one particular demand is adopted to represent the totality of the chain in what Laclau defines as “hegemony”. And, according to Laclau hegemonic articulations that are based on weak, or “poor”, signifiers need to be broad enough to maintain homogeneity for a series of demands (ie. patriotism, popular sovereignty).

The more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic demands which assume the function of universal representation (...) The construction of a popular subjectivity is possible only on the basis of discursively producing tendentially empty signifiers. (Ibid, p. 40)

As seen with hegemonic discourses, the aggregation of demands of empty signifiers may extend to a point of identification of the community at large. In the case of the Bolivarian Revolution, subjects are interpellated in the articulation of the “people” as the group in its totality. The result is a tense relationship between equivalential subjects and differential ones, for popular subjects, in a logic of equivalence, will claim the universality of their demand.

This *sine die* tension is what ensures the political character of society, the plurality of embodiments of the *populus* that does not lead to any ultimate reconciliation of the two poles. (Ibid, p. 225)

This notion of “the people” will be particularly important in the empirical analysis of Chávez’s discourse in *Aló Presidente*. It will be argued that the definition of the “people” in Venezuela followed an antagonistic relationship between a series of signifiers associated with the followers of the Bolivarian doctrine against those dismissed as “oligarchs”, “antipatriotic”, and “traitors”, etc. by the movement. The rhetoric of the Bolivarian apparatus reflects the necessity to demarcate its members from the common enemies, which is instrumental in defining and reinforcing an essential “common” identity.

President Chávez: The enemies of the Revolution, enemies of the Nation, [are] the members of the bourgeoisie, the rich that relentlessly try to convince the people that the Revolution will deprive the people... This Revolution responds to the attacks of the Empire... Imperialism will never leave us alone; Venezuelan bourgeoisie will never leave us alone; so we will get used to living in a continuous conflict. (Episode 359 2011)

Laclau suggests that the homogenisation process reaches its limits when all demands have been reduced to the smallest common denominator. At that point, one single individual manages to carry out the articulation of all demands, encompassing all the chains of equivalence into the articulation of one goal. In that case, the name of the leader becomes the signifier of the general will, the leader of a populist movement. This also implies that, rather than seeing the competence of the leader as the result of manipulation, or the imposition of subjective intentions of the leader onto a passive popular subject, Laclau views the figure of the leader as a constitutive figure. The leader embodies the ultimate unification of active subjects that depart from a logic of difference (Laclau 2005, p. 100).

The less a society is kept together by immanent differential mechanisms, the more it depends, for its coherence, on [a] transcendent, singular moment. But the extreme form of singularity is an individuality (...) the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader (Ibid)

According to Laclau, *populism* is not an ideology, or a specific political system, or an economic strategy. Seen as discourse, populism is an ontological category, a “mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological content” (Ibid, p. 34). This approach allows him to avoid falling into the limitations of theoretical deduction from empirical cases

and observe the structural conditions and effects that such a mode of representation entails. And it is in fact Laclau's claim that politics, as an arena of conflicting views, will always require populist characteristics, for, he argues, "the end of populism coincides with the end of politics" (Ibid, p. 48). Because chains of equivalence are always necessary in defining the political demands of popular subjects, only the degree of articulation and the ideological shape of the movements vary. In the context of the Bolivarian Revolution, it is easy to see Chávez's election as the reflection of a logic of equivalence during which a large majority of Venezuelans aggregated their dissatisfaction against the Punto Fijo regimes and acknowledged Chávez as the legitimate representative of their demands. The question that underlies this investigation is thus: how was this identity translated into the Bolivarian Revolution *after* Chávez's victory? And, what role did the television programme *Aló Presidente* play in this articulation? Part of the answer lies in understanding the discourse of Hugo Chávez.

#### *Chávez's Discourse: a Brief Review of the Literature*

Most of the available literature in English regarding Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution comes from the discipline of political science. The research tends to focus on the economic and historical foundations of Chávez's political project (Gott 2000, Derham 2010, Ellner & Tinker Salas 2007), the nature of the Bolivarian Revolution (Gott 2011), and of its controversial reception in the country (Ellner & Hellinger 2003, Wilpert 2007), the institutional structures of Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bruce 2008), and the geopolitical impact of Chávez's administration in Latin America and in the US (Kozloff 2007). Chávez's regime has been widely qualified as "populist" in both Spanish and English-speaking publications, exploring the concept from a wide array of perspectives. On this topic, Hawkins (2010) and Brading (2012) make strong arguments about the relationship between Chávez's social programmes, his community-based "Bolivarian circles", and the importance of polarisation for the success of his political project. These also raise questions about the normative dimensions of democracy in the Revolution and the *Chavista* movement (Hawkins 2010, Corrales 2011).

As for the involvement of the public in the Bolivarian process, Ciccariello-Maher (2013) gives an unprecedented account of the grassroots influence in supporting and maintaining Hugo Chávez in power, and Smilde and Hellinger's (2011) collected essays explore the role

of participatory organisations in the day-to-day management of the Bolivarian Revolution. Chávez's personal relation of the Revolution can be found in an exclusive series of interviews compiled by Che Guevara's daughter, Aleida Guevara (2005) in which the rhetoric of the president and his personal tone are made accessible for a non Spanish-speaking audience. Chávez's biographies, his childhood and personality, his charismatic figure, and the fundamental role he fulfilled in the Revolution, also occupy an important place in the literature (Young 2007, Marcano & Tyszka 2007, Jones 2009, Carroll 2013). Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution have undeniably attracted the attention of a wide range of intellectuals, making him one of the most recognised political figures of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Interest in the discourse of Hugo Chávez, on the other hand, tends to be rather scarce in the literature and, with a few exceptions in the US and Europe, most work comes from Venezuelan and Latin American journals. These are mainly focused on specific characteristics of Chávez's discourse and often rely on Critical Discourse Analysis and Functional Grammar theories to identify the modes of address employed in the Bolivarian discourse. The place of *polarisation* in Chávez's discourse has been the focus of much research. Aponte Moreno looks into the use of metaphors to claim that Chavez constructs a polarising discourse of *exclusion* by combining metaphors that conceptualise: a) the nation as a person who has been resurrected by his government, as a person ready to fight for his revolution, or as Chavez's himself; b) the revolution as war; and c) members of the opposition as war combatants or criminals. He also pays attention to the *role of Bolivar* in the articulation of the nation. He argues that by making explicit references in his discourse about the Revolution as the continuation of Bolivar's wars of independence, Chavez represents his opponents as *enemies* of the nation, given that in the Venezuelan collective imaginary Simon Bolivar is the symbol of the Nation's emancipation. Indeed, some of the imaginaries that have emerged since Bolivar's death include Bolivar the demigod, the revolutionary, the democrat and the Catholic.

The place of Simón Bolivar in the discourse of the Revolution is central to much research: Segovia (2009) investigates the role of *heroes* in the Venezuelan imaginary and how the political discourse of Hugo Chávez appeals to their images in order to influence the construction of a national identity. Chumaceiro also argues that Hugo Chávez borrows the



'*Bolivarian*' adjective in order to benefit from the general acceptance of this name. In her opinion, by annexing the Libertador's name to his political project, Chávez insured popular support to his administration and, ultimately, to himself. Moreover, by invoking what Chumaceiro calls the "highest representative figure" of the Venezuelan identity, Hugo Chavez was seen as transforming whoever was adversary to the project into an enemy of the national identity.

Romero (2005) gives an interesting approach to the figure of Bolivar and the articulation of key moments in Venezuelan history. Speaking of Venezuela's democratic regimes post-1958 and what was seen as the longest-lasting democracy of Latin America, Romero argues that Chavez's discourse demystified the traditional association between party leaders and "fathers of the nation" and proceeded to eradicate members of AD and COPEI from Venezuelan history. Romero concludes that Chávez's articulations disqualified the democratic regimes of the Punto Fijo era as "decadent and corrupt" and put an end to the myth of the Venezuelan democracy. This rhetoric of *degradation* and corruption with regards to previous governments are also highlighted in Molero de Cabeza's (2002, 2007) work. She argues that Chavez's speeches focus on the political degradation of the previous governments and adds the fact that his role in the radical transition is depicted as indispensable. Mixed with religious connotations, Chavez is presented as a new leader, a saviour, and Messiah, and he is seen as having the power to guide the transformation. She argues that Chavez's discourse presents him in a privileged position as having been blessed by God and having been sent to lead the people of Venezuela towards the light. Rojas González (2013) also looks into the use of *religious* metaphors in Chávez's discourse and argues that much of Chávez's rhetoric combines secular with religious notions such as 'redemption', 'sin', as well as Christian connotations such as the Theology of Liberation.

When it comes to the characteristics of Chávez's personality and his relationship with the audience, Reyes-Rodriguez (2009) looks at the precise linguistic forms used by Chávez to refer, define and construct the 'enemy' through the embodiment of three *roles*: a) narrator; b) character; and c) interlocutor. He argues that these different identities adopted by Chavez respond to an ideological positioning. First, the role of Narrator is believed to allow Chavez to provide selected information without having to hold responsibility for it. Secondly, power is obtained through the role of Character through which Chávez quotes the words and actions

of Bolívar, Don Quixote and Jesus. Chavez brings an outside voice to corroborate his arguments and authenticate his position. Finally, he establishes solidarity with the audience through interactional features displayed when incarnating the role of Interlocutor.

Bolívar (2003) shares the emphasis on the construction of the ‘other’ in her analysis of *discourtesy* in political discourse since Chávez’s arrival to power. The study suggests that there is an evolution in the number of insults used in the political dialogue since Chávez’s first electoral campaign. The president’s use of certain words with ideological orientations, she argues, resulted in the emergence of a series of whole new insults. At the same time, words used to disqualify the president boosted the use of foul language in the opposition as well and, as a consequence, the author concludes that the cognitive value of such aggressive communication reflects the profound differences in the way Venezuelans perceived and constructed their national and cultural identities. Along similar lines of enquiry, Erlich (2005) reviews the degree of *politeness* from speeches given by Chávez in the aftermath of a series of violent protests that resulted in an attempted coup d’état in April 2002. Although Chávez had at the time called for dialogue, forgiveness and democracy, the author argues, certain negotiations and promises were never mentioned or achieved after the interventions. Erlich draws attention to the fact that, even in an attempt to reconcile the country, Chavez’s speeches were always characterised by polarisation, making a clear distinction between “us” and “them” in his addresses.

Cortes (2009) reviews a wide range of these authors and concludes that *emotion* has priority over reason in Chávez’s discourse. He argues that Chavez’s communicational strategy is based on the personification of his actions and on a clear ability to display it in a dramatic manner and that, by engineering this blueprint for his political communication, Chávez achieved a symbiotic sentiment with the audience. Mixon (2009) borrows from the literature on *charisma* to argue that Chávez’s discourse contributes to reinforce the leadership figure of Hugo Chávez as an authorising figure. To Buen Abad (2007, 2010), all these characteristics reflect the *truthful* nature of Hugo Chávez. By sharing the ups and downs of the process, he argues, Hugo Chávez maintained a relationship based on truth with his audience. Buen Adab also claims that the colloquial and sometimes paradoxical aspect of the communicational strategy of the president reflected the complexity of the society he represented. And, in his

view, actions that might have seemed rude or unlikely coming from an elected representative were, in fact, the reflection of the true political landscape.

With regards to *Aló Presidente* specifically, the work focusing on the show is very limited. Erlich (2005) describes the effects of Chavez' self-centred discourse on *Aló Presidente* and the interpersonal relation with the audience that is, to a great extent, built upon disclosure of his private life. The author claims that such an unusual practice in presidential communication fulfils a pragmatic effect: it increases the impression of intimacy that people are subject to when they share similar experiences in similar social situations. Far from damaging his image, Erlich argues that the self-centred strategy of communication employed by Chavez reinforces the relationship with his electorate. As for the role of television, Cañizález (2012) pays close attention to media appearances during Chávez's administration. He claims that Chávez's presence on television, and more specifically on *Aló Presidente*, conveyed a new form of political governance. In what he calls 'mediated presidency', he argues that his constant media presence, and more importantly his tendency to perform decision-making on the air, contributed to turning Hugo Chávez into a 'telepresident' and to making of television the main locale for the conduction of politics in Venezuela.

It is within this wealth of research that the current work locates itself. The idea is to assess how a) Chávez's discourse, b) the political background of the Bolivarian Revolution, and c) the television programme *Aló Presidente* were articulated and intertwined over the thirteen years of the show. Interested in the specific case of *Aló Presidente*, it is my contention that the discourse being articulated on the programme was of a hegemonic nature, and that subjects were being interpellated in the process of formation of a national identity, namely the Bolivarian identity. Seen from a discourse theoretical perspective, the idea is to approach the show as being in continuous articulation and therefore as having *evolved* over time. Contrary to what has been done so far, this research focuses on the changes and characteristics that marked the evolution the show over time, and on the way in which this evolution affected the articulations of the Bolivarian identity and the relationship between Hugo Chávez and his electorate.

In this context, the nature of the show, its quality as a television production, and the impact of the medium on the articulation of individual's identities, play an important role in understating the impact of the show. The place of television in constructing our understating

of the self is fundamental in modern societies and our subject positions as audiences, publics and citizens tend to be intertwined in the mediated experiences of everyday life. So, how did the audience perceive *Aló Presidente*, with its manifold activities and repertoires? And, most importantly, what purpose did the show fulfil? The following part of the chapter will focus on the place of television in this equation.

### *Television, Everyday Life and Identity*

The previous chapter analysed the mechanics of the show, highlighting the fact that *Aló Presidente* employed a series of familiar narratives typical to television. It was argued that the hybridity of the show facilitated a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the programme. Not only did the show borrow elements from a wide array of genres such as the pundit show, the variety show, reality television, and the talk show, etc. but the schedule and general “flow” of the episodes gave a sense of routine, anchoring *Aló Presidente* in the idiosyncrasies of its cultural space. Moreover, it was argued that the general semiotics of the show such as its vernacular language, its Sunday daytime schedule, and the familiar tone of its host, all contributed to making a political programme into a space for conviviality and family entertainment. Elsaesser (1994) argues that, for processes of nation-building, audiences need to encounter “the familiar- familiar sights, familiar faces, familiar voices” of their cultural environments in their television sets. Audiences relate to what they recognise as their own, identifying with programmes that reproduce the language, location and time in which they exist. To a certain extent, audiences respond to realities of their everyday lives. This reinforces what Stam (1983) calls the “fictive We”, a sense of shared community aggregating in a common locale a series of otherwise distant members of the artificial group. Often posited against the ‘outside’, this impression of belonging is, in Stam’s argument, promoted in national television through the “metaphysics of presence”, or the impression of co-presence between what goes on the screen and those who are watching it. This chapter will explore how television becomes the familiar and how it can act as a space in which identities are articulated. It will look into the relationship between audiences and their medium with the aim to investigate the role of *Aló Presidente* in constructing a “Bolivarian” public..

[T]he reality of everyday life is taken-for-granted as a reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply there, as

self-evident and compelling facticity. I know that it is real. While I am capable of engaging in doubts about its reality, I am obliged to suspend such doubt as I routinely exist in everyday life. (Berger & Luckmann 1967, p. 37)

If everyday is reality, what kind of reality does 'everyday life' respond to? The term 'everyday life', claims Sandywell (2004), is as contested as that of 'community'; it "is in continuous use within lay and theoretical discourse and yet continuously evades definition" (Ibid, p. 174). This is a complicated way to start, for if everyday life is to stand for the ground on which reality is defined, its evading definition complicates the task of understanding that very object of inquiry.

Everyday life is a privileged sphere away from public life, a space for family encounters, for leisure. Everyday life is the wasted time of meaningless activities, of bodily requirements such as sleep and nourishment, and the routinised drifting of quotidian existence. Everyday life is the terrain in which ordinary experiences take place, the domain of the unreflexive, where critical self-reflection gives way to an impoverished state of being, devoid of intellect, aesthetics and heroism. Everyday life is time and space; the sphere that is colonised by powerful elites; the familiar unknown. But everyday life is also a site for resistance, the battlefield in which individuals can oppose the dominant power bloc; the site of unlimited difference, of emancipatory creativity.

Arguing for the power of ordinary people to modify their environment from within everyday life, Michel de Certeau notoriously speaks of a "common hero, a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets" (de Certeau 2011, p. v). This view, adopted by many cultural studies scholars, puts the subject at the centre of everyday life, emphasizing the multidimensional aspect of the ordinary and placing agency in the hands of individuals who read and interpret the realm of the ordinary in creative and subversive ways. Everyday life becomes the terrain for resistance, the very nature of consumption is revisited in a reading that sees individuals employing their time in creative ways as to adapt to and appropriate the environments designed by the power bloc. In this game where individuals' employ "tactics" of fragmentations and ruses against the "strategies" of expansionist production put forward by the elites, subversion appears (Ibid, p. xix).

Everyday life seems to serve both essentialist and relationalist claims, addressing notions of

reality as fixed truths while also perceiving it as in continuous fluidity, contingent on social relations. It also seems to portray ambiguous notions of agency, finding everyday life to fall at once prey to the dominating forces of systemic and economic elites, and the source of emancipatory forces. Perhaps most notorious in addressing these ambivalent visions is Henri Lefebvre's (2002) division of the everyday into *quotidien* (everyday) and *quotidienneté* (everydayness). Rooting his argument in an interpretation of modernity, Lefebvre understands everyday life as the encounter of two rhythms, two directions of time. The first, a cyclical time, reflects the repetitive rhythms of seasons, metabolisms, and routines; it accounts for the day-to-day nature of life. The second is a linear type of time, the teleological arrow of modernity, directed at progress and inevitably rooted in stages of development and change. The rhythm of the *quotidien* is marked by the necessities of linear time, it is the time that regulates labour and everyday activities in the context of capitalism and systemic needs. In spite of its seemingly irrelevant routine, lived experience, or *quotidienneté*, interrupts this rhythm, lingering behind the requirements of modernity with its repetitiveness and thus opening spaces for breaking the alienating nature of everyday life.

Everyday life is made of recurrences: gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions, natural and rational time, etc.: the study of (...) production (...) leads to the study of the conditions in which actions producing objects and labour are reproduced, re-commenced, and re-assume their component proportions or, on the contrary, undergo gradual or sudden modifications. (Lefebvre 2002, p. 18)

According to Felski: "everyday life simply is the process of becoming acclimatised to assumptions, behaviors, and practices, which come to seem self-evident and taken for granted" (Felski 2000, p. 95). Read through the discursive theoretical framework introduced earlier via Laclau and Mouffe, everyday life, as any floating signifier, can be articulated and internalised in a hegemonic discourse. Everyday life then becomes the reflection and repetition of articulated meanings, seemingly commonsensical, yet always only temporarily fixed. Everyday life is thus a good a start, fully chaotic in its reflection of the discursive struggle in which identities and "reality" are formed. Or, as Sandywell puts it, everyday life is a "hybridized 'non-place' where collective memory, the struggle for the meaning of

sociality, identity and history are represented and performed on a day-by-day basis across a spectrum of social and political struggles and conflict” (Sandywell 2004, p. 174).

Part of the importance of *Aló Presidente* comes precisely from the “everyday” nature of its reception. Embedded in the Sunday routines of the Venezuelan audience, the show dipped into a wide array of television genres, projecting a landscape of familiarity and repetition throughout 13 years. Families would gather to watch the show; and the episodes were simulcast on a large number of community television and radio. In addition to the show, Chávez’s presence was re-enacted through official weekday speeches, billboards, graffiti, paraphernalia such as t-shirts, baseball caps, tea mugs, calendars, but also murals in community halls, schools, and leisure centres. On the other hand, everyday life was represented and glorified on the set of the show. Routines, activities, and quotidian needs of the audience were enacted in every episode of the show, through phone calls and voxpops, inaugurations and graduations, testimonials and anecdotes. According to Buen Abad: “*Aló Presidente* (...) commemorates and denotes, reminds and signifies everyday life” (Buen Abad 2007). By entering the quotidian space and staging representations of the everyday life of both the audience and the anchor, *Aló Presidente* participated to the production and reproduction of a depiction of the Venezuelan life. *Aló Presidente* staged the rhythms and colours of a certain Venezuelan imaginary.

### *Everyday Life and Mediated Experience*

Having thus explored this somewhat fertile terrain of diverse articulations, seen both as the locale for individual creativity and the domination of structures of power, the question arises of how to assess the media’s presence in this “common ground” that is everyday life.

We engage with television through the same practices that define our involvement with the rest of everyday life, practices that are themselves contained by, but also constitutive of, the basic symbolic, material, and political structures which make any and every social action possible. (Silverstone 1994, p. 170)

Television and mediated communication are a fundamental component of human life in contemporary societies. As part of the social experience, it is fundamental to understand the interaction between media and their social context. In fact, modern life seems to be so

intertwined with media that it would be difficult to imagine processes of social formation and meaning-making in the absence of mediated communication. Being in the world is being in a mediated world, a world of mediated interactions, mediated self-portrayal, mediated meaning. This is bound to influence the relationships we develop with our media and the literacies that arise from them. It is Deuze's argument that it is no longer accurate to understand life as existing with media but finding itself in it<sup>24</sup>.

We emotionally invest ourselves into media as much as our media become an affective part of us. As platforms for communication, media constitute as well as reproduce the world we live in. (Deuze 2012, p. xi)

This is not to suggest technological determinism, or delusion in the "simulacrum" (Baudrillard 2005), rather, it is to imagine that an ontological shift in communication studies can help understanding how people produce and experience their identities in the media. Of course, Deuze's approach regards much of the intercommunication media that blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers and sees the development of co-produced content across a variety of outlets. Following the work of McLuhan and his understanding of media as "extensions of man", Deuze attempts to move past the critical approach of media studies and observe the role of the media as "the invisible interlocutor in people's lives" (Deuze 2011, p. 139).

It is important not to assume that this shift towards a media life inevitably makes people's experience of society somehow less 'real' or 'true'...The moment media become invisible, our sense of identity, and indeed our experience of reality itself, becomes irreversibly modified, because mediated. (Ibid, p. 140)

The spatiotemporal dimension of television has been the subject of much interest (Giddens 1981; Williams 1989, McLuhan 1994). Misha Kavka explores the bridging of time and distance with the resulting comfort for the spectator when experiencing proximity to event from the intimacy of their own home. She describes what she calls the medium's "constructed unmediation", or the "collapse of time and distance through the production of

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<sup>24</sup> For a critical stance see Sebastian Kubitschko and Daniel Knapp, «An invisible life? A response to Mark Deuze's 'Media life',» *Media Culture Society* 34, no. 3 (2012): 359-364.



affective proximity” that derives from television’s function as a “technology of intimacy” (p.7).

For Kavka, the mediated image brings out a sense of intimacy, product of its technological capacity to provide “front-row seats” to every member of the audience. This mediated access is not considered to make up for the distance but rather to provide privileged access to the event. The possibility to make the spectator feel like the event is “played out for him/her” creates a feeling of closeness that may enhance the experience and supersede the engagement that the viewer would have had, had they physically participated to the actual event.

This sense of being moved by mediated rather than lived presence occurs because the TV/DV camera parses the event for the sake of each particular viewer through framing and editing. The flowing images are constituted out of multiple perspectives for my gaze, as a kind of mixing and matching that expands my finite perspective and situates me at the point which sees all, indeed illuminates all. (p. 7)

And the feeling of intimacy is accentuated by the relationship that the audience establishes with what is happening on the screen. Be it live broadcasting or a re-run of their favourite show, viewers locate their experience in the moment of the screening, feeling as if it were happening “now”. In this regard, television occupies a central place in the home of the spectator. As a window onto to the world, the screen becomes a channel for the emotional encounter between the viewer and the event, positioning each one of us in the action, where the object of our attention is played out for our personal enjoyment. Far from being a second-rate spectator removed from the live event, viewers become witnesses of the spectacle, intimate participants to the event. As such, the technical advancements that allow television to provide an almost immediate experience of a remote event are not considered to spoil its claim to reality. On the contrary, Kavka’s argument is that edited images and multiple perspectives enhance our perception of the event, pushing through the boundaries of time, distance, and sight.

### *Television as a Transitional Object*

But this emotional connection, the sense of intimacy that arises from the spectator’s relationship with the television, is not only connected to the technology itself. Indeed, most

technological devices potentially provide an environment where closeness, intimacy, and dependency can arise. What matters about television, argues Silverstone, is its cyclical content, the familiar recurrence of its genres and narratives.

Attachments are over-determined by the *content* of the media. Television is a cyclical phenomenon. Its programmes are scheduled with consuming regularity. Soap operas, weather reports and news broadcasts, perhaps above all, provide a framework for the hours, days and weeks of the year. (Silverstone 1994, p. 15)  
(Emphasis added)

And indeed, for Silverstone, this impression of constancy is paramount to the role that television can play in the individual's life. Considering the ontological reality of media in modern or post-modern societies, Silverstone offers an interesting account of the potential space unpacked by television. Through the work of Giddens and D.W. Winnicott, he suggests that television provides a sense of comfort, a safe transition between the intimacy of the known and the anxiety of the unknown, a secure space for exploring the limits between inner and outer realities. Borrowing Winnicott's term, Silverstone suggests that the way television occupies this connecting space is by functioning as a "transitional object".

The potential space is at the interface between there being nothing 'but me' to experience and there being other objects and phenomena outside my control.  
(Ibid, p. 10)

In Winnicott's account, the relationship between the cultural environment and the identity that is being formed through the transitional object takes place at an early stage in the individual's life. Originally located in the mother's breast as the first instance of recognition of a difference between the "me" and the "not-me, or the other", the child, argues Winnicott, will create a range of habits (sucking their thumb, stroking their upper lip or nose), or objects (blanket, teddy bear, backpack), that will act as transitions every time they encounter new situations. Winnicott's position is to understand the individual not as in isolation from others, but as in constant engagement with their cultural environment.

Winnicott ascribes "wholeness" and agency to a subject who, provided with a "good enough" environment in the form of the mother and the social context, can function as a fully viable individual. Silverstone's reading of television as a potential space attempts to locate the

symbolic meanings of the transitional phenomena beyond psychodynamic theory and into the sociological domain. In Silverstone's view, Winnicott's theory can help understand the mutually constitutive relationship between individuals and their cultural environment,

Through these- ultimately cultural- phenomena, individuals come to some kind of terms with the subjectively perceived, objective circumstances of their early and then later environment. (p. 12)

For Lacan, on the other hand, the subject is necessarily split, not natural but always political. As previously seen in Laclau and Mouffe's use of the Lacanian subject, this is the "lack" addressed by discourse theory as the impossibility of a "fixed" identity. Under these premises, the role of the transitional object cannot but be reduced to a potential exposure of the subject of the lack to a large field of discursivity. Agency will thus be considered in this approach as the negotiation between different subject positions and not, as proposed by Silverstone, as the capacity for the individual to create their own identity. This should not however diminish the relevance of the transitional object, for this potential transition holds an important role in the critical position that the subject can develop with regards to the hegemonic discourse. If television is indeed securing a reliable source of comfort, it can facilitate the individual's engagement with the field of discursivity and their relationship with the different available subject positions.

In Silverstone's account, the transitional object is a space of security where the borders of the known are crossed, where reality is expanded, and where the sense of self is developed by contrasting it to the outside. But the important element of this space is that "reality" is encountered from a safe distance. This is not a reality that captures the observer, absorbing them into a fixed ontology. On the contrary, reality is here left to interpretation, as potentiality in motion. Television, in this case, not only alters the limits of time and space but, more importantly, provides access to the very notion of self as separate from "the other". Acting as repository for fantasies and creativity, Silverstone depicts the "transitional object" as presenting exterior reality that is not yet burdened by meaning.

It is important to emphasise again that, from a discourse theoretical perspective, what television can offer in the role of a transitional object is to introduce an exterior reality that is not yet burdened by one "*fixed*" meaning, or that indeed it illustrates the wide array of

articulations that take place in the world. The difference with Silverstone's argument is that neither reality is seen as a fixed objective truth, nor is the individual considered to have an a-priori identity, separate from their social context. Instead, it can be argued that, through the presence of the transitional object, the individual can safely encounter different -often-conflicting- interpellations. This allows them to navigate a series of identities, or subject positions, from a space that they consider to be safe.

In this context, when Silverstone speaks of the transitional object as a metaphorical space, as "the space of illusion: the capacity to imagine, the capacity, indeed, to create meaning" (Ibid, p. 10), I would argue that it is a metaphorical space that allows the individual to explore and engage with the discursive struggle from a secure position. And, again, whereas Silverstone posits the transitional object as a "paradox", both invented by and necessary for the child's development, this meaning can also be regarded as another articulation established during the individual's development.

As for the claim to agency, the transitional nature of this privileged space can give the impression that the individual is free to engage creatively with the outside world. As its name suggests, the transitional object is of limited temporality. As such, it facilitates the subjectivation process by providing a comforting space that consists in "the intermediate area between infant and mother, between subject and object (...) a space to fantasise, to imagine, to dream, and to play" (Silverstone 1994, p. 9). Here, Silverstone suggests that the individual has full agency in providing reality with a meaning, albeit within the limits of their cultural environment. In contrast, the discourse theoretical approach nuances this sense of agency. Here, the temporal nature of the transitional object and its intrinsic sense of safety simply allow the individual to postpone, for a limited period of time, the inevitable action that is attached to a subject position, for the social nature of the subject bounds it to perform according to a set of articulations. The transitional object provides a privileged space in which the audience can jump from a subject position to another, experiencing the different available articulations and deconstructing them. It does not erase the discursive nature of the subject but rather protects the individual from having to act from a subject position for a short period of time.

For Thompson (1995), television affects the available materials and experiences the individual may encounter. No longer limited by the temporal and spatial confines of face-to-

face interaction, individuals may face distant and unexpected situations that can broaden their knowledge. This is what Thompson calls “mediated experience”, or a “kind of experience in which commonality is no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale. Individuals can acquire similar experiences through the media without sharing similar life contexts” (Thompson 1995, p. 231). Widening the experiential potential of the individual, the media also provide clues as to how to interpret the complex variety of symbolic material. This may result in individuals risking to give up part of their reflexive distance in exchange for a clearer understanding of life’s complexities.

Thompson argues that sourcing symbolic materials and seeking guidance for their interpretation in the media can lead to heavy reliance on mediated experience rather than face-to-face interaction. As media and mediated messages become a staple in daily life, individuals may become absorbed in the mediated realm and see in it the primary source of their sense of self. Their identities based on this, self-reflexivity gives way to attachment and identification with the medium. By raising this potential dependence on the media systems and institutions, Thompson reflects the paradoxes characteristic to the theoretical analysis of media and society. The field exploring the issue of media power over the mass, and the general questions around “media effects”, has been faced with many methodological and theoretical challenges (Livingstone 1996), questioning in some instances its very paradigm. After years of research in this area, Gauntlett suggests that the question of media effects has been approached “backwards”, concluding that “the mass of media ‘effects’ studies have been unable to show that there is a simple imitative link between people’s media consumption and their subsequent actions” (Gauntlett 2005, p. 143).

McQuail considers that the large degree of media permeability (reduced reach of traditional channels, variety of outlets for an increased number of tastes and demand, as well as the emergence of consumer/producer of new media content) as the end of an “industrial vision” of mass communication. The idea is that “the overall goal of public communication is still to be able to know and give shape to the mediated experience of a target population”, only that the focus is on the “voluntary engagement of the public in its own immersion in a rich and varied world of mediated experience” (McQuail 2010, p. 543). This positioning suggests that the interest in the media no longer comes from their capacity to reach large populations at

once but from the fact that they are actively engaged by publics seeking the variety and wealth of the mediated experience.

### *Audiences, Publics and Identity*

This interest for the place of media culture in everyday life and in the voluntary engagement of an audience with the discourses embedded in this relationship marked what Alasuutari (1999) calls the “third turn in reception studies”. This seeks to unpack the dynamic through which audiences construct themselves in media discourse. In approaching communication studies from a “constructionist view”, the focus of the investigation is outside of the relationship between audiences and media, be it in their uses of it or the content that may be transmitted. Considering instead this relationship to be grounded in the experience of everyday life, the inquiry goes into how this plays a role in the construction of the subject.

[The] main focus is not restricted to finding out about the reception or ‘reading’ of a programme by a particular audience. Rather, the objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary ‘media culture’, particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life (Alasuutari 1999, p. 6).

These visions seem to suggest that power in the media sphere is distributed and multidirectional, and that theoretical attention should be given to the capacity of the audience to interpret the media content as much as to the discursive articulations found in media content. No doubt, the realm of the media, its institutions, audiences, and content is both a reflection and a component of the social. Bridging Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and Foucault’s notion of power as a productive “matrix of force relations at a given time, in a given society”, Carpentier argues that the media sphere should be considered in its broader context, as part of the social. His contention is that the media sphere should be regarded in alignment with the discursive articulations of the wider social context and not as “a magical fountain of discursive origins, which produces the original discourse that then are distributed throughout the social” (Carpentier 2011, pp. 144-146). Far from ignoring the complexities of the media sphere and the relationship between their productive interests and the audience’s capacity of engagement with it, attention can be directed towards the overall discursive articulation of the social in which the media is embedded.

For the media sphere, Torfing argues that Discourse Theory can function at different ontological levels, analysing the discursive articulations with regards to 1) discourses about the media 2) discourses of the media, and 3) media as discourses (Torfing 1999, pp. 210-224). Hartley argues that to speak of the “text” of television is to see all of the discourses that are associated with the medium (economic, political, critical, etc.). Television can be read as discourse in its content as much as in its constitution; it also can be seen through the interaction between viewers and the medium. This is what he calls television’s “textuality”, and it situates television at the centre of social life, reflecting earlier discussions about the discursive struggles that permeate all areas of life. He argues that, in this dialogical relationship, television -or the textual- is an important locale of social definition, for it establishes a connection between individuals and society.

The connection between the individual and the social is textual, and one way of investigating it is to look at a specific instance; television can be studied as a meaningful system (...) whereby social meaning is circulated among particular individuals by textual means. (Hartley 1992, p. 85)

If identity is here understood as the interpellation of a subject under discursive articulations and the consequential identification of this subject with a certain position, what is the form of this articulation in the context of a television programme? Furthermore, how does television affect this premise?

The notion of audience has been subject to much discussion in the field of media studies. Be it with an interest in targeting it, estimating its size, understanding its needs, pre-empting its responses, calculating the impact upon it, its composition, etc. The audience, as a key component of the praised object of communication, seems to be both indispensable and indescribable. For the Frankfurt School, media messages shape audiences with powerful political effects that cannot be resisted. Audiences are seen as mind-numbed masses, prey of the dominant forces of political, economic, systemic control. On the other hand, audiences, says the Birmingham School, receive, interpret, and send messages. From this perspective, audiences interact with their media landscape in unpredictable ways. Variables of gender, ethnicity, class, age, etc. compose the audience. Audiences are also often calculated, quantified, polled, and homogenised. The degree of agency granted to audiences varies according to the eye conducting the reading. With all of its complexities, the idea of an

audience is another flexible and contingent notion in media studies, a floating signifier that is at the same time key to communication and volatile.

Hartley suggests that audiences are textually constructed, brought into being by the very bodies that need them: media, researchers, and governments (Hartley 2011). Seen as such, audiences are not aware of their existence, they reflect “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) that enable the bodies that create them. Entire communities, including the very ambivalent notion of “nation” are imagined, or brought into existence, through this process. They are “based on collective fictions” (Dayan 2005, p. 68) and rely on the imagination of external bodies to provide them with a sense of community. To borrow Althusserian terms, audiences are thus “interpellated” into being; they respond -or not- to “the media’s construction of their ideal readers” (Hartley 1992, p. 10). In this sense, audiences are nothing but the artificial accumulation of individuals for institutional needs. If they, perhaps, have in common the viewership of a television programme, or the readership of a newspaper, members of an audience do not necessarily share a sense of community, or are even conscious of their being considered as part of a group. It is when they actively engage with these subject positions and participate to the making of a common locale that audiences cease to belong to the realm of statistical projection. In that case, audiences become publics.

For Dayan (2001, 2005), in order to become a public, individuals must have focused their attention onto issues that they are willing to address. They no longer exist on paper, for they reinforce their shared sense of identity, a social commitment to the group they have come to embrace. Although spectators may oscillate between different interpellations and meanings, members of a public direct their attention towards the articulations they recognise as their own and tend to participate to the reinforcement of this identity. As way of embracing their collective identity, publics need to differentiate themselves from other groups. This leads to a performance of those symbols and markers that signify their belonging to the public; their loyalty to the values it stands for. The public’s performance depends on its position vis-à-vis a particular issue; it reflects a certain “public opinion” and demonstrates support or rejection of different articulations. Publics enact the subject positions they respond to, singing the anthems of their groups, wearing the colours of their political parties, and defending the values they stand for. The media thus become the channel for constructing audiences as well as the space in which publics can participate in the reinforcement of their identity. They



“imagine” (Dayan 2005) collective identities and provide the locale for their performance.

[T]he members of a public operate on a gestural register. Their distinctive mode of action is conveyed through signs and it aims at convincing the (yet) unconvinced. The publics’ mode of action is fundamentally dramaturgic and it can best be defined as a performance. (Dayan 2005, p. 50)

Public is not understood here in contrast to private, for the lines between private and public seem to be blurred beyond distinction (Felski 1989). Instead, the space of the public is understood to be a space that involves visibility (Coleman & Ross 2010), a mediated space.

Performance links the notion of public to that of public sphere. Any public requires another public watching it perform. The performance may be polemic or consensual. It cannot be invisible. A public must ‘go public’ or it is not a public. (Dayan 2005, p. 52)

Discussions on the spatial element of the public inevitably arise questions around a public sphere, and debates regarding the normative conditions of such space. While a Habermasian (1967, 1984, 1987) approach advocates for a universal arena of rational debate guarded from the interests of systemic forces, a more agonistic model involves a pluralist, contentious set-up, inclusive of emotional and passionate variables (Mouffe 2005). These questions will be addressed more in detail in future chapters, when analysing the form of participation in the case of *Aló Presidente*. The important element for the current argument is the fact that publics are understood to be a collective and, fundamentally, social phenomenon. They are built around common interests and can stem from an active recognition of an articulated identity.

A public is not a matter of numbers. A public is not simply a spectator in the plural, a sum of spectators, an addition. It is a coherent entity whose nature is collective; an ensemble characterised by shared sociability, shared identity and a sense of that identity. (Dayan 2005, p. 46)

As part of a mediated landscape, publics do not need to be physically present. In fact, for the current case, the public corresponds to a television audience that responds positively to the interpellation of certain articulations. In light of Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of

identity, articulations are always built against the idea of an ‘other’, that which defines what I am not. Subject positions are flexible and multiple, they are negotiated on the terrain of discursive struggle and are often connected to other hegemonic discourses. The process of articulation of a public inevitably calls for chains of equivalence and logics of difference according to which the different members of the group coalesce around a shared sense of identity and against the articulation of a threatening other. Translated onto the context of a television programme that interpellates the “people” of Venezuela, this discursive landscape implies that the social division, or the claim to universality, may occur in a populist terrain.

### *Conclusion*

By appealing to a wide range of narratives, the show *Aló Presidente* tapped into the tremendous array of signs that constitute the television experience on a daily basis. This is the familiar experience of a world composed of stories, emotions, claims to authenticity, political authority, communal practices, entertainment and family time. It is the language of a visual and aural environment that accompanies the human existence in modern societies and accommodates the rational/emotional needs of a variety of individuals. *Aló Presidente* is a legitimate source of information due to the political legitimacy of its anchor, and it strikes a familiar chord in most television audiences one way or another.

[Common sense] is the product not only of direct experience but of mediated experience, as our knowledge of the world, and especially our taken for granted knowledge of the world, is conditioned by our consumption of information, ideas and values that television and other media provide. (Silverstone 1994, p. 168)

Not only do we “live in media”, as Deuze argued early in this chapter, but nothing exists outside discourse. At least, as Laclau and Mouffe borrow from Foucault, “nothing which has meaning exists outside discourse”, for be it an object of human manufacture or not, nothing is something to us until we have made sense of it in terms of our relationship to it. This is not to say that arguments about the emotional connection with television and the immutable presence of the set in our daily lives are to be ignored. Quite on the contrary, because of this presence and its familiarity, because of its facilitating the extension of our social connection and our profound emotional attachment to it, deconstructing the meaning of television continues to be a fascinating endeavor. It is the contention of this chapter that the public of

*Aló Presidente* is constructed through a discursive process. It is a process of identity formation, or of public formation, through which an audience, familiar and therefore comfortable with the narratives of television, comes into contact with a depiction of the world that reflects the Bolivarian articulation. As will be seen in the analysis of the show, the public of *Aló Presidente* was indeed interpellated through logics of difference and chains of equivalence in an ongoing hegemonic intervention attempting to fix the Bolivarian identity against a series of negative “others”. As such, the viewership of *Aló Presidente* was transformed into a Bolivarian public, a collectivity of individuals who actively responded to the identities articulated through the programme and recognised themselves in the interpellated positions they were put in.

Far from an obligation, watching *Aló Presidente* was a mediated experience sought by the audiences of the show. Not only does the show sit well in terms of its format, appealing to the familiar narratives of everyday life television, it also accompanied the process of self-formation by providing a coherent discourse for a collective identity. As such, *Aló Presidente* was a space for group formation and, therefore, the locus of a political process with social consequences. Television, it was argued, offers the double performance of mediating the transformation of an audience into a public and staging the actions of the public. As Dayan puts it, in addition to committing to a series of values, “the publics’ mode of action is fundamentally dramaturgic and it can best be defined as a performance” (Dayan 2005, p. 50). The public of *Aló Presidente* was thus a performing public, a public that participated in the reproduction and definition of its identity. The goal of the following chapters will be to analyse the content of *Aló Presidente*, locating its historical contingencies, in order to deconstruct its articulations and overall hegemonic discourse in defining and performing the “Bolivarian public”.

“What the ethnographer is in fact faced with (...) is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render”  
(Geertz 1973, p. 10)

## Chapter 4

### Designing the Analysis: Research Methods

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the role of Hugo Chávez’s television programme *Aló Presidente* in the making of his political project, the “Bolivarian Revolution”. A self-described “work in progress”, the Bolivarian Revolution had been presented at the time of Chávez’s election as a “just, independent, alternative” to the Venezuelan political regimes of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Formulated as such, change was the leitmotiv of Chávez’s inauguration.

The President of Venezuela spent on average over 300 hours per year on his Sunday television show, making *Aló Presidente* a staple activity in his weekly agenda and the flagship of his political communication. Because the show accompanied Hugo Chávez during most of his mandate, and because of the extensive and complex nature of each episode, it is my contention that *Aló Presidente* occupied an important place in defining what the Bolivarian Revolution actually meant. It is with that purpose in mind that the content of the show fulfilled different roles over the 13 years it was on the air. In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, the analysis of the show was devised to follow a chronological path, anchoring its examination in the political and historical events that marked Chávez’s presidency.

As stated in the introduction, this thesis focuses on three main objectives: 1) to theoretically assess the structure of the programme in order to locate it among the wider landscape of television genres. 2) To link the television programme to its political context in order to establish its relevance in the overall political project being developed in Venezuela under the presidency of Hugo Chávez. 3) To analyse the evolution of the Bolivarian Revolution by illustrating the content being produced in *Aló Presidente* at the different stages of its 13-year run.

The third objective, or the “empirical” part of this work, is divided into three phases. Because trends and processes do not happen in a vacuum, pinpointing dates may seem artificial. However, for the sake of clarity, each of the three phases of analysis have been designed to correspond to key political events that influenced both the course of Chávez’s political project and the structure of the show. The first begins with his investiture as Venezuela’s president and the launch of *Aló Presidente* in 1999; the second with the attempted coup d’état that resulted in Chávez’s absence from power for 48 hours in 2002; and the third after Chávez’s re-election in 2007 and the “socialist turn” in his political programme.

### *Methodological Notes*

This work is fundamentally rooted in a social constructionist ontology (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, Burr 2003). Inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) and Foucault (1972), among others, the position from which this research is approached is that of a discourse theoretical deconstruction of meaning. This means that, far from being limited to words, discourse is here understood as a “theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted (...) systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000, p. 3). This perspective entails a research position from which the existence of the world is not denied but where the meanings attributed to the things in the world cannot exist outside of the discursive field. From this perspective, both social practices and objects are understood to find meaning in discursive articulations and each articulation is contingent upon other articulations. In order to avoid the extremes of empiricism and theoreticism, this approach locates every case within their contingencies, deconstructing meaning-making articulations according to their specific contexts: “this conception excludes essentialist and reductionist theories of society, which tend to predetermine the outcome of research and thus preclude the possibility of innovative accounts of phenomena” (Ibid, p. 5).

Because of these premises, the place of the researcher is also located within her historical and social context, contributing to an articulation of reality that cannot, coherently, claim to unveil objective or absolute truths. The fact that this ontological position does not support a “fly on the wall” approach does not, however, claim that everything is relative or that the researcher must fall into an “infinite interpretive regress”. The idea is that, as a product of her context, “the researcher can judge her/his own and others’ research in terms of the role that

the research plays in the maintenance of, or challenge to, power relations in society, that is, in relation to the ideological implications of the research” (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 117). This position also entails that the researcher may make her thoughts and values more explicit as part of the reflexive process in order to “set the research within a specific political agenda; or it might be so that the researcher and reader can explore the ways in which the researcher’s own history and biography may have shaped the research. The experiences and social location of the participants will also, of course, give a particular context to their accounts, and this must also be acknowledged” (Burr 2003, p. 159).

Indeed, writing about Venezuela for me was not an easy task. Whilst most of my academic research had been dedicated to understanding the political project called the “Bolivarian Revolution” by Hugo Chávez, much of my personal background had been adverse to the regime and critical of Chávez’s administration. His character was a mystery to me, for I could not but notice what I saw as many contradictions in his work, namely weakness in the democratic institutions, strong military tendencies, attachment to the Cuban regime, inefficiency and corruption of his administration and, most of all, what seemed to me like an unequivocally hateful tone in his discourse. In that context, watching a television programme that contained such a high emotional charge had a double effect: firstly, it made me realise the strong impact it could have in sparking an affective reaction from both sides, and secondly, it made me want to understand what part it played in the Revolution. In fact, and above everything else, I was fascinated by the high levels of popularity that Chávez seemed to gain from his charisma and how, beyond all of the criticism he faced in Venezuela, he seemed to strike a positive chord among the public and benefit from an aura of unquestioned legitimacy. In spite of my unease about his politics, I could not ignore how important the figure of Hugo Chávez was to a large part of the Venezuelan population and how his most important influence seemed to take place in the social imaginary and the definition of the Venezuelan identity. Exploring the discourse of the show thus became a necessity, for it was in the polarised reception of *Aló Presidente* that I saw the discursive construction of an “us” versus “them”.

Chávez had obtained a landslide victory in 1998 and he benefitted from undeniable support. As an independent candidate, he had embodied the change many Venezuelans aspired to after four decades of the Punto Fijo regimes. He had been a popular leader since day one and

seemed to instil a sense of hope in the middle classes as well as in the parts of the population that had felt marginalised for years. Hugo Chávez had become a sensation. And, with his popularity, his presence had become ubiquitous. Whether his was a premeditated campaign or not, Chávez's relationship with the media was destined to be a highly compatible one. And this was due in part to his charismatic personality and to his insatiable ability to express his thoughts out loud. From very early on, more than a public speaker, Chávez turned out to be a born entertainer. This gave him an important advantage in the realm of entertainment and was cleverly capitalised in his television show.

### *Polarisation and Accessibility*

In order to detach myself from the received knowledge of the Bolivarian Revolution and attempt to observe the case of *Aló Presidente* from a fresher perspective, the first step of this research was to immerse myself in the material of the show and come as close as possible to the viewership experience. This was done through exhaustive readings of the transcripts of the show, accessing video recordings on the Internet, and conducting participant observations and semi-structured interviews during field trips to Venezuela in July-August 2011 and January-February 2013. Of these experiences, most of the material became the ground on which the research questions were born, as well as the limitations of what the investigation would be able to encompass.

Most of the interviews<sup>25</sup> explored the relationship of the Venezuelan audience with the television programme. It is important to note that the general atmosphere of the country had been of extreme polarisation around the figure of Chávez, his political programme, and his administration. Political confrontations were an important part of Venezuelans' daily life. This climate affected all areas of society, including the academic circles, and was therefore to be included in the very conditions of existence of this research. It is also important to note that these interviews were not meant to act as a survey and did not follow the enquiry methods of audience research. Very much embedded in a qualitative frame, the fieldwork had the effect of breaking down some of my subjective barriers in a phenomenological attempt to explore the ins and outs of the television show.

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 1 for an exhaustive list of participants.

The bulk of my fieldwork was then aimed at accumulating as many testimonials as possible in order to assess the multiple activities and responses of the show. It appeared clear since the beginning that, unless it was done for professional reasons (for instance, many journalists had to watch *Aló Presidente* in order to know the weekly agenda), the vast majority of opponents to Chávez's administration did not watch the show. Dismissing it as "propaganda", "authoritarianism", and "a waste of taxpayers' money", most of the opposition members that I interviewed appealed to news recaps for announcements whilst ignoring the actual show. As much as it did say about the consumption habits of this part of the population, these results said very little about what transpired from the manifold activities that took place on the show. On the other hand, the vast majority of Chávez's supporters interviewed seemed to hold *Aló Presidente* in high esteem, confessing to not always withstanding the episodes in their entirety but regarding the television show as a source of information, a platform for participation, and the place of legitimate authority. It soon appeared that, because the president of Venezuela was on the air, *Aló Presidente* was often left on the background of Sunday activities, as if out of deference for Hugo Chávez himself.

Many of my trips took me to Caracas shantytowns, generally perceived to be the heart of Chávez's support. I was generously offered lengthy conversations with school cooks, community council leaders, bus drivers, intellectuals, cleaning personnel, political activists, nursery teachers, trade unionists, and academics. And, beyond the passionate tone of each participant's political beliefs, what seemed to transpire with regards to *Aló Presidente* was its continuous presence, the timeless nature of its being part of the weekly landscape, political by nature but most of all naturalised into the customary discourse of the Bolivarian context. As for its content, *Aló Presidente* seemed to reflect the polarised climate of the country: cherished by some for its contribution to the Bolivarian doctrine and despised by others for the same reasons.

#### *Fieldwork and Data Collection*

As part of the consequences of the overall antagonistic climate, access to information was limited to confirmed partisans of the regime. In spite of many Freedom of Information Act requests, applied according to Art.51 of the Constitution, no answer was received from MINCI (Ministry for Information), Venezolana de Television (VTV), Vive TV, [alopresidente.gob.ve](http://alopresidente.gob.ve), or Prensa Presidencial. Most of these requests were aimed at obtaining



information about the budget of the programme and its ratings, as well as the number of phone calls, their selection, follow-up, and management. Additionally, I contacted the producers of *Aló Presidente* on numerous occasions with the aim of attending an episode of the show or gaining information regarding its production without much success. Although I was granted informal conversations with a former president of the television station VTV, and with a cameraman of Vive Tv, very little information on the queries was obtained.

There were similar difficulties in attempts to assess audience responses. The situation in Venezuela was such that conducting large-scale survey-based research would have been impossible. Not only did I not have the logistical means to pursue that route from a distance, but access to different sectors of society was also conditional on political affiliation. The core of the classification between “Chavistas” and “non-Chavistas” had been constructed around an economic divide. Not living in popular areas and working for a foreign university were enough to dismiss me as a member of the opposition. I had been lucky to gain access to remote shantytowns and working-class sectors, and my network of contacts had expanded over the months of my fieldwork, but reaching the scale necessary for audience-research was not an option and previous observations had shown that the body of *Aló Presidente*’s viewership was amongst Chávez’s supporters.

Although constitutionally bound to Freedom of Information, Venezuela under Hugo Chávez had been known to provide a difficult climate for critique (Lucien 2011). A Human Rights Watch report for 2013 stated with regards to Freedom of Media in the country: “laws contributing to a climate of self-censorship include amendments to the criminal code in 2005 extending the scope of *desacato* laws that criminalize disrespect of high government officials” (Human Rights Watch 2013). This bias of information meant that many informal responses I received when trying to access government officials or members of the production of *Aló Presidente* claimed that my intentions were dubious and that, unless I was willing to certify that my work was aimed at supporting the Venezuelan “anti-imperialist” campaign from abroad, my requests could not be satisfied. There were instances in which, out of fear, people who had agreed to meet with me withdrew their consent. For ethical reasons, access to an MP had to be cancelled on one occasion in order to protect the middle person from political retribution. As for those who agreed to meet me, many requested to remain anonymous and opted not to be recorded.

The general climate during my ethnographic research had been of self-censorship from anyone who worked for the government or benefitted in any way from the Bolivarian Revolution. This led to many situations in which members of both groups would disclose information in confidentiality, fearing to be caught criticising the government or fearing backlash from friends and colleagues if they did not. During one of my visits to a Bolivarian kindergarten in January 2013, for instance, I noticed how polarisation had been internalised into everyday interactions in spite of it sometimes leading to the wrong impressions. Most of the participants asked to be kept anonymous and shared their political views in the confidentiality of the interview, fearing that it might affect their relationship with their colleagues if they talked openly about their understanding of the Revolution or their impressions about *Aló Presidente*. However, every time they asked to know who else had been interviewed in the school, they immediately felt compelled to comment on the others' political orientation, often guessing accurately whether they supported the Revolution or not. From what I could observe during the day I spent there, the general relations among members of staff seemed extremely friendly and polite. People would laugh about my questions when they came across our makeshift desk in the kitchen, they would jokingly make insinuations about the interviewees' "love" or "hatred" of Hugo Chávez, and they would privately excuse their colleagues' opposite views by mentioning how their family backgrounds, economic situation, professional path, etc. might have affected their views. In other words, self-censorship was present although people seemed to feel compelled to move past the polarised background. Perhaps this was due to the fact that they were tired of feeling antagonised after more than a decade of Bolivarian Revolution, or perhaps it was Chávez's illness and his absence for treatment in Cuba that provided a hiatus in the confrontational discourse. However, beyond interpersonal relationships, it was the fear to be outcast by the Revolutionary institutions that seemed to matter most. In this particular case, working for a Bolivarian school meant that criticism would put their jobs at risk, if not in reality at least in the received impressions of the participants. Stories about people having lost their benefits because they had failed to participate in the frequent government-led marches, or not finding space for their children in public schools because they were not on the socialist party (PSUV) lists would constantly come up in our conversations. And I witnessed similar versions of these stories in all the interviews. In another example, during an informal conversation with a small catering business in a secondary Venezuelan city, it was made clear to me that the

partners were strongly opposed to the regime. However, because a large part of their business depended on a contract with the local authorities (they delivered lunches to the Mayor's office), they confessed to wearing red shirts (the Bolivarian colour) to many events and to keeping pro-government paraphernalia in their offices just in case. It became clear that most people doing business with the government would do the same, making it impossible to assess the individuals' actual affiliations and yet maintaining a generalised antagonistic climate.

### *Building the Hypothesis*

After having assessed the terrain, the possible research routes aimed at analysing *Aló Presidente* were narrowed down to the actual content of the show. Fortunately, the archive of Alopresidente.gob.ve was an enormous source of data. Virtually all episodes were transcribed and uploaded onto the website within days of its being aired, providing an inestimable access to the content of the show. Given the availability of the different materials, a choice was made not to look at the reception or the production of *Aló Presidente*, but to focus on its discourse.

Although further ethnographic research had to be discarded for logistical reasons, the fieldwork allowed me to realise that people relied on the show to understand the complexities of a political project that Chávez himself had described as being “in the making”. One of the main characteristics that transpired from the interviews was the sense that *Aló Presidente* was a backdrop against which people could neutralise doubts and confusion regarding the politics of Hugo Chávez. Constantly present in their media consumption, viewers felt that their questions regarding the Bolivarian process would inevitably be resolved on Sunday during the show. This sense of temporal ambivalence of, on the one hand, the immutable permanence of a television show, and, on the other hand, a political project that was intrinsically “in process”, brought the idea that the archive of *Aló Presidente* could function as a fossilised slice of Venezuelan history. This also meant that, although always present, the content and format of the show might have changed over the years. Preliminary questions then arose: Did *Aló Presidente* evolve? And, if so, did the evolution of the show reflect the evolution of the political project known as the “Bolivarian Revolution”?

When critically assessing processes of sense-making, Hartley suggests that text be regarded as “forensic evidence” (Hartley 1992, p. 29). In this view, text is what remains of an action,

or a social practice, it “allows for the recovery and critical interrogation of discursive politics in an “empirical” form” (Ibid). It is the remaining trace of the event, its legacy, which allows the researcher to reconstruct a scene *a posteriori*. And, indeed, the large amount of data from 378 episodes and 1600+ hours worth of transcripts made the endeavour of analysing *Aló Presidente* quite challenging, for, interested in reading the show as a black box for the political process being developed in Venezuela, I needed to incorporate every new episode into my data set. The plan, following Hartley’s analogy of the forensic method, was to explore the body of *Aló Presidente* as the terrain from which to retrieve the evolution of the Bolivarian Revolution. The transcripts of the show were thus read as “evidence”, or “clues”, that would inform an interpretation of the political process taking place in Venezuela.

This goal inevitably implied a selective process. At the beginning of this research, the programme was still ongoing and its anchor had just celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The first step of the analysis borrowed from discursive psychology the idea that, when building their understanding of the world, individuals categorise events and express their views according to their contingent cognitive processes (Edwards & Potter 1992). The approach suggests that different categories, expressions, and terms compose the “interpretive repertoires” that individuals employ in order to reflect their realities (Potter & Wetherell 1987). This method informed my reading of interviews and fieldwork observations, for it brought to the fore people’s narratives of their experiences with *Aló Presidente* and highlighted some of the main topics that transpired when they described their viewing of the show. Keywords such as “participation”, “learning”, “information”, “truth”, “legitimacy”, “transparency”, would often be repeated and described with regards to the show and with participants’ understanding of its relationship with the Bolivarian Revolution. As mentioned above, this initial phase provided a first glimpse of what the show was understood to be, and it allowed me to pinpoint key themes in people’s perceptions of Chávez’s interventions.

These keywords became the initial flag points of my research. I first read through 10 per cent (every 10 episodes) of the transcripts in the hope to find common themes and/or different trends throughout the 13 years of data. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the evolution of the show and to locate key moments in the political landscape that might have influenced change in the format or in the discourse of the episodes. This approach confirmed the original impression that participation on *Aló Presidente* had decreased significantly and

that the general tone of Chávez's discourse had become more hostile against members of the opposition over time. It also became clear that the later years of the show had emphasised the central role of Hugo Chávez, not only as the host of the programme but also as the central figure of the political project. In order to gain quantitative support for the hypothesis, a method of "mixed analysis", relying on both quantitative and qualitative approaches was used in order to combine the critical and technical readings. According to Teddie and Teshakkori (2009): "although the two sets of analyses are independent, each provides an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 266). This allows for inferences to be made on the basis of the parallel analyses. However, the combination of these methods does not require them to be used on equal footing, permitting one of the analytical components to take priority over the other. In the current case, priority is given to the qualitative analysis of the content of the show. Quantitative methods were used to estimate certain "trends" in the evolution of *Aló Presidente*. A sample of 10 per cent of the transcripts was analysed using a set of variables based on the different key terms compiled from my interviews with both opponents and supporters of the regime. These keywords included: "cabinet instructions", "quotes and book suggestions", "attacks on the opposition", "policy announcements", "giveaways", etc. The initial intention was to code the data and use it as the primary evidence for the hypothesis. However, although the different datasets did inform the analysis and confirm preliminary readings of the show, it was difficult to sustain claims about data compilation and exact statistics when speaking about sensitive variables such as "authority" or "education" in the actual analysis. A decision was therefore made to focus on a critical reading of the episodes and deconstruct the discursive articulations of the show in light of its political context. The secondary role of the data thus helped supporting the hypothesis that the themes developed on *Aló Presidente* evolved throughout Chávez's presidency and pointed to moments in time where main shifts in content did occur.

On the technical side, it also became clear that phone calls, videos, new legislation, ideological discussions, entertainment, and so on, did not all have a similar frequency or equal intensity in the different episodes. As has been introduced in Chapter 2 when locating the genre of *Aló Presidente*, preliminary readings of the transcripts highlighted a series of 'activities' or segments that were common to episodes of the show. After careful consideration, they seemed to occupy different roles at different times during the history of the show. Because the original desire was to analyse the evolution of the programme, I

looked at significant moments of crisis in Venezuelan politics (elections, coup d'état, Constitutional amendments, etc.) and observed how *Aló Presidente* changed during those times. This led to the design of three major “events” in Venezuelan politics: a) Chávez’s first election in 1998; b) Chávez’s return after an attempted coup and national strike in 2002; and c) Chávez’s re-election and shift to a socialist doctrine in 2007. It was quickly acknowledged that reading the text through my understanding of the politics implied a double hypothesis: one regarding the evolution of the Bolivarian Revolution and a second one regarding *Aló Presidente*. Although this raised potential accountability issues, the intrinsic connection between the two could not be separated if the idea was to understand the television programme as the mediated leg of the political project and to approach its text from a discourse theoretical perspective, and I hope the following chapters will help demonstrate the parallels between the two. In addition to noticeable format changes, as the shift from radio to television, longer episodes, and creation of a Thursday night theoretical spinoff called “Aló Teórico”, some of the activities of the show would take priority over others at different times during the history of the programme. .

### *Methodology*

Locating its epistemology in social relations, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory offers a macro-textual approach to the notion of discourse, describing it as “this totality which includes within itself the linguistic and the non-linguistic” (Laclau 1990, p. 100). The idea is that social practices, actions, and identities all pertain to the discursive field. Part of this post-structuralist approach entails that meaning can never be fully fixed; it is in constant struggle with competing articulations and is, therefore, only partially or temporarily attached to practices. In addition to being able to account for change, the consequence of this premise is that structures are intrinsically connected to discourse, dependent on the meanings that, being produced and reproduced, construct or transform them. Seen from this light, *Aló Presidente* is perceived as a mechanism of production and diffusion of meaning and not only the sum of its technological characteristics. As such, it is important to pay special attention to the political landscape in which it was embedded.

The analysis is informed by the principles of discourse theory, observing language use as well as visual representations and social actions. The overall premise sees an ontological distinction between “politics” and “the political” (Marchart 2007) in which the institutional

and social, everyday, practices of the former happen against the ontological horizon of the latter. While discourse theory has been criticised for focusing on the ontological level at the detriment of more ontic dimensions, it adds a valuable contribution to discourse analysis through the notion of hegemony, which Laclau and Mouffe interpret as the discursive articulations that attempt to fix the meaning of society or, more accurately, of politics. As such, actions, language, institutional formations, and any other meaning-making practices, are understood to be “discursive”. It is within this frame that *Aló Presidente* is read: as part of a hegemonic attempt to “fix” the Bolivarian identity.

The show is thus seen both as the horizon against which discursive articulations take place and a discursive articulation itself; it is by nature political and can only be understood as part of the political. In order to overcome the methodological difficulties of this premise, the analysis needs to be both descriptive and interpretive (Geertz 1973) as to “interpret (...) the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode” (Schwandt 2007, p. 255). Interpreting also means that a critical reading is being applied to the events being analysed, it implies that the eye of the researcher is active in locating and assessing the different circumstances that might affect the meaning of a discourse. It also means that the outcome of the research does not make positivist claims. As important as it is to define theoretical questions around discourse, its effects in constructing the social cannot be analysed without paying close attention to the words that are being talked or written.

Putting aside ontological statuses of discourse, attention is thus paid to what Fairclough calls “text”, or “instances of language in use” (Fairclough 2003, p. 3). Text includes written words, transcribed conversations, but also body language and other semiotic symbols, and it is contingent on social relations. Linked to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the place of text vis-à-vis social practices is seen as a dialectical relationship that produces and reproduces meaning and power (Van Dijk 1997). These relationships occur in and reproduce “orders of discourse” (Fairclough 2003) or “hegemonic discourses” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), that is horizons within which meanings are similar and reinforce each other in a common sense-making practice. At the ontic level, the current analysis thus works with the text of *Aló Presidente*, its context, and other dimensions of social life in order to interpret its meaning in the light of its broader political and historical horizon, or in order to identify its “order of

discourse”. This means that, at every step, the analysis pays attention to the wider “discursive” dimensions of the show, or its historical, political, and social context. In concrete terms, the procedure was to read a maximum of transcripts of *Aló Presidente* (I read approximately 125 full transcripts throughout the process) with the aim to critically assess the hegemonic articulations that were being articulated on Hugo Chávez’s television show. Every six-hour episode contained a wide range of activities and required attentive reading in order to untangle the discursive means by which current affairs, humour, Venezuelan folklore, and charismatic storytelling articulated the Bolivarian identity over time. Additionally, the “critical” element of this approach aims to reveal the role of discourse in reproducing practices of power in the social world and, more specifically, in Venezuela. This means that special attention was given to the ways in which these articulations influenced the legitimacy of the regime and, ultimately, the authority performed by Hugo Chávez on the set of the show. The following empirical chapters will address these questions in detail and provide a critical reading of the evolution of *Aló Presidente* in relation to its political context: the Bolivarian Revolution.



“As of this moment, the President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez will convene his own space for opinion and popular participation” (Freddy Balzán, Episode 1 1999)

## Chapter 5

### **Aló Presidente 1999-2002: Articulating Participation**

The past chapters have addressed the theoretical and methodological foundations for the analysis of Hugo Chávez’s television programme *Aló Presidente*. Examining the mechanics of the show in Chapter 2, it was argued that the format of *Aló Presidente* borrowed many elements from traditional television genres, presenting a form of ‘hybrid’ talk show that included reality TV, PSB, and pundit undertones. Because of the nature of television, it was argued that the fluidity of the show was a common practice aimed at crystallising its appeal and at widening the usual target audience of political programmes. Unlike niche political shows, *Aló Presidente* fitted more naturally the familiar narratives of entertainment television and potentially catered for a wider audience. It was also argued that *Aló Presidente* served as a locus of both the construction and performance of a collective identity and that discursive articulations and identity formations were exacerbated because of the nature of the genre. By reducing time and distance, television was seen as providing a secure environment for mediated experiences of the world and as having the power to interpellate its audience into diverse subject positions. Thus providing a space for subject formation, it was suggested that the show *Aló Presidente* fostered the articulation of a ‘Bolivarian public’.

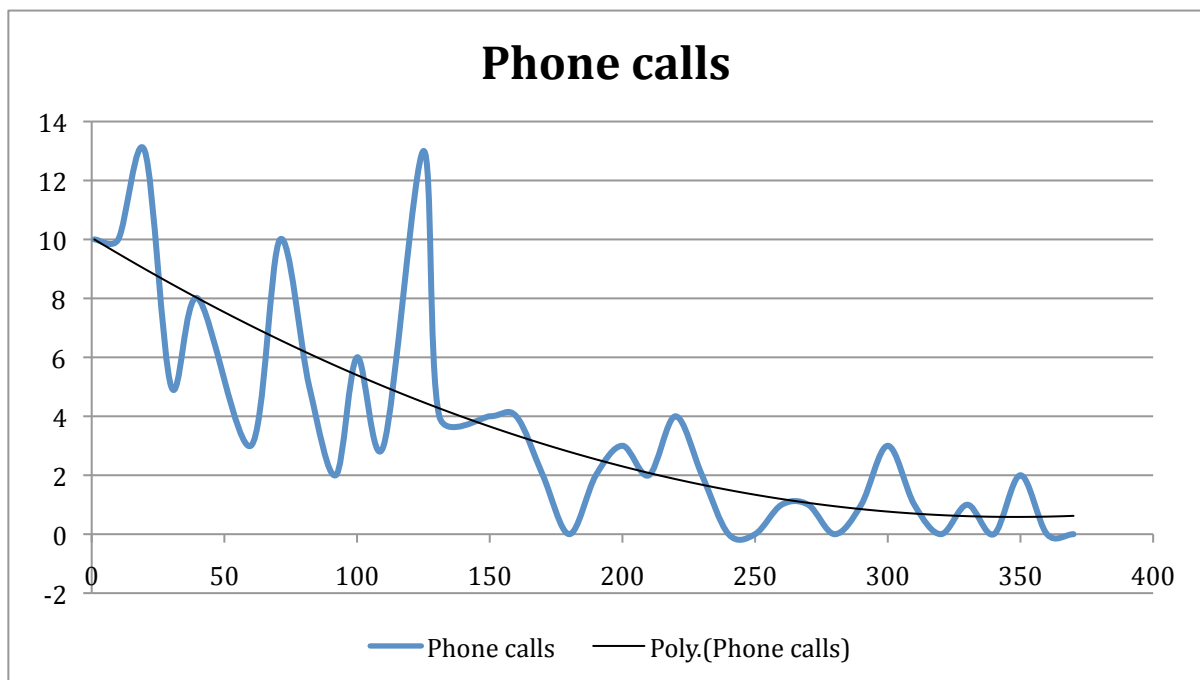
The following chapters will address this claim in more detail. Using the archives of *Aló Presidente*, it will be argued that the show facilitated the creation of a Bolivarian identity and acted as a space for the articulation of a hegemonic discourse. The analysis will look at the transcripts of the show chronologically and deconstruct the articulations that influenced the creation of the Bolivarian public in parallel to the evolution of Chávez’s political project. Starting from Chávez’s first election in 1999 and following *Aló Presidente* until its last episode in January 2012, the empirical chapters will identify three different stages, or ‘trends’, that reflected the relationship between Hugo Chávez and his audience. Each of these moments will be analysed in parallel to events that marked the political landscape in Venezuela during the years of Chávez’s presidency, and excerpts from the show will

illustrate the evolution of the discourse on *Aló Presidente*. Because the content of the show is closely related to the political events taking place in Venezuela at the time, the first part of these empirical chapters will introduce the political context before addressing the more specific details related to the show.

The first chapter, *Articulating Participation*, will follow the transformation of the audience of *Aló Presidente* into a consolidated Bolivarian public with a shared sense of identity and a series of internalised practices of participation on the show. This will correspond to the first years of Chávez's presidency and to the redrafting of the Constitution under the premises of a new form of 'participatory democracy' in Venezuela. Inspired by this new conceptual turn of the political system, it will be argued that articulating the notion of 'participation' on and off the show occupied an important part of the first years of Chávez's administration. The second chapter, *Educating the Public*, will take place during the turmoil years that followed the attempted coup d'état against Hugo Chávez in 2002 and that saw an increased polarisation among the Venezuelan electorate. In light of the growing resistance and numerous protests from the opposition, it will be argued that the discourse on the show became geared towards consolidating the Bolivarian group against a "threatening other" and securing the grassroots support by investing in social welfare and education. During the middle years of Chávez's presidency, it will be argued, *Aló Presidente* became a space where a series of nodal points of the Venezuelan imaginary were hegemonised into the Bolivarian discourse, and the general tone of the show was based on the antagonistic relationship between supporters and opponents of the regime. The third chapter, *Demanding Obedience*, will cover the socialist turn of the Bolivarian Revolution after Chávez's re-election in 2007. It will be argued that, after having established the basic elements for the hegemonic articulation of the Bolivarian identity, the final years of the Chávez regime highlighted the role of Hugo Chávez as the leader of a populist movement. As shall be seen, these last years strengthened the leadership of the Executive authority and centralised powers in Hugo Chávez's hands through a series of measures aimed at reducing pluralism in Venezuela.

The current chapter will thus explore the origins of *Aló Presidente* and the first few years of the show. Stressing the fact that it evolved alongside the political project proposed by Hugo Chávez, it will be argued that the first years of the show were aimed at coalescing dispersed members of an audience around a common identity, turning its spectators into an organised

public that shared their subject positions. The chapter will first review the rhetoric of Hugo Chávez's proposals and suggest that, in spite of an overwhelming claim to 'participation', audience's phone-call contributions decreased after the first few months, giving way to longer episodes starring Chávez and members of his administration. The chart below illustrates the decrease in individual phone-call participation on *Aló Presidente*. The x-axis represents episode numbers, and the y-axis the number of phone calls received on the air. As can be observed, the highest levels of participation were found during the first years of the show.



**Figure 3- Evolution of audience phone calls in *Aló Presidente*.**

In addition to the decrease in audience participation, it will be argued that the type of interaction fostered on *Aló Presidente* tended to privilege Hugo Chávez's supporters, practically excluding any criticism of the regime and reinforcing, through chains of equivalence, the common experiences of the members of the audience. This will support the claim that *Aló Presidente* played an important role in the construction of the Bolivarian identity and, eventually, in building the support base for Hugo Chávez's political project.

### *Historical Context: From Representative to Participatory Democracy*

In 1999, only a few months after his landslide election in Venezuela, Hugo Chavez started a radio programme intended to maintain a connection between the newly elected President and the electorate after a campaign that was described as a “media victory” in Venezuela. Claiming transparency and proximity, Chavez set up a talk show on Sunday mornings on the waves of Radio Nacional de Venezuela. The concept was to surround the President by a team of hosts and facilitate informal chats with members of the audience. The show, inspired by a programme developed in the 1970s by Rafael Caldera called “Habla el Presidente”, was introduced as the crystallisation of “participatory democracy”, a symbolic political turn reflected by the election of the independent candidate and ex-coup leader Hugo Chávez Frias.

From the very early days of the Chavez administration, the rhetoric of his political programme abounded in themes like “participation”, “empowerment”, “popular power”, and “substantial citizenship”. The debate, inherited from the general climate of dissatisfaction that had reigned over the 1980s and 1990s, and reflecting a regional trend towards tackling important issues of exclusion and social inequalities in Latin America, aimed at re-defining the role of democracy in Venezuela. The legacy of the Punto Fijo arrangement between the social-democrat party Accion Democrática (AD) and the Christian-democrat COPEI had worn down the ideals of representative democracies when, after 20 years of democratic practice, the industrial project advanced by a petro-state had failed to meet the needs of a fast-growing population.

At the time, *Aló Presidente* followed a relatively traditional format: a phone-in anchored by a team of hosts in which members of the audience could call the radio station and share their ideas, questions and thoughts with the president. In the context of Chávez’s election and proposal for a “participatory democracy”, the programme recalled a desire to open the public sphere by inviting citizens to a dialogue with their representatives. In addition to fitting the general rhetoric of Chávez’s manifesto, the programme reflected a general trend to “infotainment” in media programming that had seen a rise in talk show legitimacy, notably with Bill Clinton’s appearance on the set of several talk shows during the running up to the U.S elections in 1992 (Timberg & Erler 2002, p. 1). As shall be seen, the format of the programme quickly adapted to an environment of structural and rhetorical change. But,

before focusing on the transformations of the show, a word is necessary on the political and discursive contexts in which this participatory sphere was born.

According to Venezuelan historian Margarita López-Maya, what brought Hugo Chávez to power in 1999 was a general desire for a “change of hegemony”. Set against the background of a centre-periphery approach, López-Maya’s argument for hegemonic struggle in Venezuela depicts a Latin American country whose oil-dependent economy secured close links to the United States during the financial, socio-economic and geopolitical changes of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that provided relative stability despite a loss of sovereignty. It is within the “neoliberal” turn of the globalised economies, and the “lost decade” of the 1980s, that López-Maya locates the origins of change and move towards a hegemonic shift in Venezuela (López Maya 2005).

The conditions that had paved the way for the Punto Fijo agreement and the Constitution of 1961 were no longer sufficient to sustain the exigencies of a rapidly growing population. Over the lapse of 30 years, Venezuela had encountered an urban explosion accompanied by a widening of the inequality gap. The boom of financial districts and country clubs co-existed with slum developments; the development model sponsored by the oil industry that had provided a series of modernizing features since the 1950s was struggling to sustain its rhythm; and the austerity measures suggested by the Bretton Wood organisations from the 1970s onwards were shaking the very foundations of Venezuela’s representative democracy. The “exceptional case of Latin America”, with its longest-lasting democracy was headed towards a structural crisis, and the devaluation of the bolivar in 1983 was the first to shake the stability of the Punto Fijo era.

### *Black Friday and the Caracazo*

Economically, the development model based on oil revenue started to collapse at the beginning of the 1980s when the fall in oil prices inflated the national debt and reduced the GDP by 30 per cent. After having indexed salaries for the last time in 1978, inflation escalated and purchasing power declined. On 18 February 1983, after failing to stimulate the economy, and with soaring unemployment rates, the government of COPEI leader Luis Herrera Campins resorted to devaluing the bolivar and imposing currency exchange control

measures. The Venezuelan currency was withdrawn from financial markets and its rate, until then estimated at 4.30 bolivares per dollar, fell to 7.50 later that year.

Many scholars have perceived the day the bolivar was devalued, known as “black Friday”, as a turning point for Venezuela’s Punto Fijo system (López Maya 2005, McCoy & Myers 2006). What had once been called an “exceptional case” of Latin American democracies due to its political and economic stability throughout the 1960s and 1970s had entered a phase of social and economic decline. The general sense of dissatisfaction coalesced in 1989 during the popular riots known as the “Caracazo”. At the time, thousands of Venezuelans took the streets to protest against a new wave of economic and financial adjustments.

The political context for this period of time in Venezuela had been established by the pact signed in Punto Fijo by Accion Democratica (AD) and Comite de Organizacion Politca Electoral Independiente (COPEI) in 1958. This settlement, originally intended to overturn a military dictatorship, effectively guaranteed alternation in government and had grown over the decades into an extended network of trade unions and civil society groups that represented the views and institutions of the two main parties. By the late 1980s, and the end of the economic bonanza, Venezuelans had grown frustrated with the political elites of the Punto Fijo system. The economic recession, austerity measures and urban demographic explosion combined to reinforce a climate of inequalities and social exclusion that the main parties were unable to address. Intellectuals, civil associations, political parties and military groups, all marginalised by the hegemonic Punto Fijo system, started to channel the dissatisfaction and resentment attached to the political elites. Endemic corruption accusations and the profound inability to respond to grass-root demands reinforced the need for a viable political alternative and marked a decade of struggles and quests for change.

### *Coup d’Etat and End of Representative Democracy*

This climate of dissatisfaction and revolt has been described in the literature as the “crisis” or the “unravelling” of representative democracy in Venezuela (López Maya 2005, McCoy & Myers 2006). Tired of the centralised, corporatist institutions created by the Pact of Punto Fijo and its system of bipartisan dominance, groups that had gained social and economic relevance started to question the legitimacy of the “4<sup>th</sup> Republic”. In spite of decentralisation

reforms opening direct elections for mayors and governors after 1989, the system of representative democracy proposed by Punto Fijo was failing to satisfy the general demands.

Political parties until then excluded from the dominant coalition, non-partisan civil society organisations, intellectuals, and the general population, all seemed to disapprove of the disengaged model of legitimation brought forward by the Punto Fijo institutions and see in participation a panacea for all of Venezuela's ills. It is within this context of widening social inequalities and political corruption that questions surrounding the nature of Venezuela's democracy pervaded among all areas of society. Born from these years of democratic soul-searching and economic liberalism, Hugo Chavez presented in 1999 a project to reform the Constitution and lay the foundations for the forward-thinking "participatory and protagonistic democracy" in Venezuela.

*Participation as the foundation of the party: from MBR-200 to MVR*

Upon his arrival to the Presidency in 1999, Hugo Chávez went ahead with his electoral promises for change and proposed to redraft the Constitution of the Republic of Venezuela. One of the key themes of his political project, at the time called the "Bolivarian Revolution", was that the people of Venezuela be returned to their "protagonist" role in the country's politics.

The importance of popular participation was already present in the principles he had defended in 1992 when, as one of the founding members of the "Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario" (MBR-200), he had conducted an attempted coup d'état against Carlos Andres Pérez, calling for an alliance between civilians and the military to overturn the government. The MBR-200, as Smilde and Hellinger point out, was a Bolivarian movement formed by young officers in the 1980s. Their ideas, based on an interpretation of Simon Bolivar's work, rejected oligarchic structures imposed by the Punto Fijo parties and sought to build a model inspired by Rousseau's concept of the "general will", a model that emphasised the people's role and participation.

According to this Romantic perspective, true democracy is achieved when the disjuncture between the individual will and the collective will is overcome, making representative structures superfluous- in contrast to the assumption of

irreducible pluralism that is the basis of the liberal conception. (Wiarda in Smilde & Hellinger (eds.) 2011, p. 7)

After the failed coup in 1992, determined to bring their ideals forward to the political scene, the MBR-200 had relied on a network of civic-military groups called “Bolivarian circles” to activate grassroots mobilisation in support of the cause. A national network allowed coordinating of the circles by municipalities, regions and at the national level in an attempt to maintain a horizontal model of participation and encourage maximum engagement for the creation of the “national project Simón Bolívar”, the programme of the movement. Over a period of 5 years, militants of the circles met in Bolivarian committees across the country to discuss the proposals for a Constituent assembly. By 1997, the MBR-200 abandoned its position of resistance and strategy of boycotting elections and set up to officially become the political party “Movimiento Quinta Republica” (MVR). The flagship of MVR’s proposals was to redraw the Venezuelan Constitution in order to create the structures for an “original society of solidarity” in which the people would be protagonists of change (Canache & Kulisheck (eds.) 1998, p. 90).

The *constituyente* power is a revolutionary power. It is the power of constituting a pueblo against everything that is constituted already...The *constituyente* is a revolutionary process to destroy the system. (Chávez in Mendez-Rivera 2006, p. 63) (italics from original)

It is within this context of rejection of neoliberal representative institutions of the Punto Fijo parties and appeal of republican participatory promises that, on his inauguration speech as President of Venezuela, MVR leader Hugo Chávez announced the call for a referendum for a national Constituent assembly. The revolution was set into motion, and the country started on the path towards the “Fifth Republic”. Articulated as the alternative to an unsatisfying system that needed to cease, it is also within this context that the notion of “participation” came to prominence in the general rhetoric of Chávez’s project.

The ideological bases of Chávez’s project concurred with the general “crisis of legitimacy” encountered from the 1970s through the 1990s in the literature on “participatory democracy”. Leftist theorists like Pateman (1970) and Macpherson (1977) set out to curb the “elitist” turn in liberal democracies that reduced democratic practices to detached voting, electoral apathy,



and distant democratic institutions dominated by a hierarchical, bureaucratic select few. The movement rejected neoliberal democracy theories that relegated the role of politics to securing free-market dynamics and reduced state institutions to a minimum. They advocated against the “laissez-faire approach” and emphasised the central role of civil society in democratic practices (Held 2006). Dedicated to the spirit of participation, and loyal to his promise of making Venezuelans the “protagonists” of the political scene, Hugo Chávez premiered on 23 May 1999 the radio programme “*Aló Presidente*” as a channel for direct communication between himself and the men and women of Venezuela. On the occasion of its first episode, aired at 9am on Radio Nacional de Venezuela, the Director in chief of the Information Office and interlocutor of the show, Freddy Balzán, announced:

Freddy Balzán: We initiate today a very special show (...) For the first time in the country, the President of the Republic conducts his own opinion show, of popular participation, whose only goal is to hear the people’s clamour (...) Starting now, we will establish the great dialogue between the Head of State and those of you who are listening across the Republic. (Episode 1 1999)

To which the President replied:

President Chávez: Good morning Freddy, good morning to all of the team that we have built here in order to bring a voice, bring the truth, bring our anxieties, our impressions to all of you compatriots (...) we will be here talking to you, listening to you, writing down your criticisms, your suggestions, your ideas. The reason for this [programme] is the paramount necessity that the President of Venezuela, as one of Venezuela’s citizens, be in touch with the majority of Venezuelans. (Ibid)

From then on, Hugo Chávez began the first of a long series of episodes during which he would answer phone calls and reply to letters from the audience. Very similar to radio phone-ins, a host would invite the president to respond to his electorate. Besides a certain sense of ease in Chávez’s demeanour, the tone of the first episodes was relatively traditional in its structure. In the first episode of *Aló Presidente*, the newly elected Bolivarian leader answered 9 phone calls and one letter over a period of 68 minutes. The dynamic of this first episode was that of a talk show. The topics of discussion ranged from suggestions for tackling the

national debt, to questions about the Constitutive assembly, proposals for community development projects, and denunciations about inefficient local council management. The general tone of the show reflected the impression that a new public sphere was born. Host, president, and audience, all seem to engage in an exchange of ideas and projects for the new “participatory” chapter in Venezuelan politics. The following excerpt illustrates a suggestion addressed to the President on that first episode. A citizen from Guatire calls to propose a change in the judicial system. The motive of his proposal regards the security around courthouses.

William Rodriguez: Good morning Mr President (...) I am calling to make a proposal that could help save some money to this country. [I suggest that] you avoid transporting prisoners awaiting trial to the courts. First of all, it is terrible to see, any area with a courthouse becomes a no-go zone for pedestrians. There are expenses in transport, protection gear for those who take the criminals, because they are dangerous. Therefore it would be best to send the judges to the prisons, [so that they can] deal with the sentencing over there. I believe it would be the cheapest option for the country. (Ibid)

In response, the President acknowledged the proposal and expressed his gratitude for the interest and ideas offered during the show. He concluded the programme by communicating his weekly agenda and inviting the audience to the following episode:

President Chávez: We will be here, on our next appointment, analysing what goes on in Venezuela, listening to you (...) and building the path for our Venezuela. (Ibid)

Thus started a television programme that would provide a weekly space for the interaction between Hugo Chávez and the Venezuelan electorate during the 13 years of his presidency and on 378 occasions, for a total of 1656 hours and 44 minutes. In that context, *Aló Presidente* seemed to be taking the political potential of the television genre to a new level. It combined the familiar elements of the talk show format (direct address and prominence of everyday life topics (Scannell 1996), deictic language and rhetoric of liveness (Ellis 2000), etc.) with the promise of a paradigmatic shift in political structures, and an emphasis on citizen participation. Additionally, because it escaped the commercial exigencies of the

entertainment industries, the programme seemed to bolster public life by proposing of a public sphere where communicative action would be favoured to economic interests (Habermas 1984, 1991).

### *Constituent Assembly*

In continuity with the MVR's programme, Chávez had organised, on 25 April 1999, a referendum on the creation of a Constituent assembly. Organizing an assembly that would revise the foundations of Venezuelan original law was not stipulated in the ruling Constitution of 1961. On that occasion, the Supreme Court invoked the fundamental power of the "popular will" and its right to *participation*, and agreed to conduct a Referendum to consult the people on the matter (Brewer-Carias 1999). Once accepted, the process would move on to a vote to elect the assembly's members, and proceed to draft a proposal for a renewed Constitution. The Bolivarian Constitution was paramount for Chávez's project, and the activities surrounding its development occupied most of his first year in office. This was reflected in the conversations on the show where the public would be invited to share their opinions on the themes of the week. Engaging in ways that reflected a sense of "entitlement" (Myers 2000) to express their views, participants would phone the programme and contribute to the discussion. The mode of engagement would include emotions and intimate accounts often resulting in testimonials of participants' everyday lives. To Livingstone and Lunt (1994), this practice of television talk encourages the primacy of "lay knowledge" over expert knowledge. By using their own voices, participants speak on behalf of the community, reflecting what is understood to be "common sense". As such, participants presented themselves as being authentic and sincere in a performance that implied what Tolson (1991) calls "being oneself". In the following excerpt, a citizen recommends keeping members of previous governments from participating in the drafting of the new Constitution, and reiterates her support for the upcoming elections on the Constituent assembly.

Dalila Acosta: Listen! Three things: firstly, [you should] recite Psalm 91 every morning before leaving your house. Secondly, do not let Carlos Andrés, Franceschi, or Salas Römer into the Constituent [assembly]. Thirdly, we await the 24<sup>th</sup> of July with open arms. (Episode 2 1999)

Further on during the weeks preceding the vote, a young man phones the programme to talk

about youth proposals:

Luis Guevara: I have a proposal, Mr. President, I am 18 years old and I represent the youth's civil society (...) called "Reto Juvenil" [youth's challenge] (...) we have a series of programmes, like offering affordable books for students, and a literacy plan in the state of Guárico (...) We are organizing a crusade throughout the state of Guárico (...) in which young people and children have sent proposals to the Constituent [assembly] [they are] wonderful [proposals] Mr. President, proposals that no cheap politicians from the past have ever done, for prosperity and change (...) We have all these proposals but we need help in accessing all municipalities. Many thanks, I truly feel happy that, for the first time, I have a direct contact with a President that listens to me and gives me answers. (Episode 6 1999)

Bridging the distance between citizens and representatives, the show created a sense of "intimacy at a distance" (Horton & Wohl 1956) that allowed members of the audience to participate to a shared community. And even Venezuelans living abroad would phone in to inquire about their options in this participatory process. In this excerpt, a group of Venezuelans living in Dallas, USA contact the programme via email. Juan Barreto, director of the press agency Venpres reads,

Juan Barreto: Mr. President, a group of ladies in the United States have written "(...) We would like to ask if we can vote for the Constituent Assembly from here, from the U.S.". They would like to participate and would like an answer for the Electoral Council. They also send their love to your family. (Episode 6 1999)

The Constituent assembly was elected on 25 July 1999<sup>26</sup>. Many of the candidates were individuals from different communities and social backgrounds as well as representatives of civil society groups and academic circles. Among its 131 members, only 6 were issued from the ranks of AD and COPEI, and 90 per cent were affiliated to the Polo Patriótico, a coalition of parties supporting the Bolivarian Revolution. The apparent support for the Constituent process demonstrated the levels of popularity of Chávez's proposals. The shift

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<sup>26</sup> The vote "Yes" won with 71.78 per cent of votes for a total participation of 44.47 per cent of registered voters.

towards a new form of politics in Venezuela was *en marche*.

With the new Assembly came the redesign of the distribution of powers in Venezuela; its members worked on drafting a new Constitution as well as on reorganizing the institutions of the Venezuelan political system. Effectively, the process of revision devolved all institutional powers derived from the Constitution of 1961 to the Constituent assembly for a period of 180 days during which its members had original powers in ratifying or halting the activities of the State (Brewer-Carias 1999). Commenting on the composition of the Assembly, former member Ricardo Combellas has observed that part of the success of the Constitution of 1999 was due to the popularity of Hugo Chávez. Without questioning the democratic nature of the process, he writes “the *Lex Superior* was not the product of consensus but the [result] of an imposition of the majority. There was no representation of political and social pluralism during the process of its creation. The Constitution was product of a majority, undoubtedly relevant, but circumstantially coalesced around the President of the Republic, its undisputable mentor” (Combellas 2003, p. 9). At the time, Hugo Chávez enjoyed high levels of popularity, and participant contributions would often translate into support for the newly elected President and his Revolution. In this sense, the show would not only promote audience discussion but also work as a hub for messages to the president, and a significant amount of airtime was dedicated to hearing members of the audience’s testimonials of support.

Benicia Niño de Sandoval: God Bless you! I wanted to congratulate you for this show and for all the things that you have been doing for our country. (Episode 9 1999)

Antonio Lovera: I thought I would never see such profound and democratic change in our country. After 40 years and in such a short period of time, in such a peaceful way (...) I want to thank God for our President and [thank you for] all the things that you represent in (...) the positive transformation of our country. (Episode 31 2000)

### *The Bolivarian Constitution*

A second popular referendum approved the new Constitution in December 1999. The country was renamed the “Bolivarian” Republic of Venezuela, and a “protagonistic and

participatory” democracy was initiated under the auspices of a Constitution reflective of new forms of popular justice and social responsibility. The text included an unusually large number of articles and, out of 350, over 130 developed ideas associated with the notion of citizen participation, defining the Venezuelan foundations of a society that was “democratic, participatory and protagonistic”. This conception of the political system implied an ideological shift in the definition of the Venezuelan distribution of powers and the addition of two new pillars of the state: an electoral branch called “Poder Electoral”, and a citizen’s branch called “Poder Ciudadano”.

The central role of citizen participation was defined as a “continuous, flexible process of unprecedented character” aimed at handing over to citizens the management of any activities concerning the wellbeing and development of public life (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999, art.2). This established a duty of “co-responsibility” between citizens and state. In other words, in giving the central role to citizens, the Bolivarian Constitution foresaw potential instances of direct democracy and the elimination of former representative institutions. In this logic, the State was perceived as a facilitator, or as having the responsibility to “accompany” citizens in the proactive management of their communities and lives (art.62). This rhetoric, continuously reiterated during Chávez’s contributions on the show, were reminiscent of the participatory tone of the talk show genre, where citizens are “seen as participating, potentially at least, in democratic processes of the public sphere” (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, p. 19).

However, according to García-Guadilla, opponents of the reformed Constitution were critical of the repercussions on pre-existing institutions. Considering the fundamental nature of a Constitution in defining the political model that supports the state, the broad terms of these articles left the Constitution open for interpretation with regards to the “citizens’ power” and whether its institutions would be subordinated to other decentralised powers or would eventually override them (García-Guadilla 2005). The values stipulated by the new Constitution were reflected in the “Lineas Generales del Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación”, the political programme for 2001-2007. On the ideological side, the guidelines were designed to steer away from previous social measures deemed to reflect neoliberal economic policies, and put special emphasis on “citizen development”. The central goal of this project was to promote a vision of citizenship capable of organizing itself, highlighting

its cultural identity and developing its critical abilities.

The first forms of participatory organisations supported by the government were aimed at managing public services in the communities such as Mesas Técnicas de Agua (MTA) and Consejos Comunitarios de Agua (CCA) in charge of water distribution, or Civilian Committees on specific issues such as health care. The goal was to create spaces of organized civil society capable of tackling immediate community needs and providing an interlocutor to governmental bodies. Legally, the new Constitution afforded tools for direct democracy such as referenda that allowed revoking public mandates and forced legislative bodies to conduct popular consultations. It also created mechanisms for legislative initiative from citizens and opened town councils to citizen participation (López Maya 2004, 2011).

It is within this context of ideological shift and construction of a “participatory democracy” that the role of *Aló Presidente* became a key component in defining and staging the role and place of citizenship in Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian project. As announced by Chávez himself on the first episode, the radio show was created to give a “voice” to Venezuelans, to receive their “suggestions, criticisms and ideas” (Episode 1 1999). Under these premises, the tribune offered by *Aló Presidente* had seemed to be aimed at conducting a sphere of communication between citizens and their representatives on a national scale. This also suggested that audiences were understood as citizens “with the right to decide policy and the information – the data of everyday experience- on which decisions are based” (Livingstone & Lunt 1994, p. 33). At the time of its birth, a weekly programme aimed at opening the dialogue with the President seemed to be in direct connection with the “participatory” tone of his project and the format of the show seemed to break with the traditional boundaries of pundit talk shows by placing the audience at the heart of the discussion.

President Chávez: We are here to listen to you (...) so welcome to this programme, we are here to serve you, we are here to tell each other the truth, to communicate, and to continue to build together the path for our new Venezuela (...) In addition, I am here waving the flag of freedom of expression, leaving behind the [4<sup>th</sup> Republic]. May all say and write what they wish (...) This is a way of pushing freedom of expression forward. (Episode 1 1999)

All of the abovementioned measures reflect the desire to ground the structural and ideological shift on citizen participation and the repeatedly cited “protagonist” role of the people in the making of the peaceful *Revolución*. Once again, Chávez’s “democratic” revolution envisioned the distribution of powers at the grassroots level, and developing this newly founded power was at the centre of the agenda. As such, this rhetoric would translate on the show, turning *Aló Presidente* into a space for agenda-setting and discursive articulations around the Bolivarian Revolution. Presenting himself as a member of the group, Chávez would speak in the name of the audience to raise the themes that deserved attention,

President Chávez: It is essential that all Venezuelans participate to this revolutionary process. This is a revolution, a peaceful revolution. Thanks to Almighty God, we have not seen the need to take up arms, or fight in fratricide encounters (...) This is the unavoidable will of the Venezuelan people, a peaceful path. (Episode 9 1999)

This constant reinforcement of the relevance of the measures proposed by Hugo Chávez for the successful construction of the Bolivarian project seemed to gain a positive reception. For many months, the show was filled with phone calls addressing the new Constitution and the important idea of “citizen participation”, covering the topic at all possible levels. Unlike the limitations of other talk shows, whose audience ratings command as much entertainment and variety as possible, *Aló Presidente* could afford to linger on one topic for several episodes. Albeit with nuances, including different guests and covering different aspects of the theme, the topic of the Constitution remained central to the show throughout the entire redrafting process, and phone calls were selected to espouse this theme. Wood calls this screening of participants’ calls “agenda-seeking questions”. Fitting audience’s contributions to the discourse of the episode, the host integrates a “seemingly spontaneous discussion” into the conversation, giving the impression that the topic is by nature commonsensical (Wood 2001, pp. 77-82). In the following excerpt, a participant reports a series of irregularities in her former workplace, but also with regards to her living situation, and the fact that she is currently unemployed. The conversation goes on for a long time while she explains the details of her complaints. Hugo Chávez offers some solutions and asks:



President Chávez: I am going to give this advice, listen, because of course I cannot deal directly with every one of these issues. You know that the people, those who are listening, must [act with] consciousness. Have you got [a copy of] the Constitution?

To which the participant responds:

Xiomara Navas: Yes, of course! I have it on me wherever I go. Have I read our rights to the Mayor himself! I have [told him] about the citizen participation he must provide to us. (Episode 57 2001)

The rhetoric of participation continued to permeate Chávez's discourse outside of the programme as well. It is important to note that, because the Bolivarian Revolution was in its early stages, the articulation of the concept was still in process. This articulation had different effects. On the one hand, the show served as a platform to perform and practice news forms of participation. On the other hand, the central role of citizenship was still in the making and its meaning was being articulated in the subject positions interpellated through Chávez's interventions. As a consequence, the content of the first episodes, although seemingly spontaneous, was often very repetitive, and the themes introduced by Chávez continued to stress the notion of "participation" time and time again.

President Chávez: We need to participate with all our power, with all our attentions, with all our conscience, our will, our soul, our arms; with everything we have, with all the beautiful strength of the human being, of a people. Let's all participate in this; this project is here for good. (Episode 20 1999)

Once the Constitutional process was completed, all public offices needed legal ratification under the new chart. So called "mega elections" were held at all levels of power, including the Presidential office, and Hugo Chávez was re-elected for a new mandate<sup>27</sup>. On 27 August 2000, for its 40<sup>th</sup> episode, *Aló Presidente* moved to national television. It was the first episode to take place after Chávez's reelection. The episode was broadcast by the State

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<sup>27</sup> Over 5000 Executive and Legislative offices were elected in 2000 at the national level in July, and for regional mandates in December. Chávez's coalition of parties, "Polo Patriótico", won a large victory at all levels of power, controlling most Regions and the absolute majority of the National Assembly (Neuman, L., & McCoy, J. (2001). *Observando Cambio Político en Venezuela: La Constitución Bolivariana y las Elecciones 2000*. Atlanta: Carter Center).

channel Venezolana de Television (VTV) and lasted 4 hours and 45 minutes. After a 4-month hiatus, Chávez re-launched *Aló Presidente* from the Presidential Palace and spoke about the special role of the programme:

President Chávez: Whenever I travel, heads of State and colleagues ask me about *Aló Presidente* (...) They always ask me “what is that about you having a radio show? What do people say [when they call]? And I tell them that (...) people call and intervene, that this is a channel where people can participate and be part of a new form of communication in Venezuela. (Episode 40 2000)

Undoubtedly, the show had received a lot of attention. Bringing together members of the audience from distant locations, offering a platform to discuss everyday life concerns, and building a common identity around signifiers such as “participation” and “the people”, *Aló Presidente* had progressively established a sense of intimacy among members of its audience. To Scannell, it is the sociability of the genre that makes television a different experience to other media such as cinema, for it fosters communicative relationships (Scannell 1996). Partly, because the mode of address of the talk show genre favours “ordinary” speech, or “unvarnished words” that celebrate “regional or working-class culture” (Ibid, p. 17), and partly because it focuses on the audience’s everyday lives, he argues that certain forms of television talk contribute to citizen participation to “public life”.

Fifteen months after the first episode, the programme had received almost 400 calls and had been broadcast from different locations around the country. The President had talked to Venezuelan citizens from the cities of Valencia, Merida, and Ciudad Bolívar; he had visited the states of Apure, Guárico and Vargas. During episodes lasting over 2 and 3 hours, Chávez had discussed Venezuelan economy, sports, human rights, and current affairs. However, the format of *Aló Presidente* had started to change. In addition to its move to television and the fact that episodes had grown exponentially in length, contributions to the show had started to shift from members of the audience to other interlocutors. Chávez had begun to receive guests on the programme, such as members of his Cabinet and local politicians, and part of the conversation was now diverted to members of his administration. This tendency had a double impact on the dynamic of the show. Firstly, in terms of public discussion, Chávez seemed to be opening the floor of *Aló Presidente* to members of his administration in addition to the citizens. This accentuated the impression of transparency and openness that

gave that made the show feel like it had initiated a space similar to a public sphere. Secondly, however, by mediating the conversation between audience members and panel members, Chávez also detached himself from the group by acting as the convenor of the discussion and moving into a more distant and authoritative role. In the following excerpt, a member of the audience calls to complain about a housing project that is taking place on his property. The government is planning to build on a 400-acre area of land belonging to his family and he wants to raise the issue before the works begin. Chávez invites General Cruz Weffer, president of the development agency in charge of the project to come to the microphone:

Presidente Chávez: I want you, your family and all of our audience –who are listening in the millions- to know that we will never violate or allow that you and your family’s rights be violated. Gen. Weffer, you should talk to him; compare numbers; analyse documents; and see what is going on here (...).

General Cruz Weffer: You can have my word, Mr. José Gregorio, we are going to find a solution for this problem in a very positive way. I can receive you tomorrow in my office at 7:30am to discuss and resolve in a harmonious and positive manner the current issue. You can count on us. (Episode 34 2000)

The Bolivarian Revolution seemed to be promoting a sense of solidarity, and the results of the 1998 and the 2000 elections reflected Venezuelans’ support for Chávez’s proposals. Interpellated as participants to this revolutionary project, members of the audience were responding to this subject position and relating to the Bolivarian identity. At the time, the government had been sponsoring a programme of redistribution of the land aimed at encouraging local agriculture and independent farming. The President intended to increase consciousness about the unequal distribution of land in the country and had asked that Venezuelans “not only see [the interests of] their families and friends, but [of] the country as a whole” (Ibid). In this spirit, many people had been calling the show to volunteer their lands to the State:

Jesus Esteban Pérez: I have called to make a donation of lands on the banks of the Orinoco river (...) I have called to offer it to the President to see what he can do with them (...) there is approximately 50.80 acres. (Episode 9 1999)

Lucrecia Jaime: (...) there are some lands that we would like to donate to you in order to help the community. (Episode 24 1999)

Juan Barreto: We have come to the end of today's programme. We have received a donation from the Gersh family (...) they are donating some land in the state of Falcón to build a children's hospice. (Episode 27 2000)

### *Defining Participation*

Very soon, most calls broadcast on the air seemed to come from supporters of the regime addressing everyday dilemmas and sharing with each other testimonials of their reception of the Bolivarian Revolution. If the rhetoric had originally suggested that *Aló Presidente* was a space for debate, the type of phone calls and the contributions from the audience seemed to be geared at constructing a shared identity around common everyday life concerns, and support for Chávez's administration. Over time, participant interventions consisted of declarations of affection for the President; requests for social benefits; etc. Additionally, far from experiencing the dynamic of a deliberative arena, the criticism expressed on *Aló Presidente* rarely concerned the President or his project.

In fact, by the year 2000, the words of introduction to the show by Juan Barreto had been rephrased. From presenting *Aló Presidente* as a "space of opinion and popular participation" (Episode 27 2000), the host now called it a show where "the head of State analyses in depth themes of interest as well as interacts directly with Venezuelans" (Episode 29 2000), highlighting the central role of the president to the detriment of the audience. And, indeed, as the show grew in length and distribution (the open signal was simulcast by over 25 radio and television stations around the country), the number of phone calls per episode decreased. At the same time, new activities took over the space of *Aló Presidente*, and themes surrounding the Government's agenda became predominant. Although still mediated by a host, the President began to play a much bigger role than that of a simple talk panel member. Hugo Chávez's speech time occupied a bigger slot on the air, he surrounded himself by more members of his Cabinet, and journalists on location conducted live two-ways with people in the street. The tendency to make Chávez the conductor of the show increased progressively until episode 82 when, after two years on the air, the show dropped the

conductor altogether, making Chávez the sole anchor of *Aló Presidente*. At this point, the role of the President had become similar to that of the host of a pundit show, both leading the discussion and a central figure to the programme (Jones 2005). But this aspect will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters when looking at the authoritative role of Chávez on the show.

The first years of the show were thus transformative years. Having secured the support of its viewership, the concept of “participation” had progressively come to equate “testimonials” or “support” from those who responded to the subject positions articulated on the show.

Alirio Rivas: I wanted to thank you (...) I think that now there is democracy, there is communication; we (the people of Venezuela) have participation; [an option] we never had with previous governments. It is easier now to speak with the President than to speak with a Prefect (...) I had tried to contact the Governor; several local institutions; I had done all the paperwork, but it was impossible. It is now easier to talk to you. (Episode 57 2001)

As time passed, *Aló Presidente* had grown into a heavily produced Sunday show, and most citizen contributions were screened to fit the scripted topic of the day. In this excerpt, Hugo Chávez is visiting Zaraza in the state of Guárico. The previous day, the President had met with the Governor of the state in order to inaugurate a medical centre created under the auspices of Chávez’s “Plan Bolívar 2001<sup>28</sup>”. During the episode, the President and the Governor chat about the fact that Chávez got to assist a surgeon during an operation the day before. He invites the Doctor to comment on his performance; speaks with General Rosendo, Genral Vietri Vietri, General Silva about the costs of the programme, the overall performance of the medical centres, the frequency of operations, etc. The ambassador of Cuba in Venezuela, guest on the show, congratulates the Venezuelan government for their Bolivarian ideals, and Hugo Chávez congratulates the army for their “humanitarian aid”. At the end of their conversation, Chávez answers a phone call from the audience. A woman is calling to congratulate the medical programmes implemented around the country and to

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<sup>28</sup> Plan Bolívar was a civilian-military alliance aiming at using military resources to create social relief programmes. The initial stages of the project (Plan Bolívar 2000) had provided mass vaccinations, waste recollection, food and education programmes, and housing projects, among other things Wilpert, G. (11 November 2003). *Venezuela's Mission to Fight Poverty*. Retrieved 17 April 2013 from [venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/213](http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/213)

share the story of her sick child's case.

President Chávez: It is impressive to see what the Plan Bolivar does in the communities. Yesterday, I participated to a surgical procedure (...) in a rural hospital (...)

General Rosendo: Yes, I am very moved by the team of the Plan Bolivar (...) and how it continues to grow (...)

General Vietri Vietri: We do such operations every 15 days (...) we go to the most remote locations, where poverty is at its highest (...)

General Pacheco Silva: We have been working for a month [organizing] this operation (...)

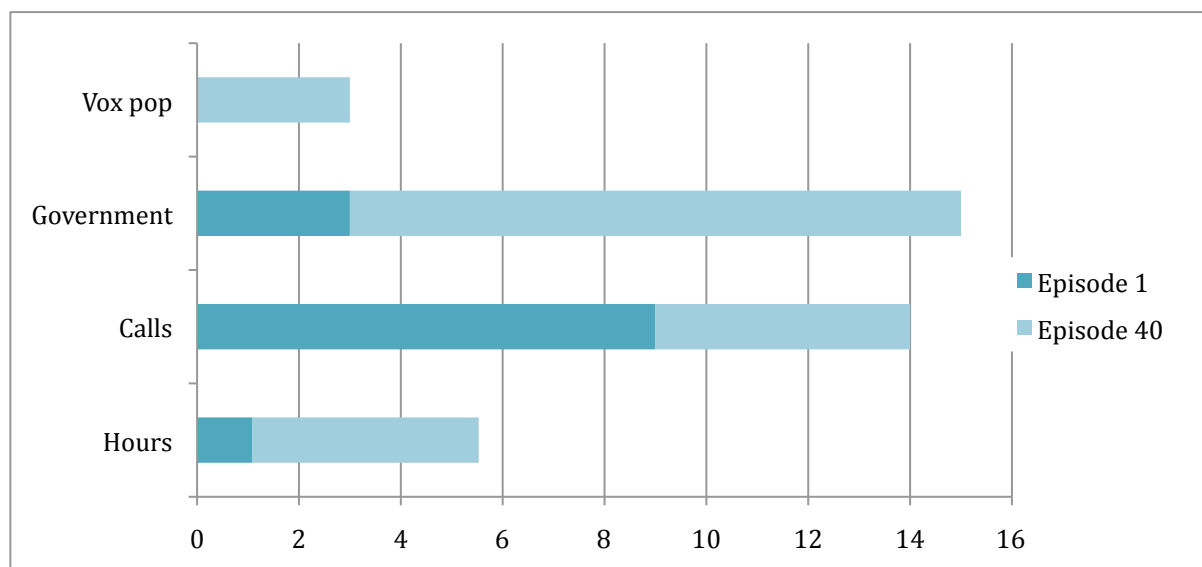
President Chávez: Dr. Mogollón, am I qualified to participate in the surgery of the Governor? (...)

Dr. Mogollón Silva: You are qualified (...)

Gloria Chaparro; I am currently at the hospital (...) with my baby (...) who, thanks to the General Rosendo is now receiving treatment (...) I want to thank all the team of Plan Bolivar 2000 (...) use this call to [prove wrong] all those people who try to ruin your image, Mr. President (...) [to congratulate] all the work done by the military, from the soldier to the general. (Episode 67 2001)

In terms of phone calls, the below chart compares the first episode (Episode 1) of *Aló Presidente* with the first episode (Episode 40) after Chávez's re-election in 2000. As can be observed, the central role of participants in the first episode (9 phone calls per hour versus 3) shifted towards a format that favoured Presidential interventions (longer instalments), interactions with members of his government, and vox populi. It can be noted that the apparent spontaneity of the early episodes gave way to more heavily produced content, that the set-up for participation was arranged in order to accommodate the theme of the episode, and that members of Chávez's government were asked to respond to questions relevant to their competences. After Chávez's re-election, the dynamic of the show evolved so as to emphasise the work done by his administration, and long segments of the episodes consisted

in Presidential monologues about particular elements of his political project.



**Figure 4- Comparative chart of participation and episode duration between Episodes 1 and 40 on *Aló Presidente*<sup>29</sup>**

The following excerpt illustrates the extended interventions of Hugo Chávez. In this case, the President receives a letter from a young girl, Yaneizi, who has recently graduated. She has been applying for jobs but struggles to find employment because of her lack of experience. The President expresses his sympathy with regards to her situation and takes the opportunity to talk about the economic incentives that his government is putting into place.

President Chávez: (...) I can imagine what it must be like [awaiting for work], looking at the ceiling, surrounded by the family, in poverty. It must be, it is, very sad (...) The problem with unemployment is, of course, the fracture of the economy that we have been seeing for a while. That is why the day before yesterday (...) we were working on this agricultural project. The impulse of productive economy. I mean microenterprises (...) let us create microenterprises with ladies like Yaneizi. They are educated, they want to work, and a microcredit of (...) should help them (...) people are good with credits (...) this is the new phase of the Revolution: the reform (...) The Bank of the People is a

<sup>29</sup> Chávez, H. (1999, May 23). Episode 1. *Aló Presidente*. Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela. Chávez, H. (2000, August 27). Episode 40. *Aló Presidente*. Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela.

new organisation; the Unique Social Fund is also a new organisation (...) the Fondacfa (...) Foncrei (...) All this money belongs to the people and will be directed to those who need it the most (...)

After speaking for several minutes, the President reviews the agricultural production for the year 1999-2000. Illustrating with numbers he continues:

President Chávez: (...) coffee production increased by 6 per cent; cocoa by 18 per cent; sugar 3 per cent; palm oil 15 per cent (...) rice (...) maize (...) beans (...) onions (...) garlic (...) eggs (...) oranges (...) I could not talk about this the day before yesterday because we were running out of time<sup>30</sup> (...) but these are the good news (...) and I wanted to talk about the letter this Venezuelan woman wrote because it broke my heart. We need to reactivate agricultural [production], microenterprise, farms, manufacture, fisheries. This is the way out and we are starting to succeed. (Episode 43 2000)

### *Guiding Participation*

In addition to the changing nature of the show -longer episodes, longer-speech time for Hugo Chávez, diversified governmental teams, etc.- the type of phone calls received on the air also became less varied. Most participants asked for personal favours and help with the satisfaction of basic needs, and testimonials of people struggling to find work, housing, health care, legal advice, etc. flooded the call centre of *Aló Presidente*. Although the show presented similarities with the current affairs talk show (agenda-setting and predominance of host expertise), and audience discussion shows (inclusion of the studio audience and other panel guests, no commercial breaks, limited editing), the type of contribution taking place on *Aló Presidente* seemed to be geared towards a more “therapeutic” tone. According to Haarman, on this kind of programme, “issues emerge from and are anchored in a domestic, personalized context” (Haarman 1999, p. 45). To Shattuc, the issue-oriented element of the genre translates emotional and personal testimonials into broader social issues. In her view,

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<sup>30</sup> At the time, in addition to *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez had started to appear on television and radio in “cadenas”, or Presidential messages considered by the law to be of importance and therefore officially broadcast on all public channels across the country. Hugo Chávez refers of this specific “cadena” at the beginning of the episode of *Aló Presidente* and mentions that it lasted for three hours but had to come to a conclusion before all of the material was broadcast. For more information on “cadenas” and Hugo Chávez’s broadcasting habits, see Cañizález, A. (2012). *Hugo Chávez: la presidencia mediática*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa.



the “expert knowledge” of the host supports the sense of confidence that participants feel in the mediation (Shattuc 1997, p. 7). In the case of *Aló Presidente*, however, more than an abstract “moral authority” (Ibid) the host had concrete decision-making authority, linking private, everyday, matters shared in the familiar context of daytime talk television, to political issues related public life. In certain cases, the show seemed to have been transformed into a constituency help desk, where members of the electorate could reach their representative and address their needs. The following excerpts provide a few examples of the requests that were handled in every episode of the show.

Santa Charles: I have a son. He has AIDS. He is three years old and I have never been able to give him medical care because I don't have any money. (Episode 24 1999)

Carmen Noira: (...) I wrote to you to ask for a loan for my husband, he owns a minibus and the vehicle is too damaged [to drive] (...) we need a loan to either fix it or buy a new one. (Episode 30 2000)

Trino Giusti: Mr. President, I had the possibility of doing a business transaction that went badly, I am sure I was played. My idea (...) is that the government could give me a job (...) so that I could get a loan. (Episode 38 2000)

Elisabeth Medina: (...) I was calling to present a problem with regards to my mother. She is a teacher (...) she retired in 1994 and still hasn't received any social benefits (...) What can we do about this? (Episode 15 1999)

Iris García: I study IT and I am calling because I need to see if you can facilitate me a computer. This is an important tool for my career and my mother doesn't have the means to afford it. (Episode 67 2001)

As for contributions providing a critical approach, some people would call the show to denounce irregularities in their workplace, or in the local governments. In the following excerpt, a man calls to report abusive actions from his employers and law and order corruption:

Martín Sanchez: I work for a bus company, Expresos Flamingo, I have been working for them for 14 years and, well, they exploit us Mr. President, they

don't give us any days off or any social contributions (...) Also, on the motorway from Caracas to Valencia, for example (...) the National Guard often stops us and tells us we have "ten thousand and one ways of getting out", implying that we pay them ten thousand bolivars (...) it happens all the time Mr President. (Episode 47 2000)

However, criticism of Chávez's performance or of Bolivarian project as a whole never seemed to take place on *Aló Presidente*. At best, members of the audience would call to complain about poor follow-up to their previous calls, or the fact that their requests had not been satisfied in spite of their having managed to reach the President. In this example, the person on the phone complains to Hugo Chávez about a building project that over 600 families have been planning in an area adjacent to a military base. The plot is part of a security zone and the housing project has been discarded.

Julio Machado: My point is the following: I represent the Bolivarian Association 2000 and am the Vice-president (...) We talked to you in Barinas, while you were doing the *Aló Presidente* over there (...) and we discussed 42 acres of land (...) You promised you would enquire about the necessary paperwork (...) We have been on this for two years and you have always delegated [the case] to William Fariñas, to the General Alberto Gutiérrez, head of the "Plan Zamora", to Raúl Salazar, Victor Cruz Weffer, an endless number of people (...) Since the [original] piece of land is unavailable; we would like for you to help us get [a different one]; we ask you insistently Mr. President. (Episode 38 2000)

Quite often, daytime talk shows emphasising the lives of "ordinary people" tend to develop around social issues, family themes, and debates around matters of deviance. These "confessional talk shows" (Shattuc 2001) generally build their discussions around the experiences of the audience and tend to orient the dynamic towards a moral judgement of social behaviour. In confessional shows, of which *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in the U.S and *Kilroy* in the UK have become a reference, these issues are often tested against the moral compass of the host and of members of the audience, and are willingly presented as weaknesses by their participants. Pushed to the extreme of infotainment, these formats can take a dramatic tone, staging scandals and heated encounters between their participants, and establishing social conventions against definitions of the "abnormal" (Gamson 1999). Even

though *Aló Presidente* did not include regular confessions about sexual orientations, neighbourly disputes, or eating disorders, the intrinsic dynamic of the confessional genre softly surfaced in the subject positions of the different actors. This would translate in the way in which participants would expose their emotions and suffering on the air as well as in the broad spectrum of topics discussed on the show. In a somewhat milder version of the confessional talk show, *Aló Presidente* incorporated familiar dynamics of the genre such as the ease at which the host would touch upon matters of domestic life, and the vulnerability through which participants would express their needs and concerns. In this excerpt, Chávez discusses family planning with the help of an expert on the set of the show,

Doctor Gilberto Rodriguez: (...) women should not always be the ones to pay in terms of family planning. Men should get vasectomies.

President Chávez: (...) explain this well please; because people are worried here in the studio, they are worried that they are going to get something chopped off. Go ahead and give us a good explanation (...) our friends are very scared!

Doctor Rodriguez: The procedure is simple. You need to get local anaesthesia on each side of the two scrotums and cut the vas deferens, the tube that conveys sperm.

President Chávez: But listen, listen, doesn't it hurt at all?

Doctor Rodriguez: no, no, no

President Chávez: And everything works fine? (...) I am saying this because people are scared. I have to speak the truth here because people are frightened so I am asking. Is the "steel cable" intact, speaking in metaphors?

Doctor Gilberto: The "mental cable" is even better after that. (Episode 32 2000)

The interesting element of this example is the fact that, without making it the focal point of the programme, *Aló Presidente* spoke the language of an audience who was familiar with such discussions. And, as has been argued above, participants eagerly shared their desires and worries on the set of the show.

Magalys Reyes: I retired five years ago and I haven't received my pension (...)

They say they've send the check but I haven't received it (...) I don't have money to pay for a lawyer, I'm shaking, I'm scared because I don't know how much this phone call is going to cost me. (Episode 19 1999)

Thus far, it has been argued that *Aló Presidente* started during a time of ideological and structural change in Venezuelan politics; a time when the Bolivarian project as proposed by the newly elected Hugo Chávez advanced a political system based on “popular participation”. As a paradigm-shifting political project, the participatory nature of the Bolivarian Revolution was still at best in the making and at worst polyvalent. Laclau and Mouffe define those discourses that attempt to “fix” meaning, or dominate the floating signifiers that make the field of discursivity, “nodal points” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 112). These are privileged signs around which other signs acquire their meaning, signs that attempt to reduce all possible polysemy and become articulated in hegemonic discourses. During the first months of Chávez's presidency and indeed the show *Aló Presidente*, the notion of “participation” functioned as a nodal point in the articulation of the Bolivarian discourse. Because the meaning of Chávez's project had not yet been “fixed”, the key concept of participation somehow served as an all-encompassing floating signifier that, through the practices taking place both in the political arena and on the stage of *Aló Presidente*, slowly acquired its more “fixed” meaning. In this context, the oscillation between rhetorical appeals to debate, performances of support, testimonials, and mediated contributions through presenters or elected representatives, all denoted attempts to reduce, by chains of equivalence, the polysemy of the notion of “participation” and, by extension, define what the concept meant in the particular context of the Bolivarian Revolution. This also implied that, for contributors of the show, the activity of participating in the Revolution required a certain understanding of the procedure. Livingstone and Lunt (1995) argue that the mechanisms of production behind the dynamics on talk shows impose a set of regulations and practices on their audiences. In their view, participants internalise modes of conduct and appropriate behaviours corresponding to the context of the show. Subject positions are therefore negotiated in the very process of their definition. Considered thus a fundamental component of the construction of the Bolivarian identity, the articulation of the signifier “participation” on *Aló Presidente* merits closer examination.

As previously mentioned, theories of participatory democracy promote the active

involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes that affect their everyday lives. They propose to enhance democratic legitimacy by institutionalising forms of citizen power that organise the political life according to concerted views. On that basis, it has been suggested that “the models of participatory democracy imply involved citizens- informed, motivated, communicative- who join together with others to forge their opinions about public affairs” (Katz 1995, p. xxx). Quite often, this relates to another theoretical movement that also proposes to enhance democratic legitimacy through interpersonal action: *deliberative democracy*.

It has been noted that audience contributions did not reflect the intention to translate participation into debate in *Aló Presidente*. If citizen participation was more easily defined with regards to community centres and local management, for example, their role in a participatory space created through a television programme was still unclear. In spite of a few attempts during the first episodes, there was little to no exposure to different political viewpoints, most of the airtime revolved around the President’s monologues, and participants did not engage in debates with each other, nor with the presidential team. On the contrary, most participant contributions reflected adoration for Hugo Chávez and requests for the satisfaction of daily needs. In the context of a vision of democracy based on the “central role of citizens”, the question inevitably rises: what purpose can a talk show with the chief Executive of the state serve?

An arena of direct communication under the premises of more “participatory” forms of democracy in Venezuela could originally suggest the opening of spaces of deliberation, of encounter of ideas, with the higher ranks of power. Indeed, the very fact that the person interacting on the air was the elected President of Venezuela implied that the space of participation formulated in *Aló Presidente* was attached to a figure of the *representative* democratic tradition<sup>31</sup>. Far from being an ordinary citizen, Hugo Chávez embodied the Executive power of a republican model of democracy. This condition relates back to Habermasian structures of power, in which institutions formalise spaces of deliberations that ensure the health of democracy by promoting public debate and popular participation. In a deliberative democracy, as understood by Habermas (Habermas, 1984, 1992, 1998), the

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<sup>31</sup> See the early debate against representative institutions in the context of the Punto Fijo tradition and the expressed will to move away from previous political structures.

legitimacy of the state is maintained by ensuring continuous communication among citizens and delegated forms of power. This can be achieved by providing a legally institutionalized space for debate, also known as the “public sphere”. The aim is to stimulate rational debate and expose members of society to diverging political ideologies in order to build mutual understanding at each step of the public life. By interacting with each other in a deliberative space, citizens are offered the possibility of ridding themselves from prejudice and self-interest, and mutually define the greater good. The idea is to promote participation through dialogue in order to protect popular sovereignty against the elitist interests of representative bodies.

*Participatory* and *deliberative* theories of democracy share the common goal of returning democratic legitimacy to popular sovereignty. Stemming from the legitimacy crisis encountered by liberal democracies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (crisis of accountability, of party systems, political elitism, minimal state intervention, electoral apathy, and so forth) the two branches of democratic theory advocate for increased interpersonal practices in order to curb “elitist” democracies and reduce inequalities. And both sides are keen on developing structures of direct democracy that contain institutional abuses and reflect citizen participation, although supporters of the deliberative trend advocate for primacy of deliberation in the creation of the structures of power (Vitale 2006, pp. 754-755). The role of political discourse in modern democracies is disputed among tenants of both participatory and deliberative democracy theories. In spite of their differences<sup>32</sup>, both models have addressed the importance of communication in the projects that they present. For the former, deliberation is a form of participation, and, for the latter, spaces of organised participation are necessary for ensuring non-coerced deliberation.

However, if deliberative democrats have been considered to believe that “the elementary bloc of participatory democracy is conversation” (Katz, 1995, p. xxx) (Rosenberg 2007), they have also been concerned with the “feasibility” of such a project and have been

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed comparison between participatory democracy theories and deliberative democracy theories, see Vitale, D. (2006). Between deliberative and participatory democracy. A contribution on Habermas. *Philosophy & Social criticism* , 32 (6); Wojcieszak, M. E., Baek, Y. M., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2010). Deliberative and participatory democracy? Ideological strength and the process leading from deliberation to political engagement. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* , 22 (2), 154-180. Nabatchi, T., Gastil, J., Weiksner, G. M., & Leighninger, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Democracy in Motion. Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*. Oxford University Press. Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2004). Radical Democracy. *Swiss Journal of Political Science* , 10 (4), 23-34.

criticized for its empirically unrealistic normative requests. They have been accused of failing to address notions of material inequalities, accessibility, inclusion, and publicity; they have been contested in their claim for consensus; and have faced the challenge of associating the outcome of deliberation with fairness (Bohman 1998).

#### *Deliberation as cross-cutting exposure*

Mutz (2006) attempts to overcome this “feasibility” conundrum by overseeing the series of normative criteria of deliberative democracy theory and reducing the conditions of a deliberative situation to what she calls “cross-cutting exposure” (p. 6). In other words, in order to empirically test the effects of political talk in everyday life, she observes what happens when people are exposed to opposite views in a situation of communication. Her starting premise is that the bigger the contact with different viewpoints, the greater the ability to see from another person’s perspective, and the more enhanced the spirit of community. Surprisingly, Mutz’s results showed the opposite effect. Actually, she argues, “although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they discourage political participation” (p. 3). After looking at networks of participation with highly enthusiastic political activists and instances of formal or informal deliberation with people with conflicting opinions, she observes that participatory and deliberative practices in a democratic exercise are in fact opposite forces. The former appeals to the formation of homogeneous groups that perform activities in accordance to their set of beliefs, and the latter tends to increase democratic tolerance while reducing the impulse for political action (p. 133).

This relates back to the case of the show. Based on the abovementioned analysis of the activities that took place on the set, the form of participation favoured in *Aló Presidente* did not seem to be aimed at consolidating a space for deliberation as crosscutting exposure. In fact, there is no evidence that the show ever fostered exposure to diversity of opinions or debates around different political ideologies. Rather, it seemed to provide a space for Venezuelans to participate in Hugo Chávez’s project and share testimonials about their similar views. Participation in *Aló Presidente* was dominated by shared opinions and support of the regime.

### *Articulating Legitimacy*

The central question for understanding the function of this case is the question of *institutionalism*. And, in order to do so, one must take into consideration the context of its creation. *Aló Presidente* was a political phone-in that emerged in the middle of a process of transformation from a representative to a participatory form of democratic system in Venezuela. The show was created a few months after Hugo Chávez was first inaugurated and it was broadcast during a time in which the President proposed and won popular support for redrawing a new Constitution. In that context, was *Aló Presidente* a space that utilised technological means to facilitate a space of direct communication between the President of Venezuela and virtually all citizens of the state? Or was the show a means of drawing participation from supporters of Hugo Chávez's project?

These questions echo Garcia-Guadilla's (2005) argument at the beginning of the chapter with regards to the unclear relationship of legitimacy between institutions issued from representative and participatory formats. Unpacking the guidelines of the new Constitution, Garcia-Guadilla had commented: "in this interpretation of democracy, representation and participation seem to be antithetical, for the dilemma arises about who should be in charge (...); those who were elected or those who were more active in the mobilization" (p. 105). In this case, Hugo Chávez was a democratically elected representative of the people as head of the Executive power. And, simultaneously, he was the promoter of a participatory democracy *in the making* that aimed at reducing the role of the state to an "attendant" of the process (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información, 2000). In the first scenario, the creation of a televised communication space would see greater benefits under a format of deliberation as understood by Mutz. In the second, the show provided a "protagonist" role to the people on the show, albeit in non-deliberative forms.

### *Participation as Public Performance*

The new Constitution of 1999 stipulated that the "Bolivarian" Republic of Venezuela rested on powers that, in addition to the three liberal pillars, would guarantee a "participatory and protagonistic democracy" in the country. This last element, albeit largely undefined, suggested that citizens should regain their role as "protagonists" in the political realm. In the context of the battle against inequalities that was central to participatory democracy ideals,



such claim refers to the inclusion of previously marginalised sectors of the population into the political arena. And, in this context, *Aló Presidente* did offer a space to strip off the inhibitions of ordinary citizens when talking about political affairs or addressing matters of political interest. The informal language employed by the President and the extended personal anecdotes shared by the communication team on the show helped reinforce this sentiment.

Non-deliberative participation implies that the form of interaction is not limited to a rational dimension, to a public sphere where the “better argument” wins. And, indeed, the form of participation witnessed on *Aló Presidente* was not limited to the rational consideration of public policy. Many of these interventions reflected an emotional connection between members of the audience and the new regime: interpellated by Chávez as part of the new Bolivarian “we”, and described in the programme as “protagonists” of the political process, members of the audience regularly expressed their affective support to the regime. Demonstrations of affection, or emotional outbursts, largely influenced the way in which participation evolved on the show. Participants opened their hearts on *Aló Presidente*, and examples of passionate testimonials quickly became a staple of the dynamic on the air. To Carpignano et al. (1990), the main role of talk show television is to produce and distribute common sense. It does not intend to engage the citizen in a debate, “on the contrary, the purpose of the talk show is not cognitive but therapeutic. The structure of the Talk Show is not a balance of viewpoints but a serial association of testimonials” (Carpignano et al. 1990, p. 51). In this sense, the aim of the programme is not to expose its audience to opposing viewpoints but to articulate a common identity through the shared experiences of its participants.

The place of emotion<sup>33</sup> in the modern era has, for some time, been subjugated by the enlightened ideal of rationality. Higher levels of consciousness are favoured to passion, and reasoned decisions are seen as necessary for the enforcement of social contracts and organised politics. This prevailing paradigm has fuelled the belief that political behaviour is (and must be) determined by rational choice and cognitive evaluations, and has led to the confrontation between supporters of “rational choice theory” and those of “affective

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<sup>33</sup> Emotion, feelings, affect, and passion are used as synonyms, for a more detailed discussion on the differences see Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London: Sage, 2012).

intelligence” (Marcus 2000). Over the past few decades, emotion theory has relied on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and others fields such as philosophy and more broadly the social sciences, to explore the link between emotion and cognition in an attempt to overcome the Cartesian dualism of mind/body. Part of the project is to shed light onto the productive force of affect in political theory and its potential impact on the participation deficit in modern democracies.

To Mouffe: “‘passion’ is some kind of place-holder for all those things that cannot be reduced to interest or rationality (...) fantasies, desire, all those things that a rationalist approach is unable to understand in the very construction of human subjectivity and identity” (Mouffe in Zournazi 2002, p. 124). As a fundamental component of the human experience, affect cannot be dismissed from the political realm. To many, emotions are seen as a fundamental component of social life and of political decision-making (Marcus 2000, 2002, Damasio 2000, de Sousa 1987); they play an important part in triggering change, working as a compensating mechanism for rational ideas, and providing the necessary motivation for action (Frijda 2000). Maiz (2011) argues, “moral empathy, feelings of belonging, affective ties and bonds of solidarity are also some of the fundamental elements of the collective identities of social movements, social groups and political parties” (p. 55). Seen as part of the identity building process, the affective dimension becomes a key component of social identity and, as such, a channel for group consolidation.

The affective element of the identification process, individually and as a group, inevitably means that emotions are not only found at the rhetorical level of communication, but are a fundamental aspect of citizen identity and political participation. By sharing their subjective views and speaking in their own voice, by talking about their everyday experiences, participants of the show took part in the construction of a public sphere in which emotional ties and the witnessing of others was prioritised over rational argumentation. As Carpignano et al. (1990) suggest, in talk shows “individual interventions are not predisposed to follow a logical argumentative line. More often than not they are inconsequential. The statements are repetitive, sometimes they assume the aura of a ritual” (Carpignano et al. 1990, p. 51). Notwithstanding its non-deliberative tone, *Aló Presidente* encouraged forms of participation in the Bolivarian Revolution and, in that sense, provided legitimacy to the political project

that Hugo Chávez was proposing by offering a tribune to those who had been cast away from the democratic process.

Speaking of the Belgian political talk show *Jan Publiek*, Carpentier (2001) argues that “the performances of the participants during the programme actually show how participation is articulated in social practice, partially fixing the discourse on participation of ‘ordinary people’ in the media system, but also in other social systems” (Carpentier 2001, p. 224). From this perspective, the fundamental purpose of *Aló Presidente* can be regarded as a form of performance of participation. In spite of reducing the number of phone calls per episode, new forms of audience participation were created as time went on. The show grew to have a live audience and live two-ways with people across the country; it incorporated vox pops and videos about the communities, school graduations and folklore. These elements will be discussed in detail in later chapters; however, it is interesting to note that, instead of focusing on single phone interventions, the sense of participation slowly expanded in order to include a larger number of individuals. What had started as a radio programme, limiting the input to one voice at a time, moved to television, revealing the audience both on location and in distant spaces such as vox pops and group segments. If audiences are fictional (Hartley 1987), constructed by the bodies that interpellate them, the audience of *Aló Presidente* was unveiled, brought into the studio, and progressively presented as a group. By stretching out its visibility, *Aló Presidente* brought its own audience into being. This also means that participation on *Aló Presidente* evolved from a potentially deliberative frame in its early stages, to a more consensual rhetorical self-reinforcement from members of its audience. And this was largely influenced by the relationship that the audience had developed with regards to each other and with regards to the host. The familiarity of the discussion and the modes of address that invited lay knowledge and common sense input had provided a background in which viewers of the programme felt at ease disclosing their vulnerabilities and desires for bettering their conditions. Foucault links the rise in confessional techniques to the submission of subjects to the judgement of others. This suggests that subjects integrate the outcome of their confessions to the production of truth in all areas of life. He describes these articulations, or “techniques of the self”, as “those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault 1992, pp. 10-11). These

practices are linked to relations of power in which subjects are governed by the boundaries between normalcy and deviance. And the next chapter will discuss this aspect in more detail, identifying the articulations of “normalcy” in *Aló Presidente* and the role of the host as the authority of expert judgment. It is important to note that the practice of confession for Foucault implies a redeeming element, the sense that subjects unburden themselves through the rituals that allow them to surmount resistance in order to improve themselves. It is deeply embedded in psychological practices and knowledge of the self. If contributions on *Aló Presidente* were not directly aimed at staging such practices, not even at the entertainment level as perhaps talk shows like as *Oprah* or *Kilroy* would do (Wood 2001), the fact that the interventions came from participants who had previously felt marginalised from the political arena touches upon this theme. Somewhat compelled to examine their subject positions as participants to the Bolivarian Revolution, viewers of the show, acted as both regular folks and members of the electorate. In this context, talking to the President of the state, albeit in the familiar tone and arena of a talk show, required full disclosure from the subject position of the “citizen”. Confessions on *Aló Presidente* regarded the nature of their desires with regards to their political condition, especially in the context of what was presented as the construction of a “participatory democracy”. On the set of the show, participants confessed their political desires, opening themselves to the judgment of others and to the authority of the expert host.

Participation, in this context, consists of the activities of the interpellated viewers who, responding to their subject positions, reinforce their received identities by performing to each other as a *public*. Recalling Dayan, “[t]he publics’ mode of action is fundamentally dramaturgic and it can best be defined as a performance (...) A public must ‘go public’ or it is not a public” (Dayan 2005, pp. 50-52). In this sense, public interventions witnessed on *Aló Presidente* reflected the audience’s identification with the values and structures shared by its members and put in place by the show. With longer episodes and heavier production, subject positions were built around the themes of the day; and individual interventions consisted of requests for everyday life improvements and positive reinforcements of group identity. Through “chains of equivalence” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), members of the audience witnessed one another’s involvement with the Bolivarian project, identifying with each other’s everyday life experiences, testimonials of support, and overall communitarian values performed on the show. In that setting, and on the emotional register, Hugo Chávez

appeared as a member of the group, part of the shared social identity as the Bolivarian “we”. Participation can thus be read, in the context of *Aló Presidente*, as public performance of the Bolivarian identity as well as the recognition from subjects of the practices and activities that reinforced their sense of self as Bolivarian citizens.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has reviewed the origins of *Aló Presidente* as a radio programme created to foster communication between citizens and instances of state power in the midst of Chávez’s campaign for a Constitutional change and an ideological shift from a model of representative democracy to one of participation. The numerous measures and institutional changes enforced in Venezuela in the first years of Chávez’s mandate reflected this tendency. However, phone calls and suggestions were found to have decreased in favour of Hugo Chávez’s interventions, topical questions with members of his cabinet, or the development of projects of the Bolivarian Revolution. It was argued that the rhetoric of participation in *Aló Presidente* contributed to the birth of a Bolivarian public. Grounded in this participatory idea, the audience of the show came to perform and reinforce a shared sense of identity. Far from projecting a deliberative public sphere, *Aló Presidente* provided a space for public formation. In a long series of chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), members of the group recognised each other in their support of the regime and their requests for everyday life improvements.

However, giving visibility, exposing the audience, and providing a tribune for public performance soon proved to be insufficient to consolidate the Bolivarian identity. The following chapter will discuss how, through a ‘logic of difference’ (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), the public of *Aló Presidente* came to be defined against a political “other”. It will explore the evolution of *Aló Presidente* through the analysis of the attempted coup d’état against Chávez in 2001 -and the subsequent general strike- that would cement a polarised climate in Venezuela for the remainder of Chávez’s mandate. A rhetoric of antagonism took over the tone of *Aló Presidente*, and a tacit line between Chavists and non-Chavists was drawn when it came to gaining access to the show.

“I will have to keep reminding you every Sunday, every time that it will be necessary, so that the people and the world can see what we are doing” (Chávez, Episode 93 2002)

## Chapter 6

### **Aló Presidente 2002-2007: Educating the Public in the Face of Opposition**

The previous chapter reviewed the origins of *Aló Presidente* and its creation amidst a political project “in the making” that aimed at consolidating the “protagonist” role of citizenship in Venezuela under the paradigmatic new “participatory” regime embodied by Hugo Chávez. After a few months on radio, the show turned to television, with longer instalments, bigger production, and a wider variety of activities. What had started as a political phone-in with the president of Venezuela had transitioned into a more highly produced talk show. In terms of participation, it was observed that, with very few exceptions during the initial episodes, no critical views were portrayed on the show. It was found that phone calls decreased over time, and that other forms of public representation such as vox pops and live audience had been brought to the programme. Based on the shift in format, as well as the lack of exposure to opposite views, *Aló Presidente* was found to serve as a performative space for the construction and enactment of a Bolivarian public. Interpellated as Bolivarian subjects on the show, members of the audience expressed their views and projected their day-to-day experiences in a series of chains of equivalence that reinforced their visibility as a group and their shared sense of identity.

This chapter will look at a turning point in Venezuelan politics and in the construction of the Bolivarian project: the turmoil years of the general strike and the attempted coup against Hugo Chávez in 2002. It will look at *Aló Presidente* in order to understand the evolution of the Bolivarian identity and locate the key moments of its definition. As shall be argued, these years were indispensable to the articulation of the Bolivarian identity, for they established the foundations of what it meant to *belong* to the Bolivarian group. Following Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) description of the discursive articulation of identity, it will be argued that the period between 2002 and 2007 was used to “fix” the meaning of a long series of nodal points linked to the Venezuelan imaginary and provide a hegemonic definition of the group identity. Among the most important factors will be the identification of an antagonistic

“other” in Venezuelan politics and the reinforcement of the Bolivarian values in order to consolidate the grassroots of the Revolution. It will be argued that most of the middle years of *Aló Presidente* were indeed devoted to articulating in detail the ins and outs of this antagonistic relation and that establishing a shared identity against the negative “other” became the key component of Chávez’s discourse on *Aló Presidente*. As for positive articulations of the group identity, it will be argued that much of the time on the air was devoted to associating key historical figures of the Venezuelan culture with the Bolivarian discourse and that a great deal of the programme consisted in descriptions and explanations of the Bolivarian myth and rearticulations of the legacy of certain figures like Jesus Christ or Don Quixote in order to integrate them into the Bolivarian discourse. The public, consolidated in the early years of the programme, will be addressed as a group that outgrew the limits of a television audience and was constructed as the “nation” against undeserving “others”.

In parallel to the evolution of *Aló Presidente* into a pedagogical space for the articulation of the Bolivarian identity, it will be argued that many of the political measures taken under Chávez’s administration were also geared towards creating alternative welfare and education programmes called the Bolivarian Missions. Working on different fronts, the discourse on the show will be seen as complementing the general political landscape aimed at constructing a Bolivarian identity and securing the grassroots support against the advancements of the opposition. Here again, it will be seen that the discourse on *Aló Presidente* followed closely the political events that were taking place in Venezuela. Against the challenging landscape of political turmoil, the show will be seen as an important arm of the Revolution, imparting a Bolivarian reading of the political context and securing direct access to the supporters of the regime.

#### *The Political Context of the Middle Years:*

##### *Tension and Growing Opposition*

Resistance against the Bolivarian project and reforms proposed by Hugo Chávez grew in 2001 and 2002 with a series of actions orchestrated by the Venezuelan opposition aimed at destabilizing the regime. On the one hand, most opposition forces coalesced under the umbrella organisation “Coordinadora Democrática de Acción Cívica” (CD); the heterogeneous range of political actors organised in this opposition front included the

business association “Fedecamaras”, political parties, trade unions assembled in the workers’ confederation CTV, as well as groups from civil society and NGOs. The aim of the organisation was to overthrow Chávez’s administration. On the other hand, although the government benefitted at the time from the support of a variety of political parties, cooperatives and other civil associations, the different groups supporting the regime were not efficiently institutionalised in a partisan bloc (López-Maya 2005).

The climate of tension between supporters and opponents of the Chavista project escalated at the end of 2001 when, backed by special powers granted by the National Assembly, Hugo Chávez announced the first radical measures of his programme since the concretisation of the new Constitution: in line with the nationalistic tone of the Bolivarian Constitution, Chávez passed a series of laws concerning lands, hydrocarbons, fisheries, and social security known as the “package of the enabling laws<sup>34</sup>”. With a total of 49 presidential decrees, the legislative package reinforced state influence over oil production, private property, and key economic sectors (Flores-Macias 2012, pp. 32-35)<sup>35</sup>.

This provided a common ground of resistance for the previously disarticulated opposition and led to a 12-hour national strike on 10 December 2001 during which many productive sectors, including the management of oil giant PDVSA, demonstrated against Hugo Chávez’s government. The action was a success and the Venezuelan opposition gained momentum both domestically and internationally. Strong from its support, the leadership in the opposition refused to negotiate and rejected in bulk all 49 laws. Similarly, Hugo Chávez rebuffed any negotiation and threatened to dismiss any member of his party willing to compromise, and close the National Assembly if MPs defected to the opposition (López-Maya 2005, p. 112).

The beginning of 2002 was marked by a series of demonstrations in the capital concretising the sense of polarisation around the figure of Hugo Chávez and coalescing forces around each pole. On every bank holiday supporters of the regime and members of the opposition

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<sup>34</sup> In line with art. 203 and 236 of the Constitution of 1999, Chávez had received enabling powers from the National Assembly in order to draft decrees with force of law.

<sup>35</sup> Among its most important features: 1) The *Ley de Hidrocarburos* gave the national oil company PDVSA majority stake and operational control in all oil production, including foreign firms; increased royalties to up to 30 per cent; regulated extraction in order to comply with OPEC quotas; and raised taxes to 50 per cent. 2) The *Ley de Tierras* allowed national expropriation of unused lands; redistributed 1,5 million hectares to small farmers and cooperatives; established limits to land ownership; and increased taxes on idle lands.



alternated marches in the streets of Caracas. For months, the upper and middle classes organised by Fedecamaras and the trade unions (CTV) would engage in protests against the regime in the East of Caracas. And, for every action, lower income sectors and followers of the Bolivarian Revolution would reciprocate with demonstrations in Western areas of the capital (Acosta 2007).

The confrontation escalated when, on 7 April 2002, after the board of PDVSA had called for another strike this time explicitly demanding his resignation, Hugo Chávez sacked 7 high executives of the oil company on episode 101 of *Aló Presidente*<sup>36</sup>, instructing that “whomever was to call for a strike be fired immediately, without any discussion” (Human Rights Watch 2008, p. 175). This action, seen as a direct attack on the meritocratic tradition of Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), sparked a new wave of support for the opposition and materialised in an indefinite general strike that started on 9 April. A demonstration was called for 11 April aiming to culminate at the “Plaza de la Meritocracia”, PDVSA’s headquarters in Caracas.

### *Confrontation*

On the day, the emotionally charged demonstration of hundreds of thousands (figures vary between 300.000 up to 1.000.000) followed the organisers’ incentive to deviate from its official itinerary and continue past PDVSA’s headquarters towards the presidential palace of *Miraflores*. According to Coronil, the heightened euphoric mood of the crowd gave the impression that the protest was not against measures of the state but against the state itself.

The extraordinary magnitude of the protest encouraged the illusion that the entire country was behind it and that history was in their hands (...) that day, they believed that this collective action would save the country from being adrift and change the course of history (p. 93).

Gathered around the palace in the West of Caracas, Chávez’s supporters had been guarding the President since the beginning of the strike two days earlier. Surrounding the scene, the National Guard had been deployed. At 3:45pm, Chávez had started a “cadena” to call for the

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<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 7

withdrawal of the opposition march. In the middle of the fervour, and while Chávez was on the air, shots were fired around Miraflores, and the nearby bridge *Puente Llaguno*, causing the death of 19 protesters. In the confusion, both sides held each other responsible for the massacre; private television channels split the screen in two in order to broadcast the events as well as the Presidential address. The images attested of government officials firing down from the bridge onto the streets next to footage portraying the wounded crowd, suggesting that Chávez's supporters were responsible for the massacre<sup>37</sup>.

### *Coup d'Etat*

Based on the recordings, the opposition march gained legitimacy in its fight against “a President that hurt his people”. Declarations of Chávez's political mentor and former member of his cabinet, Luis Miquilena, and of a naval officer Vice-Admiral Hector Ramírez Pérez, holding Chávez responsible for the killings were broadcast in repeat throughout the day to reinforce this sentiment. By the early hours of April 12, under pressure from the High command of the armed forces, Hugo Chávez had left the Presidential palace and entered the military base *Fuerte Tiuna*. At 4am, a group of commanders led by the highest officer, General Lucas Rincón Romero, announced on television that they had requested the President's resignation and that he had agreed. Hugo Chávez would later deny these facts<sup>38</sup>.

What followed was a short-lived interim government led by Fedecamaras's president, Pedro Carmona. The self-proclaimed President of Venezuela immediately dissolved all powers, including the National Assembly and regional governments; cancelled the 49 laws part of the “package”; nominated the new president of PDVSA; and erased the “Bolivarian” adjective of the Republic of Venezuela. But Carmona's eagerness to dissolve the Assembly, and the

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<sup>37</sup> The accuracy of Puente Llaguno's coverage has been disputed in films such as *The Revolution will not be televised*, directed by Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Brian, 2003 and *Puente Llaguno, claves de una masacre*, directed by Ángel Palacios, 2004. Both films argue that the images of government officials firing from the bridge were manipulated to make it look like they were aiming at the protest when, in fact, they were firing back at police tanks sent by an opposition governor. The veracity of the events and the origins of the fist gunshots are difficult to document. For an interpretation of the media manipulation supported by the CIA, see Eva Golinger, *The Chávez code: cracking U.S. intervention in Venezuela* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Different accounts of what took place in Fuerte Tiuna and discussions around the alleged resignation of Hugo Chávez contribute to the disputed interpretation of the events of 11 April. Members of the opposition claim that the conditions reflected, if not a clear resignation, at least a power vacuum due to Chávez's disappearance, and tenants of Chavismo assert that it was a coup d'état. For more details, see Fernando Coronil, "Estado y nación durante el golpe contra Hugo Chávez," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 62, no. 1 (2005): 106.

seemingly conservative components of his Cabinet sparked unease among supporters of the opposition as well as from forces who had backed the transition. Soon, amongst popular demonstrations calling for Chávez's return, officials following long-time Bolivarian leader General Baduel threatened to bombard the Presidential palace if the new government refused to step down. At 3:30am on 14 April, 48 hours after he had left the palace, Hugo Chávez returned to office and addressed the crowds under his balcony<sup>39</sup>, promising reconciliation and repentance.

On 28 April, two weeks after he was restored to office, and three weeks after the infamous dismissals episode, Chávez returned to *Aló Presidente*. Having been off the air since the attempted coup, this episode was charged with tension. Whatever the president would bring to the stage on this occasion was to set the tone for the future of the Revolution. In a solemn disposition, Chávez seemed to call for peace and reconciliation, inviting members from all sides to join a united path.

President Chávez: Good morning. Today Venezuela is reflecting, rectifying (...) Venezuela needs to continue on the road of unity (...) I assume my responsibilities, but I also call for others to assume theirs (...) Let us all be immersed in the spirit of national reconciliation. Venezuela cannot continue the confrontation against each other (...) Like a family, let us keep our differences (...) reconcile from the heart, and work together for future generations. (Episode 102 2002)

On this episode, Chávez seemed to have recognised the general antagonistic landscape that had been growing in Venezuela. However, in spite of a welcoming introduction, the episode did not include any extraordinary feature. There were no interactions with members of the opposition, or interviews with journalists from different ideological sides. In fact, the president only answered one phone call in this episode, and the show aired on one vox pop showing a person who had suffered from significant material losses during the riots.

But Chávez's return to power in April did not exhaust the forces of the opposition. For the rest of 2002, monthly demonstrations continued to take place in the streets of the capital, and

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<sup>39</sup> For a detailed description of the evolution of the coup, see Richard Gott, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2011): 223-237.

the general climate of resistance increased amidst outbursts of violence and power struggles at the local and military levels (López-Maya 2005, p. 116). In spite of reconciliation attempts from the Chávez government, including the rehabilitation of those who had been dismissed from PDVSA on *Aló Presidente* the week prior to the coup, and the exoneration of the insurgent officers by the Supreme Court, opposition forces continued to pressure the government.

### *General Strike*

On 2 December 2002, the opposition launched an indefinite general strike aimed at destabilizing the Chávez administration. This time, the purpose was to paralyse the oil sector in order to collapse the economy and force the government out. PDVSA workers joined the lockout and the action reached its peak when the crew of oil tanker *Pilín Leon* cast anchor in the Maracaibo Lake for two weeks, interrupting not only the production but also the transport of Venezuela's black gold. The strike continued through the Christmas holidays and affected the commercial sector, sparking shortages in foodstuffs but also, and most importantly, in fuel, forcing the industry to purchase petrol on the international markets. In terms of economic damages, the strike cost a total of 7.367,18 million dollars, around 7.5 per cent of the country's GDP, and saw a decrease of 75 per cent in barrel production (Lander 2004, p. 10).

President Chávez: The Captain and a group of officials stopped the boat and blocked the computers with passwords. This is sabotage, this is criminal. People in Maracaibo were waiting in infinite queues and the fuel was right in front of them, in a boat, because of a little group's caprice. It was very difficult to find a skilled crew in order to move the boat and alleviate the shortages (...) This is a victory in the battle against the *Pilín Leon*, for they had taken it as a symbol, there in Maracibo, they said that we would not be able to move it. (Episode 132 2002)

Chávez responded to what he called the "oil sabotage" with the dismissal of nearly 19.000 employees. In spite of the severe decrease in production, PDVSA maintained its activities under the management of formerly retired employees, the National Armed Forces, and workers that had refused to join the stoppage. In February 2003, after 2 months of struggle,

and without ever declaring a formal end to the industrial action, the country regained a sense of normality. Paradoxically, rather than toppling Chávez's regime, the strike facilitated stronger governmental control over the oil company. According to Lander, at the time, "the most transcendental achievement for the oil reform (...) is that the corporation, instead of being the main source of resistance in the country, [was] becoming its main ally" (Lander, 2005, 14). Among the turmoil, episodes of *Aló Presidente* became laden with discussions about the events. Fully produced as a pundit show, the president would mention the state of affairs, offer a comprehensive reading of the events, and comment on the behaviour of the opposition.

President Chávez: Listen how [the opposition] built this plan, they thought it was perfect. They abandoned the plants, they sabotaged and blocked all access, thinking that we would not be able to resist. What is their objective? That Chávez resigns. They thought that I was going to surrender (...) but they were wrong because they failed to see that God was with us, as well as the people and the Armed Forces. (Episode 105 2002)

This climate of tension had inevitably heightened the sense of polarisation in the country. Assembled around the different poles, Venezuelans had engaged in an animated battle for power that had reached its peak after the confrontations of April 2002. As far as *Aló Presidente* was concerned, shortly after the attempted coup, the antagonistic positioning became a fundamental premise in Hugo Chávez's discourse. As shall be explored in more detail throughout this chapter, the general tendency during the early years had been to exclude critical views on the show. After the attempted coup, Chávez's interventions and audience participation were set up in a clear confrontational discourse against anyone opposed to the regime. Even though the programme did not follow the usual format of "shock talk shows" addressing taboo issues or inviting guests to discuss controversial topics on the air, the general tone of conflict resonated with an audience used to experiencing friction on the air. Speaking of its appeal in talk shows, Livinstone and Lunt (1994) argue that controversy "is one means of obtaining audiences, for controversy means excitement and emotion as well as, if not instead of, good argument and genuine engagement" (p. 82). This sense of moral or ideological positioning reinforces the audience's interest in the topic, for it contributes to their sense of belonging to the group with whom they side on the different

issues. Seen from a discourse theoretical perspective, this tendency recalls the discursive articulation of identity through the construction of antagonistic “others”. The more the discourse articulates negative characteristics to an opposing camp, the more it homogenises the differences between members of the group and consolidates the shared identity. In the context of pundit television, this translates into partisan talk shows that draw the largest audiences on cable television in the US (Jones 2010).

### *Policymaking and Public Support: the Misiones*

Steve Ellner argues that, in reaction to the attempted coup and the general strike, Chávez’s attention became fully directed to those whom he characterised as the “people”. In his view, Chávez’s discourse moved “beyond a rhetoric of participatory democracy and towards the implementation of social programmes favouring the popular classes that actively and massively supported chavismo during the crises” (Ellner 2012, p. 109). The result of these policies was the creation of “misiones”, or social programmes in areas such as health, food, and education. Conceived in order to boost support for the revolution, these were to continue the work of Plan Bolívar and provide fast relief to underprivileged regions. The Missions were created<sup>40</sup> and managed by the Executive himself through “para-institutional” structures. They are financed by oil revenue outside of the national budget, and they benefit from Cuban support in the form of consultancy, technical support, and personnel. Based on the principles of the participative model sought by Chávez, the local populations are involved in the design and management of the misiones<sup>41</sup> (Maingón 2006, p. 39).

In addition to the flagship mission, Misión Barrio Adentro, a network of free clinics offering primary care from “inside the neighbourhood”, the first missions to be born were aimed at tackling issues of education, particularly among the adult population. Misión Robinson I and II, Misión Ribas and Misión Sucre, provided classes that ranged from literacy through primary, secondary and university levels, respectively.

On 15 June 2003, Chávez announced the creation of the first mission, Misión Robinson, on *Aló Presidente*:

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<sup>40</sup> Most missions were created via presidential decrees.

<sup>41</sup> For more information on the network of the Misiones and their organisation, see Yolanda D'Elia, ed., *Las Misiones Sociales en Venezuela: una aproximación a su comprensión y análisis*, ed. Yolanda D'Elia (Caracas: Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, 2006).

President Chávez: At this precise moment, our government is activating an literacy plan that we have called Misión Robinson (...) under the Bolivarian concept that a man without an education, a woman without an education, is an incomplete being. (Episode 153 2003)

The idea, especially in the case of Misión Sucre and higher education, was to provide the necessary accompaniment for the “transformation and exercise of citizenship (...) oriented towards the construction of a participative society”. In addition to providing free-of-charge higher education, the missions were to promote communitarian involvement in the process, highlighting the value of local experience and skills (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación Universitaria 2013).

Already in 2002, over a year before the launch of the network of missions, Chávez had emphasised the need to sustain a critical approach to information and knowledge through participatory and “co-responsible” means, in the spirit of the new *participatory* model of democracy. In this excerpt, Chávez discusses the notion of education as a right and encourages a university lecturer to volunteer some of his time for professional workshops.

President Chávez: [addressing Emilio Silva, lecturer at the Central University of Venezuela] Why don't you join [our] work? We are looking for volunteers to work with the youth (...) organize seminars about education, values. You know, our people have been greatly hurt. They have been denied an education. Those of us who did receive one, we were lied to, not because of our teachers' ill intentions, but because they had wrong information, especially because of the media. Look at all of this junk, this propaganda, the violence, of drugs, of sex, of consumerism, of egoism, of individualism. Look at how it has hurt our peoples (...) So, I invite you to join the social battle, because you have a clear mind. (Episode 98 2002)

In the previous chapter, it was argued that contributions from “ordinary” people about everyday life concerns established an “intimacy at a distance” (Thompson 1995) on *Aló Presidente* that helped construct a Bolivarian identity. By foregrounding “commonsense” on the set of the show, the nodal point “participation” had been articulated through a shared identity rather than through debate. Participants expressed their desires and fears in chains of

equivalence that emphasised the performance of “being oneself” (Tolson 1991) in a dynamic that combined familiar narratives of talk show television and the aura of legitimacy that came with the host of the show. The articulation of the public, it was argued, was anchored in their portrayal as “protagonists” of the Bolivarian Revolution. As such, the space of *Aló Presidente* partially fixed the notion of participation on the show but also in other social systems around the idea of “ordinary people”. For this purpose, one of the interesting elements of the process of public formation on *Aló Presidente* had been the fact that the articulation of the self required that viewers internalise the modes of conduct appropriate for their public personae (Livingstone & Lunt 1994, p. 61). It was also argued that part of this self-management was reinforced by the emotional tone of the show, or the fact that participants shared their motivations and desires with the group.

For Carlos Lanz, the political model proposed by Chávez required a “permanent education campaign to train the exploited and the oppressed in order to democratize knowledge and citizenship” (Lanz in Ellner 2012, p. 111). His argument implies that citizens needed to be introduced to the appropriate modes of behaviour and systems of values that pertained to the Bolivarian identity, illuminating its “truths” and realities. This claim resonates with Foucault’s understanding of governmentality as the internalisation of practices of governing the self. To Foucault, the culture of government extends beyond the limits of the state and spreads across “self-governing” networks. Generally understood as “the conduct of conduct”, or as “a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons” (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, p. 2), practices and techniques of government are internalised and exchanged at the micro-level (psychological) as well in macro contexts such as the household, or the courtroom. In Foucault’s later work, the notion of governmentality grows closely with concepts of power and knowledge. Beyond positive/generative and negative/repressive dichotomies of power (Kendall & Wickham 1999), power is viewed as circulating in the practices through which people regulate and guide their behaviour. In other words, formations of the self depend on articulations of identity that permeate discourses and influence modes of conduct. Seen in this light, Lanz’s idea that audience interventions on *Aló Presidente* needed preliminary training in order to perform their contributions appropriately further shifted the power of articulation of the Bolivarian identity from ordinary citizens to a mediating expert. This was reflected in the emphasis that would be put on learning techniques, reading recommendations, pedagogic activities, and testimonies on the show. In



this excerpt, for example, a community theatre director is calling the show in order to promote the play “Caracas, mi capital”, sponsored by the Municipal government. The President receives the invitation and takes the opportunity to encourage such practices of civic education:

President Chávez: This is a tremendous initiative, full of creativity. There are three objectives to this: civic education, an important [practice] nowadays, in order to live peacefully, in harmony with the citizens of a whole country, of a whole people; environmental education, fundamental for the equilibrium of life, for the future, for sustainability; and education for tourism in order to exploit positively this concept, considering the potential that Venezuela has for tourism. (Episode 125 2002)

In this other example, Chávez invites a kindergarten teacher to talk about the work of the Bolivarian schools:

Doris Camaite: (...) Reading is very important, reading has to be a creative and liberating process, not a mechanical process but a process that will allow us to build the new republican [identity] and allow the individual to read through what they are missing (...) to continue the transformation.

President Chávez: That is right Doris, that’s what we have been talking about and reading about (...) education for liberation, and reading. On that topic, I’m actually going to recommend this book that I have been reading, you were talking about reading and I was given this book as a present: “La Forma del Poder” (the shape of power) by Francisco Rubio Llorente. (Episode 177 2004)

As can be observed, the socialising value of education had become a recurrent theme in Chávez’s discourse, and *Aló Presidente* was a platform to promote this intention. When addressing the social construction of identities, Laclau and Mouffe stress that to “fix” an articulation, or to define an identity, cannot but be a temporary phenomenon. Constantly faced with a variety of interpellations, subjects need to negotiate different meanings and different identities. Whenever discourses collide, antagonisms arise; in this context, subjects need articulations that will harmonise their sense of identity. Hegemonic discourses are born in antagonisms; through logics of equivalence and difference, they attempt to erase

ambiguities by fixing new meanings. Seen as a platform for the articulation of the Bolivarian identity, the discourse of *Aló Presidente* can thus be seen as the space for continuous hegemonic interventions where, in a terrain of antagonism, a constant flow of articulations attempted to temporarily fix the group identity. The following part of this chapter will present how, both in policy-making and on the discourse on *Aló Presidente*, the antagonistic rhetoric and educational tone became fundamental elements of the Revolution.

### *Constructing the Bolivarian Identity*

#### *The 'Other'*

At this point, it is important to note that Hugo Chávez had become the centre stage of *Aló Presidente*. As mentioned previously, the protagonist role of the audience in the form of phone-ins had already undergone a shift in representation with a decreased number of phone calls and the addition of mediated forms of participation such as a live audience and vox pops. Although executed progressively, by the time of the attempted coup, the format of the show had come to resemble the tone of pundit talk shows in which hosts gain visibility as political commentators. Chávez had already started to distance himself from the Bolivarian audience by introducing occasional panel members and by increasing the scripted tone of the episodes, often defining the theme of the day and discussing political topics with his guests. In spite of his continuous use of the common pronoun “us” when articulating the Bolivarian identity, and his emphasis on the shared identity between the audience and himself, his role in the group became predominant, especially with regards to the format of participation that was being constructed on the show. By now the exclusive host of a political programme, Chávez had integrated the features of daytime talk shows, such as the primacy of “commonsense” and the interest in everyday life activities into a personality-driven format. The show had maintained its familiar tone and its original participatory mystique, but the dynamic of the episodes had come to emphasise the expertise of the host in matters of political relevance. This meant that the original claim of lay knowledge primacy over expert knowledge suggested by Livingstone and Lunt (1996) with regards to the potential of a public sphere was once again reversed on *Aló Presidente*. To Jones, the transformation of current affairs programmes into “news-talk television” stresses the affective relationship between the host and their audience. In this genre, the relevance of political affairs is seen as entirely dependent on the choice of the host. He argues that “[t]o achieve this, the talk show host must create a special relationship to his

audience, binding them together in agreement and shared feelings, garnering their trust by flattering and seducing them” (Jones 2005, p. 187). Additionally, in order to maintain his legitimacy, he argues that the host must present their relationship with the audience against a common other by “joining them together to attack their common enemies or perceived opposition (perceived or imaginary)” (Ibid). This last element became very important on *Aló Presidente*, articulated time and time again during Chávez’s interventions on the show.

By the time of the coup and the following civic actions against Chávez’s regime, the discourse in *Aló Presidente* had come to reflect the division among the population and Hugo Chávez’s adversity for those opposed to his ways. The language and tone employed on the show would vary according to the subject, and anyone suspected of criticism would be disqualified as “oligarch”, “escuálido” (scrawny), “traitor”, “vendepatria” (literally someone who sells their country), etc. At the time of the “package of the enabling laws”, and more specifically the land reform, in December 2001, Chávez had discussed the opposition’s resistance suggesting that the well-off elite, namely the “oligarchy”, was spreading “lies” in order to defend private property. Their strategy, he explained, was to attract land workers to join the strikes by scaring them into believing that they would lose their crops. But the “people”, he argued, the working class that he represented, would not fall for their threats and “back away” from the revolutionary process.

Francisco Barletta: The “escuálidos” are confusing our people, they are saying that land workers will no longer have [property] titles, that they will not have properties.

President Chávez: We cannot back away [from the process]. No one will stop this Revolution (...) You know that the escuálidos of the land-owning, depredatory, and savage oligarchy have been laughing [at this law]. (Episode 89 2001)

Soon after the first strike of December 2001, in the midst of marches and counter-marches, the President defined the *escuálido* enemies, a term he invented, as the representatives of the old regime of Punto Fijo, that political arrangement of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that had promoted a bi-partisan system and had led to Chávez’s election as an independent alternative.

President Chávez: I have said it before, “escualidismo” is the next phase of Puntofijismo. (Episode 93 2002)

Often, the negative narrative surrounding the group of “escuálidos” was accompanied by positive reinforcement of the countering group: the “people” of Venezuela, or those perceived as marginalised by the previous regimes. This discourse of antagonism, of identification of the “other” as shall be discussed later, would become key in defining the collective identity of the revolutionary people.

President Chávez: The [marginalised] communities (...) are the most sublime expression of love. This is a people that fights, lives and loves. It is in these places that one feels with more intensity the solidarity, love and self-esteem (...) Many people think that doctors are señores, you know, “this is a doctor”, but no, even doctors [are participating] chanting and screaming “we are the people” (...) The people of Venezuela know where the truth is. (Episode 114 2002)

As has been argued, the viewership of *Aló Presidente* consisted in fact in a Bolivarian public. Identifying with the subject positions into which they were interpellated on the show, members of the audience participated to an arena of shared identity that connected them to the project proposed by Hugo Chávez. In this particular case, “el pueblo trabajador” (the working people) as understood by Chávez, is interpellated through a series of chains of equivalence as the essence of the Revolution.

President Chávez: This government directs its resources to the weakest, and that is why the people want this revolution, that is why the people support this Bolivarian government. The people know [the truth], no one can mess with the people. (Episode 127 2002)

Following a similar logic, in order to consolidate the group identity, the articulation of the Bolivarian public was continuously reinforced in contrast to the threatening “other”. After the events of April 2002, and the temporary Carmona government, Chávez also referred to members of the opposition as “golpistas”, or participants of a coup. This reinforced the antagonistic relationship between those who supported the Bolivarian government, the “people”, and the “unpatriotic” oligarchy that fomented the coup. In this zero sum logic, the

Bolivarian government favoured the poor over the rich, and therefore validated the conflictive relationship between supporters of the regime and tenants of the opposition.

President Chávez: That is what the oligarchs want, that is what the *golpistas* want [government resources] That is what they used to do, and they would not leave anything for the people (...) The people know that their lives are in this revolution and that is why they defend it with all of their love and all of their passion. (Episode 127 2002)

Also borrowing from pundit talk strategies, generally attributed to Conservative hosts in the US (Steel 2009), Chávez had integrated an aggressive approach on the show, often insulting the opposition and making the tone of the discussion more opinionated than it had been in the early episodes. Adriana Bolívar (2002) argues that this antagonistic discourse is in part the cause of the violence witnessed in 2002 and that the use of insults in the political discourse grew out of the sphere of Parliament and into everyday conversations since Chávez's arrival to power. She argues that the "discourtesy" in his language, and the wide range of derogatory adjectives employed against his opponents, fulfilled a "strategic function" in shaping the polarised landscape and instigating physical violence.

Venezuelans have increased their repertoires of offensive words, they have organised the experience in terms of oppositions (rich/poor, left/right, democratic/antibidocratic, pretty/ugly, stuck-up/thug, etc.) and they have aligned themselves in two highly polarized groups (...) In the context of the political events of 2002, discourtesy and insult fulfil the function of damaging the opposite, but also, it conduces to physical violence and death. (Bolívar 2002, pp. 224-226)

It is against this background of extreme polarisation and "discourteous" language from both sides of a fractured society that the opposition continued its attempt to topple Chavez's government. On Sunday 2 February 2003, as the general strike was coming to an end, the Coordinadora Democrática launched a countrywide operation aimed at collecting enough signatures to organize a recall referendum. Chávez ignored the operation during the 6 hours of episode 137 of *Aló Presidente*, making it clear that his targeted audience did not include those who were critical of his work (Bolívar 2002). Amidst accusations of fraud and months

of legal battles, the National Electoral Council recognised the validity of the signatures and organised a referendum that Chávez won in 2004 (Kornblith & Jawahar 2005).

The struggles of the early 2000s had led to a logic in which the opposition was not only delegitimised in Chávez's discourse but also excluded from governmental planning. The cases of the "lista Tascón" (2003), and later of "programa Maisanta" (2005) are examples of how the relationship with opposed views was taken out of the context of Parliament and into the lives and jobs of Venezuelan citizens. The lists, first published online by MP Luis Tascón, contained personal information about those who had signed the petition for the recall referendum. Originally, the claim was that opposition groups had falsified the signatures and Chavistas should check that their names had not been used against their will. But, in reality, their publication resulted in hundreds of complaints for unlawful dismissals and political discrimination against the names found on the list (Human Rights Watch 2008, pp. 17-19).

Months after he had won the referendum, and almost a year after the first allegations were made, Chávez recognised in a Cabinet meeting the consequences of the Tascón list, and urged the public to move past the episode. This particular example illustrates how the positioning of "the people" against the "others" implied that members of the opposition were entitled to a different type of treatment, paying little attention to the legal validity of their complaints.

It was a moment that we have put behind us. If one of us who has to take a personal decision about someone goes to consult the list, what they are doing is dragging past situations into the present, and helping to recreate them (...) the famous list certainly fulfilled a useful role at a given moment, but that moment has passed. (Chávez in Human Rights Watch 2008, p. 18)

Much work has been conducted on the importance of polarisation for the Bolivarian Revolution as a way to legitimize the political project proposed by Chávez (Aponte Moreno 2009, Romero 2005, Chumaceiro 2003, Reyez Rodriguez 2009, Bolívar 2002, Molero de Cabeza, 2003a, 2003b). Cortés argues that the hegemonic struggle at the root of the Bolivarian identity was originally embedded in economic categorisations. To him, the key element of the Bolivarian project lies in the understanding of the subject as a participant in the Revolution, as opposed to a "citizen-consumer" (Cortés 2009). This articulation,

presented by Chávez at the time of his electoral campaign as a refusal to endorse the neoliberal practices allegedly advocated by the Punto Fijo parties, was translated into a supporter/opposition category after the struggles of 2001 and 2002. In a series of chains of equivalence, the Sunday programme offered a stage to articulate the Bolivarian identity around a neoliberal dichotomy, as well as around narratives linking supporters of the regime to legitimate “Venezuelans”.

Thompson (1995) argues that, in modern societies, individuals increasingly depend on “mediated experiences” to form their identities. Because of the media’s capacity to provide a sense of intimacy at a distance, individuals face a wide array of symbolic materials, or discursive articulations to borrow Laclau’s terms, and are exposed to difficult and often conflicting meanings. The need to define one’s identity in this discursive “overload” may lead viewers to turn toward systems of expertise, sometimes relying on the guidance of experts and authoritative figures for the articulation of their views (Thompson 1995, pp. 214-217). In the case of *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez was undoubtedly presented as a legitimate figure of expertise. In addition to his ostensible command of the discussion, defining the theme of the episode and moderating all contributions on the set of the show, Chávez benefitted from political legitimacy in his role as elected head of the state. To Jones, the general consensus about political talk shows is that “those doing the talking should have “insider” knowledge of what they are talking about” (Jones 2005, p. 35). As host of a political programme and president of the country, it is hard to imagine Chávez as not having the ultimate “insider” knowledge of what was taking place in Venezuela. In this interplay of commonsensical discourse, hegemonic articulations reducing the polysemy of identities mediated through television, and the highest possible attribute of expertise due to his office, Hugo Chávez held a privileged position in the Bolivarian group interacting on *Aló Presidente*.

### *The Heroes*

Historical figures of the Venezuelan imaginary also contributed to the mobilisation of the “national” myth. Partly articulated through a logic of opposition between patriotism and colonialism, the rhetoric around independence-war-hero Simón Bolívar became fundamental in this process. Ana Teresa Torres asks:

Is it possible to think of Venezuela outside of [Simón] Bolívar? (...) The Bolívarian thought as a political philosophy, as the origin and the goal of the motherland, is a sealed fate (...) Our filial relationship is established: we are Bolívar's children. (Torres 2009, p. 13)

Considered to be the heroic figure of Venezuelan genesis, Bolívar is an inescapable component of the Venezuelan imaginary, but also of its political discourse and its daily life. The national hero is the face of the currency, the name and statue of every town square, a source of pride, a landmark of national identity, and, since the arrival of Chávez to power, the symbol of a political project that bears revolutionary connotations<sup>42</sup>.

Simón Bolívar was born and raised in Caracas. He was the successor of one of Venezuela's richest and most influential families, part of the colony's *creole* (land owners of Spanish descent) aristocracy. Finding inspiration in the enlightened ideals of the French revolution and the republican values promoted by Napoleon Bonaparte, Bolívar led, among others, independence wars against the Spanish rule at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to gaining independence for his homeland, Venezuela, Bolívar helped defeating the imperial troops in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, earning the title of "Libertador" in many Latin American countries (Esquirol 1992, p. 196). In the midst of internal power struggles, the figure of Bolívar became a symbol of freedom and unity for a nation in search of its identity. He came to embody the aspirations and possibilities of the Venezuelan citizen, and has fulfilled a legitimating role for many political doctrines since. In his book "El culto a Bolívar", historian Germán Carrera speaks of the emergence of a "second religion" based on the national hero:

[Bolívar] is a God (...) a *second religion*, aimed a complementing in the civic order the function that the other fulfils in the spiritual and moral order. A religion that had, in the moment of its birth, the important role to respond to concrete and urgent demands of a conflictive political situation, but that would maintain this therapeutic property [in future circumstances].(Carrera Damas 2003, p. 65) (italics in original)

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<sup>42</sup> See origins of the MBR-200 in Chapter 5



In the case of Hugo Chávez's political project, the figure of the Libertador also served to fuel the ideals of the Revolution, whose etymology established a symbiotic connection between the national hero and Chávez's ideology. By gaining the *Bolivarian* adjective, the Venezuelan revolution struck a chord in the identities of a national audience. The role that Bolívar played in Chávez's discourse served different purposes. As father of the nation, the figure of Bolívar provided a common ground to those who identify themselves with the "Bolivarian" revolution. By linking his political programme with what he claimed were the Libertador's ideals, Chávez established a direct connection between the two events, despite a 200-year gap. In parallel, the relationship of identification between supporters of his political project, and the legitimacy it was conferred through its interpretation as a continuation of the war of independence, reinforced a vision that dismissed members of the opposition as enemies of the motherland.

President Chávez: Bolívar, Bolívar, always Bolívar (...) he was a great revolutionary, an example of dignity, of sacrifice, a great soldier, a great warrior, a great statesman, a creator of republics, a great constitutionalist. Bolívar created Constitutions and this Constitution is in his honour. And this Republic has taken his name to raise him to the glory he deserves. Us Bolivarians, us Venezuelans, us Revolutionaries, we have a challenge: we need to measure up to our legacy. (Episode 89 2001)

Many interventions on *Aló Presidente* were aimed at disseminating the stories and values of the Bolivarian doctrine and, disregarding anachronistic accusations, Chávez would often embrace the opportunity to link current affairs with historic accounts of the Libertador's work. Hence, it became common to hear about the place of Bolívar in the theoretical foundations of the Revolution on *Aló Presidente*. The legacy of the heroic father was woven into the values brought forward by Chávez's project, providing a vision of democracy that claimed to have been Bolívar's own.

President Chávez: Bolívar had accepted that we are born unequal. That is a criticism that some Marxists have done to Bolívar. In the Angostura speech, he says something biologically and scientifically true, Bolívar says: "We are born unequal". We are born unequal in character, temperament, physical traits, etc. And it is fortunately the case, imagine if we were all born like a computer: all

the same. Some of us are born in the savannah; some in the cold mountains; others are born near the sea, on an island. Some have a golden crib and others straw houses. We are born unequal and that is how it is.

Now, Bolívar says that then comes the state, the law, the institutions. And, when spread over the surrounding inequality, they generate equality, a [type of] equality that is factual. Bolívar called it “supreme social equality”, equality that is political and social (...) There is a Rousseauan maxim that goes “between the weak and the strong, freedom is oppression and law is liberation”. That is what the law is for: to regulate, to curb the appetite of the strongest and to propel the weakest, those who need it the most, and therefore to generate a state of equality. (Episode 185 2004)

### *The Nation and the Fatherland*

Discursively, the humanist ideas of Chávez’s political programme were also translated into a nationalistic call for what was perceived as a threat against Venezuelan sovereignty. The dignified people of Venezuela, children of the *Libertador* and only legitimate citizens of a democratically elected President, were mobilised around the myth of the “nation” and asked to act against unpatriotic attacks. Hugo Chávez had also brought the antagonistic discourse into the international scene: fervently opposed to what he believed to be an extension of the Monroe doctrine, he had presented a strong political line against any form of intervention from the United States in Venezuelan affairs. This position was translated on the one hand into a strong Pan-American approach, aiming at counter balancing the North American influence through the strengthening of economic and cultural integration with neighbouring countries<sup>43</sup>. And, on the other hand, through economic measures that had driven a great deal of American companies away from Venezuela, particularly in the oil sector.

President Chávez: We are trying to build a Latin American unity, but not the one that the hegemonic power [the United States] wants us to build, an integration for popular sovereignty and emancipation. (video in Episode 184 2004).

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<sup>43</sup> Opposing the Latin American Free Trade Agreement (ALCA in Spanish), Chávez had proposed the creation of ALBA, a regional organisation “based on the socialist principles of social justice, fair trade and equitable development of the forces of production” Henry Veltmeyer and James Petras, *Beyond Neoliberalism: A World to Win* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011, 116).

In the following excerpt Chávez comments on a report on Latin America that the U.S Department of State had issued a few days earlier. He had been infuriated that the report warned against Venezuela's complacent behaviour towards terrorist organisations, in particular towards the FARC, and concluded that the border with Colombia was not sufficiently secure.

President Chávez: The United States have claimed the power, a legal authority, they believe they are the owners of the world (...) The way we take care of our borders is none of their business (...) or perhaps the U.S Department of State and the North American elite want to use the Colombian territory to attack Venezuela? (Episode 190 2004)

As for the economic model, Hugo Chávez very often criticised capitalism and mentioned the role of the United States in promoting a neoliberal agenda. This claim helped portray the relationship between the two countries as a battle between oligarchs and the "people". It also served as an ideological background to justify his proposals. In this excerpt, Chávez refers to this struggle as the remnants of a model that will be superseded by the Bolivarian Revolution.

President Chávez: We are building a participatory democracy (...) but we are still in the first phase of the project, we are still in a Gramscian dilemma, an intermediate situation in which what needs to die off has not yet done so and what needs to be born is not here yet (...) this is an old economic model, capitalist, neoliberal, and brutal (...) This old model is dying but it is still clawing and resisting, and in addition it is the prevailing [model] in the world. It is very powerful here and in the rest of the world, and we can see how they bark from Washington defending the dogs that defend that old model here. (Episode 200 2004)

Of capitalism, Chávez would often criticise its effect on people's perceptions and needs, warning against the values of consumerism and their negative impact on society. At the time, the government had imposed a currency control scheme and imports had been limited on certain products, including vehicles. In this excerpt, Chávez refuses to curb the measures and speaks against the need to import goods, and against consumerism in general. Thornborrow (2001) argues that storytelling and anchoring narratives in personal experiences is one of the

most common techniques for creating an aura of common sense and credibility around the narrator. It is interesting to note that, by introducing narratives of his family life, Chávez's rhetorical choices in this excerpt reinforce his image as an ordinary man.

President Chávez: I asked my daughter Rosinés “how much longer do you intend on having Barbies?”. Apparently there's a new one with a side braid now (...) I am trying to keep my daughter away from advertisements, I try to protect her from those needs that have been created (...) Let's be useful, that is what matters. As Bolivar used to say: glory lies in being great and useful. That is real glory, it is not about money, let's get that old record out of our heads, let's protect our children, our grand children, from the evil of capitalism, of consumerism (...) Let's produce our own cars, our own toys. (Episode 206 2004)

Following this logic, only those who did not represent the “evils of oligarchic interests” were granted membership to the “people” of Venezuela. This antagonistic portrayal, by now fully integrated into the discourse on the show, had effectively excluded any dissident from the audience that Chávez would address during his interventions on the air. Not only had the show precluded spaces for debate, as discussed in the previous chapter, but on his Sunday show, the President of Venezuela rhetorically revoked the citizenship of those who disapproved of his regime. The conversation on *Aló Presidente* was exclusively between Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian public. Opposition members were not only disqualified on the basis of their political affiliation or their economic status, but they were also stripped off their citizenship and given a stateless status on account of their “unpatriotic” behaviour and their “betrayal” of the nation.

President Chávez: Last year, around this date, a lady had called me saying “Oh, President, we feel like we are dying, we have lived all of our lives with the gas flare on and they have turned it off. How could they turn it off?” (...) I urge the opposition to become real Venezuelans, Venezuelans not only because they were born here but because they feel Venezuela; because they feel this country (...) and never again in their lives think of stabbing their own mother, the motherland. (Episode 176 2003)

At this point, *Aló Presidente* had clearly become a space for the reinforcement of the Bolivarian identity in contrast to a series of negative others. Although the ratings of the show are nowhere to be found, it can be said that *Aló Presidente* had consolidated a substantial public that responded to this identity. First, at the equivalential level, participants shared their everyday life dilemmas and requests, and a sense of hope and of direction with their representative, Hugo Chávez. The project of the latter was directly connected to the life of Venezuelan hero Simón Bolívar and, therefore, mobilised the myth of the nation. Secondly, in light of the resistance shown during the early 2000s, the “other” had been defined as: 1) the traditional parties of the Punto Fijo agreement and anyone suspected of supporting the old regime, namely the Venezuelan opposition, and 2) the neoliberal agenda of the United States, the leading capitalist empire. However, the model of a participatory democracy required, in its essence, to be in continuous making. On the subject, Chávez would often say: “Here we are, looking for the right path and building the dream to give the greatest sum of happiness to our people” (Episode 182 2004). Once the Bolivarian public had been put in place, defined in antagonistic terms, their actual role in the path towards a system that brought “the greater sum of happiness to the people” required the right definition. As time went by, much attention was brought to the conceptualisation and definition of the different foundations of the Bolivarian Revolution on the set of *Aló Presidente*.

As for the format of the show, episodes of *Aló Presidente* had started to include videos describing the achievements and “memorable” moments of the construction of the Bolivarian Revolution. Made in a documentary format, the videos provided background information on specific regions of Venezuela, advancements in the Revolution, accounts of historical figures or key events in Venezuelan history. In this excerpt, Chávez comments on a video that was broadcast on the set of the show celebrating the first million of graduates from Misión Robinson.

President Chávez: Bravo to Misión Robinson! (...) This video touches the soul and nourishes the battle (...) [the missions] are an ensemble of trains, of horses cantering towards social justice, and the sum of them all is Misión Cristo: zero poverty in 2021. There will be no poverty in Venezuela by then, I know there won't (...) That is why we are strengthening our sensitivity, our sentiment, our conscience, our capacity (...) This million of compatriots has proven that they

can, and we can too (...) all our nation is called to demonstrate to ourselves that we can. (Episode 176 2003)

Just as the missions became a key component of the structures of the Bolivarian Revolution, the show *Aló Presidente* was also key in defining and transmitting their value. Many of Chávez's missions, often created through presidential decrees, were announced on the Sunday show, where the President discussed at length their aims and objectives, and called for citizen support in their implementation. In this excerpt, Chávez announces the creation of Misión Vuelvan Caras, an employment programme aimed at stimulating employment while transforming the economic model. The plan was to support the creative potential of the communities through training and develop an endogenous market for goods and services (Wynter & Mcilroy 2007).

President Chávez [answering a phone call]: Look, Linda, Misión Vuelvan Caras will be a strategy to incorporate the workforce of large masses that are unemployed at the moment (...) Thanks to Misión Vuelvan Caras we will first train and then incorporate them into integral development and socioeconomic projects (...) and for social work, of course, social work for missions like Barrio Adentro. (Episode 178 2004)

By that time, the antagonistic rhetoric had been integrated into every public discourse, and it had become a habit to comment on what was presented as an implicit dynamic of aggression from the opposition. This articulation of a positive/ negative framework portraying the “people” against the “oligarchy” was present in every area of the public sphere, as a constant reminder of the need to identify with the group.

President Chávez: We are designing the programme, all the details, in spite of the fact that the opposition is already saying that this [project] is impossible, that this is another lie, just like when they spoke about Misión Robinson (...) All of this is an irrational opposition (...) We will provide training to *increase* the workers' knowledge. No one is ignorant (...) look at what the people have done in terms of architecture in the slums. Popular architecture is fascinating; the people are wise. (Ibid)

### *The Revolution*

It is in this interplay of discursive articulations of a hegemonic worldview and the familiar narratives of the television genre that *Aló Presidente* was consolidated as the space for the education of the Bolivarian public. As Livingstone and Lunt (1994) argue:

The relationship between audience and programme or genre may be seen as contractual in that the construction of meaning is not only negotiated on-line during viewing, but is also determined in advance by a set of conventions, frameworks and expectations which each party holds of the other, formulated on the basis of past experience. (p. 6)

The basic dynamic of the show had by now been established. Most of the middle years of *Aló Presidente* were invested in maximising the hegemonic articulation of the Bolivarian Revolution. This translated into a heavily charged ideological formulation of what *being* Bolivarian meant in terms of its historical, cultural and political foundations. As has been seen, collective memory, metaphors, familiar tone, discourtesy, etc. all linguistic tools were employed in reinforcing these articulations. In a masterly command of rhetorical devices, past, present and future were constantly woven into the discourse of *Aló Presidente*. These were the most important years for the articulation of the Bolivarian doctrine, the years where most of the long series of nodal points of the Bolivarian discourse were built. They were also the years of incredible repetition on the show, for each individual signifier had to be hegemonised before it could be connected to the rest of the discourse and this required a long process of meticulous articulation.

The following examples illustrate how, in a similar fashion to the use of Simon Bolívar's figure, Hugo Chávez hegemonised, or rearticulated, the place of important historical Latin American and literary figures into the Bolivarian discourse. Beyond the linguistic values of these examples, they illustrate how *Aló Presidente* had become the main platform on which these discourses were articulated. At this point, and in line with the educational guideline, *Aló Presidente* informed its public, it constructed their collective memory, and instructed them on the path to follow in order to enact their legacy. The mixture was a colourful articulation of ideological content, political guidelines, emotional values, and fear, all directed towards defining the ideal Bolivarian subject.

Since its creation in the 1980s, the Bolivarian movement had constructed its doctrine based on what they had called the “three-rooted tree”. This was a political programme that had vowed to address growing inequalities by appealing to the roots of the Venezuelan identity in an attempt to find in the history of the country the tools for its emancipation. With this purpose, the work of several “founding fathers” was presented as the blueprint for continuing what was considered to be an unfinished battle for the liberation of Venezuela. The main historical characters were: Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar, and Ezequiel Zamora.

The first, known as the “Robinsonian root”, after Rodríguez’s pseudonym Samuel Robinson, regarded the role of education in the making of the Bolivarian Revolution. Based on the republican ideas of Bolívar’s tutor, this influence puts the emphasis on endogenous experience and values the transformative role of education in the process of democratisation.

President Chávez: Simón Rodríguez used to say ‘there will be no republic until we educate the republican man’, in other words a man who thinks about the republic, about the *res publica*, who thinks about others (...) When we are talking about education, we are sowing citizens. (Episode 150 2003)

Seen as the central root, the root associated with the Libertador Simón Bolívar constituted the more broad political foundation of the Bolivarian ideology. It provided a blue print for national and regional strategy as well as directives for policymaking. As often repeated by Chávez in his speeches, the general thought of Bolívar was summarised in the idea that the best form of government was a system that would achieve the highest possible levels of political stability, social security and happiness.

President Chávez: That is what Bolívar used to say, to provide the greatest possible sum of happiness to our people. And that is where we are headed, to the greatest possible sum of happiness. (Episode 150 2003)

As for the Zamoran element, the Bolivarian doctrine borrowed the legacy of a general of the Venezuelan army that fought to redistribute the land from a handful of regional caudillos that had seized power after the wars of independence. This historical figure is believed to have continued Bolívar’s work in leading the liberation of the “sovereign people” from the oligarchic oppression, and his legacy was translated into the law on land reform of the first years of Chávez’s presidency.



President Chávez: Ezequiel Zamora, the general of the sovereign people, died during the war in 1860, and the revolutionary ideals remained with him. After that came liberalism, reformism, governments that did not fulfil Zamora's ideas of free land and free people. (Episode 88 2001)

In addition to these three pillars of the Revolution, Chávez would also incorporate ideas from prominent figures of Venezuelan and Latin American history such as Augusto Cesar, Fidel Castro, Emiliano Zapata, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Gaicaipuro, Eduardo Galeano, István Mészáros, among many others. Often reading passages from their works, Chávez would emphasise the transformative character of the Bolivarian Revolution and the constant need for theoretical and ideological input.

President Chávez: This is the thesis of territorial development, endogenous development, development from within. I am reading Teotonio Dos Santos, an advanced thinker of several decades, of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. [He writes] about dependency, peripheral capitalism, and under-development. We think that the endogenous development thesis is perfectly valid, combined with other theses, and we are trying to implement it here. We are inventing, as Simón Rodríguez would say: “we cannot continue to copy models. We either invent or we err”. We have to invent our own models (Episode 200 2004)

In the spirit of a humanist education and the importance of knowledge in developing the higher version of oneself, Chávez would often recommend works of classical literature such as Victor Hugo's “Les Misérables”, and Miguel de Cervantes' “Don Quijote”. The works were often quoted during *Aló Presidente* and distributed for free by the state publishing house *El Perro y la Rana*. The President would urge his audience to progress in their readings, emphasising the value of an enlightened mind for active citizenship.

Speaking of literature, we are getting ready for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cervantes's *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*. I am armed with my copy, come on, everybody [needs] to read Don Quixote, because that is where we come from, we all have some Quixote in us. (Episode 206 2004)

For many years, the show had seen phone calls give way to other means of participation. As mentioned previously, the airtime for presidential interventions had taken over the main

content of *Aló Presidente* and popular participation was incorporated into the show through other means such as interviews with communal councils, live two-ways from different locations through the mediation of journalists, etc. In the following excerpt, Chávez shows footage of a survey conducted in the street collecting messages for him in the midst of the ongoing tension with the opposition.

Question: What would you say to President Chávez?

Responses: That he should not allow groups with power to manipulate him. But that he should also work for the people (...) That he continues to support the Venezuelan people (...) That he goes ahead with his ideas for change but with much prudence (...) That he rectifies partly but that others do too and that they allow him to do his work (...)

President Chávez: Thank you for the advice, I will take it into consideration (...) There goes the popular wisdom, this is the voice of the people, the voice of God (...) We all need to fill our spirits with critical [capacity], self-criticism, with the capacity to recognise our mistakes (...) putting before all the interest of the people and the motherland. (Episode 87 2001)

On the topic of phone calls, Chávez had often pointed to the impossibility of answering every call on the air and had repeatedly mentioned that each participant would be given a thorough follow up through the hotline 0800-ALO. Too large to appear on the air, the public of *Aló Presidente* had become a mass that required managing. With time, participation became ever more mediated: mediated through live two-ways, through community spokespersons, produced videos, and finally, mediated through a call centre. The “participatory space” saw the depersonalisation of its participants. In a slow process articulating a series of chains of equivalence, requests and opinions were amalgamated into one sole purpose: the reproduction of the behaviours and values of the Bolivarian public. Individuals, originally interpellated into the subject position of political participants and empowered “protagonists”, progressively became part of a mass. This aspect will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, when understanding the Bolivarian public as a populist public. However, it is important to note that, at this stage of the evolution of *Aló Presidente*, the public had become an object of governance; both constructed and conducted as to guide their political actions.

President Chávez: This is very important (...) look, it is impossible for every call to go on the air, but if you call and file a complaint, or a piece of information, I can promise that every call will be processed by the team of *Aló Presidente*. (Episode 210 2005)

Beyond the entertaining value of the pundit format, the set of *Aló Presidente* had become a place in which host and panellists, although mostly the host, would inform the audience about the appropriate ideologies and behaviours of the Bolivarian identity. Since the early days of the show, the language on *Aló Presidente* had integrated the logic that common sense is what foregrounds legitimacy in the talk show genre (Carpignano et al. 1990). Chávez had established an emotional relationship with his audience and had gained expert authority in his position as host and political leader. The mechanisms of participation on the show had proven to be aimed at the governance of the Bolivarian public. Modes of conduct were managed through the screening of phone calls and the provision of representative and mediated forms of audience participation. As for the discursive articulation of the Bolivarian identity, a series of chains of equivalence involving historical figures, distant others, and common values had become the background against which participants interacted with Chávez on the show.

### *The Socialist Turn*

The year 2005 was to signify a new impulse for the Revolution for, after winning the recall referendum in August 2004, the Bolivarian coalition had obtained a landslide victory during the regional elections of October 2004, winning 83 per cent of the municipalities and thus reversing what was until then the opposition's lead on regional politics. Amidst accusations of fraud and high levels of abstention, the Bolivarian Revolution had consolidated its power and defeated a long series of destabilising attempts from the opposition (Sánchez 2004). In the context of what was perceived as a new victory in the struggle for the Bolivarian ideals, Chávez declared that *Aló Presidente* would undergo a makeover. In January 2005, after spending 2 months off the air, the President announced that they would re-emphasise the participatory roots of the show and include examples of organised participation in the audience. Among the main changes, citizen groups representing the advancements of the Revolution would be invited to be in the show, according to the theme of the day. Additionally, a second stage would be allocated for artists and folklore, and a special section called "In Private with the President" would provide a space for interviews as well as room

for special readings and text analysis. As for the main part of the stage, the President would be seated in front of a desk with a laptop, next to a screen and a globe, formalising the pedagogical figure he had been developing.

Seen as a new beginning for the Bolivarian Revolution and the project of a participatory democracy that it entailed, the show was spruced up to formally include many of the elements that it had been incorporating over the years. The emphasis on making Venezuelans the protagonists of the political project was renewed. Once again, the *Aló Presidente* was introduced as part of a new type of programming, as television that aimed to break away from models of representative democracy and opening new spaces for participation,

Blanca Eekhout (newly appointed President of state channel Venezolana de Televisión): The model of representative democracy needed us to be representatives and, in a way, to speak on behalf of us. But in a participatory democracy, we need communication to be in people's hands (...) we are inaugurating new models of communication [in VTV]. (Episode 210 2005)

However, as has been argued above, citizen participation on *Aló Presidente* was rooted on antagonistic premises of exclusion. By now integrated in the collective understanding of the dynamic, participation on *Aló Presidente* was linked to partisanship. In fact, the political life as a whole was subconsciously understood as such. Described in the official website as “those compatriots, protagonists of substantial changes in the consolidation of the participative democracy”, the targeted audience invited to this political discussion was implicitly regarded as favourable to the regime. As mentioned, opposition members were dismissed as “anti-patriotic” and, by extension, considered to be non-citizens of the Republic. Originally defined by Foucault as a consequence of modern societies, and more specifically in medical contexts, “normalisation” is understood to be a technique of governance that aims at marginalising deviant behaviour by establishing the “normal” (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991). Rather than through a top down imposition of force, behaviour, and by extension the management of self, can be “normalised” through individuals’ internalisation of certain articulations of “truth”. To put it in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, hegemonic articulations partly fix discourses by the reducing polysemy. The identities that are constructed in these articulations internalise these exclusions as the norm. This engenders a series of behaviours in line with the sense of identity that is being articulated. It can be found at the personal level

as well as the social and institutional ones. As such, processes of “normalisation” require “identity negotiations” in which subject positions govern their desires and actions according to their internalised truths. Part of the effect of these articulations on *Aló Presidente* was the “normalisation” of the behaviours and beliefs of the Bolivarian subject.

In this context of antagonistic climate, guests were tacitly required to be members of Bolivarian organisations, representative of the advancements of Chávez’s political project. Additionally, because these organisations were an extension of the network of *Misiones*, they were inevitably linked to the government, and had been conceived as relief programmes aimed at providing services for the poor. Therefore, members of these organisations were associated, if not for every individual case at least at the symbolic level, with supporters of the cause. In January 2005, during the episode that had brought back a revamped version of *Aló Presidente* after having spent 2 months off the air, Hugo Chávez spoke for the first time of *socialism* as a worthy political ideology. At the beginning of the show, the President had announced that the Bolivarian Revolution had entered a new phase. At the time, he had declared:

President Chávez: After these two significant political events, defining for Venezuela and for the Bolivarian Revolution, the Bolivarian Revolutionary democracy has entered a new phase. And *Aló Presidente*, an important support for this revolution, will also enter a new age. (Episode 210 2005)

During that episode, reiterating the importance of studying Latin American history, the President briefly spoke of Abreu de Lima, a Brazilian general that fought next to Bolívar in the Independence wars and died in exile. As he mentioned Abreu’s legacy, Chávez associated Simón Bolívar with socialist ideas, linking for the first time his Bolivarian project with this political ideology.

President Chávez: We need to learn more about our own history (...) we know more about Hanibal and Alexander the Great than about the countries that surround us (...) I am interested in Abreu de Lima, he was condemned in his time because he was a revolutionary and because he ended up being a utopian socialist (...) I believe that Bolívar would have also ended up becoming a

socialist had he lived a little longer. I am absolutely certain [of this]. (Episode 210 2005)

Thus started the socialist leg of the Bolivarian Revolution. First, the notion was weaved in through chains of equivalence through Bolivar, then through Jesus, into Chávez's discourse. Months later, it was integrated into the political programme for the presidential elections of 2006. It is interesting to note that Chávez had until then rejected socialist ideas, favouring instead a "third way" in line with the humanist ideals he associated with Bolivar. He had developed close ties with Fidel Castro, especially after the Cuban leader had participated in the creation of the *Misiones*, providing both consultancy and personnel for their implementation (Díaz Polanco 2006). In his quest for further integration in the Latin American region, Chávez had also spoken against the Cuban embargo and had been an important actor in promoting Pan American relations with the island. But of Cuba, what had inspired Chávez until then was its ability to defend national sovereignty against North America, not its economic model. This truly changed the rhetoric of his political project, for, as a fundamentally different ideological doctrine, the political programme needed to be defined.

From Episode 210 onwards, Hugo Chávez would present on *Aló Presidente* the new phase of his political thought. Just as he had presented the ideological foundations of the Bolivarian Revolution and the three-rooted tree that symbolised the values of the Venezuelan people, the President presented the evolution of his project on the set of the Sunday show. Soon, socialism had become the way forward, and Chávez would recommend readings and provide theoretical analyses on the development of what he had called "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". In the following excerpt, Chávez describes what has brought him to this new turn:

President Chávez: The revolutionary democracy and the *Movimiento V Republica*, the political party of the Revolution, in addition to its brother parties, need to continue to open the ideological debate. I have been saying that capitalism is not the right path to build a better world. No, capitalism leads to hell itself. At this point in my life, at 51, after 6 years of presidency (...) after so many readings, debates, discussions, travels around the world, etc. I am convinced, and I think will be for the rest of my life, that the path for a new, better, and possible world is not capitalism but socialism (...) I also think we

need to invent a new socialism, the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let's invent it, let's discuss it, let's not be afraid of ideas (...) [the missions, etc.] are all instruments for the construction of a new model for life, for politics, for the economy; a model that moves away from capitalism and builds the new socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Episode 214 2005)

On that same episode, the President had invited Latin American writers, one from Argentina and the other from Chile, whose theories he found interesting. In continuity with the pedagogic rhetoric he had been developing over the previous few years, he recommended the reading of Oswaldo Sunkel's "Desarrollo desde Dentro" and Hugo Cabello's "Ideología y Neocolonialismo" and discussed the latter's notion of "ideoforce", or how to transform ideas into forces. On the new path towards socialism, policymaking should be inspired by theories, and it was important to discuss them on the show. With this in mind, Chávez gave a full account of Sunkel's theory during the episode. In this excerpt, Chávez summarises Sunkel's book and explains some ideological foundations for socialist industrial planning.

President Chávez: Sunkel offers a neostructuralist synthesis and makes a strategic proposal: development from within (...) What is the strategy? It is about endogenous development (...) I am going to read the theory because otherwise one might get lost (...) This is about industrial development "from within" (...) It is a creative effort that does not copy anything but tries to give birth to something new (...) We start by establishing the industries that are considered to be the fundamental pillars of the process of industrialisation (...) from this initial impulse come the industry of iron and steel, metallurgical and electrical industries, then basis chemical, energy, transport and communications [all of this] based on natural resources and the articulation of the territory and the national market (...) All aspects must be combined (...) This is why we cannot allow [basic industries] to export most of their production (...) Empires from around the world have forced us for 500 years to produce and export raw materials. At this point we need to turn this all around and change direction (...) In addition, small endogenous nuclei will produce at a small, medium or large scale, and work closely with the big industrial plants (...) One of the most important elements of this idea of endogenous development is the role of

cooperatives, but we must make sure that they don't reinforce the capitalist model like it has been the case in many capitalist countries (...) Sunkel and his colleagues touch upon many aspects of endogenous development in their book. The first part is "the Strategy of development" (...) and the second is "Productive resources: work and employment markets in Latin American economic thought". (Episode 215 2005)

With this new turn towards socialism, *Aló Presidente* had turned over a new leaf during which Hugo Chávez would quote Latin American writers, describe the new path of the Bolivarian Revolution, namely "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", and instruct the audience of the show on the ins and outs of the political doctrine. By now a common *modus operandi*, articulating the Bolivarian identity involved a combination of popular culture, everyday life anecdotes, literary suggestions, reviews of current affairs, and more. Working on both emotional and rational logics, the show became somewhat of a master class in Venezuelan politics. And, quite literally, for a short period of time, the set of *Aló Presidente* became a classroom in which Chávez enacted the role of a teacher. In a spinoff of *Aló Presidente* called "Aló Teorico" the president discussed exclusively the conceptual foundations of the Bolivarian Revolution. Setting up Hugo Chávez on a desk, *Aló Teorico* discussed the pillars of Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The title of the episodes, all broadcast live on Thursdays in addition to the normal instalment of the Sunday show, were: 1) Communes and the five pillars for the construction of Socialism; 2) Social property, individual freedom, and socialism; 3) The new stage of the PSUV; 4) The National Bolivarian Army and the battle of ideas; 5) The National Army as a manifestation of the anti-imperialist character. Addressing the specifics of the new political path, Chávez explains in this excerpt the difference between capitalism and socialism. By now common in his semantics, Chávez introduces the figure of Simon Bolivar to legitimise the project, and introduces an intrinsic enemy using the pronoun "they".

President Chávez: Is property a privilege? Or is property a right? Capitalism turns property into a privilege; they end up concentrating property. They take it from you and accumulate everything for themselves (...) Socialism doesn't. Socialism distributes property equally. Property belongs to the individual as



much as it belongs to the society and the community. That's a harmonious world, as Bolivar would say. (Episode 2 2009)

More than a pundit, or an expert host, Chávez's figure had reached a new level of authority. Fully embedded in a paternalistic logic, the spinoff *Aló Teorico* was aimed at educating the Bolivarian citizen. The show had by now integrated the articulation of "citizen" as non-opponents to Chávez's regime and it was aimed at informing, educating and entertaining a public that had been articulated as the only legitimate citizens of the country. In a mode of address that maintained informal language but saw the distancing of the host from the Bolivarian public, the show adopted a top-down pedagogic dynamic that positioned Hugo Chávez as an exceptional member of the group. It is within this context of articulation of the Bolivarian identity that *Aló Presidente* came to occupy a key role in turning its audience into an object of governance. Through a series of emotional, rhetorical, and pedagogical means, the show served as a space in which an audience could learn to recognise and manage themselves as Bolivarian subjects.

### *Conclusion*

The previous chapter analysed the construction of the Bolivarian public under the premises of a "participatory" democracy. This logic had been applied to the creation of a phone-in programme with the president of Venezuela. It was argued that, as time passed, the public of the show had been interpellated as supportive of the regime. In that context, the figure of Hugo Chávez had been that of a highly visible member of the group identity. Often talking of "our" path, the president had later established the "other", or the opposition, as a negative reflection of the Bolivarian identity. This chapter has attempted to examine how the set of *Aló Presidente* became a space for ideological dissemination and education on the values of the Bolivarian Revolution. Emphasising the transitional period between his second and third mandates, the chapter has analysed the evolution of Chávez's thought from a republican project based on the nationalist ideals of Simon Bolivar to a socialist alternative in the making of the "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". Paying special attention to the political events that sparked the ideological change, the chapter has reviewed the state of opposition that the Chavist project faced during the early 2000s and how this was translated in Chávez's discourse into a logic of friend and enemy that allowed him to consolidate a sense of identity among his supporters and provide a stronger base for his legitimacy. As mentioned in the

previous chapter, the interventions of Chávez on the show had increased as the episodes had grown longer, turning the attention towards the President and away from the audience. This tendency was acknowledged in 2005 when, announcing a new turn in the progress of the Revolution, the format of the show had been changed to include representatives of citizens' organisations in the live audience. In the analysis, this measure was found to further accentuate the division among Venezuelans and crystallise the exclusion of members of the opposition from the political space.

As for the discourse analysed in the chapter, the choice of excerpts reflect the strong hegemonic content found in *Aló Presidente*, be it in the form of theoretical arguments, historical re-readings, or ideological commentary on current affairs. Against the background of political events and the development of the Bolivarian Revolution as a practical project, the pedagogic aspect of Chávez's discourse was reinforced on the set of *Aló Presidente*. In portraying Hugo Chávez as an instructor of the Bolivarian doctrine, the Sunday show contributed to making him an indispensable figure of the political project. In this context, not only did the people identify with his values, but, by defining the Revolution as "a project in the making", Chávez ensured his role as its guiding figure. Next chapter will further analyse the leadership figure of Hugo Chávez and the development of the Bolivarian public. It will be argued that, having consolidated the group identity, and having informed its mode of conduct, the later years of Chávez's presidency were marked by the unwavering support of a populist public for its leader.

## Chapter 7

### **Aló Presidente 2006-2012: Demanding Obedience**

The previous two chapters have observed how *Aló Presidente* evolved both in shape and in content over the first years of Chávez’s mandate. Using the political context as background for the analysis, the focus has been on the formation and maintenance of the Bolivarian public as the grassroots of the Revolution. First by bringing it together in a space of participation, then by defining its boundaries against the necessary “others”, the main argument has been that the audience of *Aló Presidente* was both constructed and sustained by a hegemonic discourse of the Bolivarian identity and that the political background informed the discourse that was being articulated on the show. In this context, as Chávez’s mandates passed, the activities on *Aló Presidente* were adjusted to the political contingencies, reflecting the relationship between members of the audience and Chávez himself. It is in this parallel between the development of a ‘revolutionary’ project on the political front and the articulation of a Bolivarian identity in his political communication that *Aló Presidente* had become a key space for the enactment of the Bolivarian process. As seen in the previous chapters, during the first two years of his presidency, the role of Hugo Chávez on the show had been that of a member of the political public: he had presented himself as part of the group and had seemed to emphasise the role of active citizenship in his political project. After the attempted coup of 2002 and the following move towards a socialist doctrine, his role had evolved into that of an instructor of the Bolivarian identity, informing the group on the rights and duties pertaining to the Bolivarian citizen.

This chapter will analyse the last mandate of Hugo Chávez from his re-election in 2006 until his illness in 2012. Paying special attention to the series of political measures that took place after 2007 aimed at centralising powers in Chávez’s hands, the chapter will argue the articulation of Hugo Chávez as the leader of the Bolivarian Revolution became paramount for the crystallisation and consolidation of the Bolivarian identity and overall political project. It will then focus on the relationship between Chávez and his audience on *Aló Presidente* and argue that the show had become a tribune for the strengthening of his leadership figure and the reinforcement of his legitimacy.

### *The Bolivarian Revolution and Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

The year 2007 marked a new turning point in Hugo Chávez's project. After being re-elected for a third time, Chávez introduced a new political programme called "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". As mentioned previously, the president had been discussing the benefits and characteristics of socialism in the post-cold-war era. Since he had first mentioned it in *Aló Presidente* in 2005, he had led a strong campaign aimed at contextualising socialism in the Venezuelan frame. After this ideological turn had received electoral support in 2006, Chávez launched a series of institutional and legal amendments aimed at supporting the socialist path of the Bolivarian Revolution.

At the time, *Aló Presidente* had become a staple programme in Venezuelan television. Having celebrated its 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the show seemed to have established a preset format that included: 1) a different location for every episode, 2) a live audience sitting across from the president, 3) some form of celebration of Bolivarian achievements (factory inauguration, high school graduation, etc.), 4) long episodes of 6 hours on average, 5) discussions involving current affairs and guidelines for the national and local administrations, 6) audience participation in the form of phone calls, vox pops, videos, folkloric performances, videos, etc., 7) and the immanent presence of Hugo Chávez. Except for the short-lived spinoff *Aló Teorico* in 2009, the show underwent very few technical changes during its last years. However, the content of Hugo Chávez's interventions, and the general tone of his discourse on the air, became progressively stronger, reinforcing his role as leader of the Bolivarian Revolution. Having reduced citizen participation to partisan support and group performance, Chávez had managed to become a central figure in the shared identity he had been articulating through the years. Evermore present in his discourse on the show was the power he had to define the path for the Bolivarian Revolution and defend the project against the influence of an antagonised opposition. Although "the people" were always present in his discourse, Hugo Chávez had by then seemed to become the official spokesperson of the Bolivarian identity, devolved with representative powers, both on the political scene and on the stage of the show. In this context, most of the content of the show was devoted to political affairs, presenting new legislation, and staging Chávez's power in front of the cameras of *Aló Presidente*.

Over the years, the relationship between Chávez and the audience had become ingrained in the dynamic of the show. Horton and Wohl (1956) describe the sense of familiarity that grows between audience members and hosts as “para-social” relationships. Although their claim dates from a time when the audience was believed to be highly impressionable, they suggest that audiences develop a relationship of intimacy with television personalities as if they were acquainted in real life. Often based on the depiction of the host as “ordinary”, or accessible, audiences may address the personalities as if they were talking to a friend or as if they shared a common membership to an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). Perceived as markers of authenticity, disclosure of personal stories and experiences of everyday life reinforce the claim to ordinariness and the familiarity of the personality. This resonates with Dyer’s (1986) notion of “rhetoric of authenticity” as the way in which audiences capture the “truthfulness” of the television personality by assessing their appearances and interpreting their actions. Beyond the intimacy bond, media figures, celebrities, and personalities may fulfil an important role as ways of navigating the complexities of modern selfhood. When speaking of Hollywood celebrities, Dyer argues that “stars articulate what it is to be human in society: that is, they express the particular notion that we hold of the “individual” (p. 8). In the context of a modern landscape of multiple identities and mediated experiences, Thompson (1995) argues that, in the construction of the self, individuals can draw a large part of their resources from mediated systems of “practical expertise” (p. 218). Seen as both the locale for experience and the source for coping with the complexities of the social, media personalities can function as proxies for the construction of the self.

The idea that celebrities may have a claim to authenticity has been widely criticised in the literature (Gamson 1994, King 2003, Lovell 2003) with special emphasis on the nature of the celebrity as a public persona designed especially for the hype of the medium and therefore prone to unstable identities. A similar claim regards the performance of “being ordinary” and the interiorisation of practices that aim at curbing behaviours that do not reflect the norm (Sacks 1984). However, the point has been made through Laclau and Mouffe (2001) that identity is by definition unstable, for it is constantly articulated in the field of discursivity and influenced by the mediated experiences of current Western societies. In this sense, a negotiation is being made between the familiarity and “ordinariness” of the public persona and their capacity to perform an identity in private and public settings alike. It is their

adaptability that precisely informs the audience on the procedures to follow for the performance of the self in specific social contexts. In this setup of intimacy at a distance and the sense of belonging to a shared community, members of the audience can project their insecurities and identity formation processes onto the media personality. To Sandvoss “the fan’s fascination with the fan object is based on a narcissistic, self-reflective bond in which the fan’s attachment is rooting in projecting aspects of the self onto the fan object” (Sandvoss 2010, p. 408). This also entails a series of behaviours aimed at reproducing the fan object’s performance. In the case of *Aló Presidente*, it has been argued that since the first years of the show, Chávez and the audience had developed a relationship based on a shared “imagined community”. Presenting himself as an ordinary person and discussing everyday life issues, as well as showing the ropes for the public performance of the Bolivarian identity, Chávez had become the object of attachment to a large part of the public, often treated as a celebrity by members of the audience. This could be seen in the queues lined up outside the show, the different banners and paraphernalia sported by members of the audience, and the crowds that surrounded the location set. It was also found in the type of messages that people would post on the website ([alopresidente.gob.ve](http://alopresidente.gob.ve)) and Facebook page of *Aló Presidente*, as well as Chávez’s Twitter and Facebook pages (@Chavezcandanga) and Chávez’s official blog ([blog.chavez.org.ve](http://blog.chavez.org.ve)).

[Username] *chavez (Mérida)*: hi my chavez I’m from merida I LOVE YOU I’m a 11 year old girl when you came to merida I couldn’t see you I LOVE YOU (sic) (Blog de Hugo Chávez 2010)

[Username] Carmen Aguilar: Good afternoon my beloved boyfriend Hugo Chávez President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, this farm girl sends you kisses and hugs (...) let me know if you have received my letter, only then will I know if you love me the way I love you I just ask that you be honest with me the way I am honest with you (...) this country needs you, I need you man of my life. The girl from your street (sic). (Aguilar 2012)

As can be observed in these examples, the tone of the comments implied certain levels of familiarity and intimacy with regards to Hugo Chávez, as well as a form of fascination for his persona. Following typical modes of fan behaviour (Roberts 2007), the participants express a

desire to increase their proximity to their object of fascination, either by meeting him physically or by receiving a response to their epistolary address.

### *The Ley Habilitante*

After winning his second election on 14 November 2006 with 61 per cent of the votes, Hugo Chávez announced in his investiture speech that Venezuela was entering a new historical chapter in the movement towards equality. He declared his intention to move away from the neoliberal governments of the past and enter a new radical phase of his political project. Explaining that during his first terms he had attempted to reconcile the needs of the Venezuelan population under the umbrella of an alternative “third way”, he argued that the only real alternative for Venezuela was the path towards socialism. Crystallising what he had been announcing on *Aló Presidente* before his election, Chávez introduced the *Proyecto Simón Bolívar* (PSB), the programme for government for 2007-2012 and first *Socialist Plan for the Nation*. During the investiture speech, Chávez talked about the first 8 years of his mandate as part of a transitional phase from capitalism to socialism and presented what he called the *Five Constitutive Engines*<sup>44</sup>, five key elements that were to constitute the backbone of the PSB for the longer-term project set to begin in 2007, namely: ley habilitante; reforma constitucional; educación popular; nueva geometría del poder y del poder communal. Interestingly, many of the so-called “pillars” of the new turn seemed to call for a centralisation of powers, making the Executive a key instrument in the Revolution.

One of the most important elements of these engines was the need for *fast-track authority* in order for Chávez to legislate the necessary foundation of the revised Bolivarian project. The “Ley Habilitante”<sup>45</sup>, was granted on 30 January 2007 during several “street parliamentary sessions” of the National Assembly that took place in five locations around the country. Named by Chávez “the mother law, mother of all revolutionary laws”, the fast-track authority gave full legislative powers to the Cabinet in virtually all matters of policymaking: economic, social, tributary, financial, security and defence, territory, infrastructure, popular participation, energy, state institutions, transport and services for a total of 18 months.

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<sup>44</sup> “Cinco Motores Constituyentes”

<sup>45</sup> Enabling law. The National Assembly granted special powers to Chávez’s government of four occasions: in 1999 for 6 months; 2000 for a year; 2007 for 18 months and 2010 for 18 months. A total of 218 decree-laws have been passed under the Enabling laws of Chávez’s terms (Maria Da Corte, «Con 46 leyes culmina hoy habilitación del Presidente,» *El Universal*, 17 de 06 de 2012).

The opposition had criticised the habit of transferring full legislative powers to the Cabinet for extended periods of time arguing that bypassing the National Assembly was unconstitutional and that it should only be required in times of emergency and for limited periods of time. According to opposition MPs: “enabling laws are used to solve problems that need immediate attention. This law is a Constitutional fraud; for the President is allowed 18 months to legislate on matters that do not require immediate attention. The Constitution states that organic laws must be approved with a qualified majority of two thirds of the National Assembly, this enabling law is breaching the Constitution” (Noticias24 2011).

To this criticism, supporters of the Government had responded: “the President proposed a socialist programme to the people and the people voted for the President and for that proposal: socialism. This is a mandate backed by the people in the form of a majority vote. We take this mandate as an order, the people of Venezuela is telling us: this is our leader, this is our project, and this is the way. Us, Members of the National Assembly, know that the President Hugo Chávez needs the power to legislate in accordance with this political project. Therefore, as soon as he requested the Enabling Law, we will grant in extraordinary session the powers required by the citizen president Hugo Chávez in the form of an Enabling Law” (BBC Mundo 2007). Interestingly, at the time, Chávez already benefited from complete support from the Assembly, for there were no opposition MPs in the chamber from 2005 to 2010. In 2005, all opposition parties had called for a boycott of the legislative elections taking place that year, resulting in an overwhelming 73 per cent of abstention. This situation gave the Chávez administration absolute control over the Legislative power, for every single one of the 167 MPs of the Assembly was affiliated to the governing party (Jímenez Monsalve 2011, p. 93).

### *The Constitutional Reform*

In addition to fast-track authority, the second constitutive engine of the Bolivarian project required a new Constitutional reform. The main argument for a second revision of the Constitution only eight years after Chávez had introduced what he had called the “best Constitution in the world” in 1999 was the need to adjust articles that could hinder the path towards socialism. The Enabling Law was to go hand in hand with the new Constitution. Hugo Chávez called for a *Presidential Commission for the Constitutional Reform* (PCCR) on January 15 2007. Among its 13 members, the Commission included the president of the



National Assembly, the president of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General, and the Ombudsman. Their goal was to work on a proposal for the Constitutional reform and pledge confidentiality to Hugo Chávez.

President Chávez: [The Consitution] should be reformed in cycles. This is normal, especially in the case of a moral, social and political movement as accelerated as the one we are going through at the moment. Some days feel like centuries, some centuries feel like days. We are going through accelerated times, constitutive times, revolutionary times. This is why we need to revise the Constitution; there is no doubt that what we need is a Constitutional reform. (Episode 283 2007)

Lander and López Maya argue that the composition of the Commission, and the conditions under which the report of the PCCR was introduced to the National Assembly, hinder pluralism and transparency (López Maya & Lander 2010). Underlying certain authoritarian tendencies, they argue that the PCCR should not have been confidential in light of the fact that most of its members held public offices at the time. In their view, the democratic debate was further damaged when, after months of classified discussions under the direct leadership of Hugo Chávez, the PCCR accelerated the ratification process and pressured the National Assembly for a definitive draft of the proposal.

Amongst criticisms and accusations of unconstitutionality (Penfold 2010), the new Constitution proposed many measures aimed at reducing subsidiarity and centralising competences around the Executive. Among the main changes, it proposed: 1) to allow indefinite re-elections of the President and raise from six to seven years the length of the executive term (art. 230), 2) replace the Federal Government Council with a National Government Council and to grant powers to the President to appoint as many Vice-Presidents as deemed necessary (art. 125), 3) abolish the autonomy of the Venezuelan Central Bank (art. 318), 4) grant Presidential powers to create special regions with strategic aims and appoint special authorities in order to guarantee the sovereignty and protection of the territory in cases of contingency or disasters (art. 11). As for matters of defence, the new Constitution proposed to add the National Bolivarian Militia, a form of unofficial reserve, to the armed forces, renaming the whole the “Bolivarian Armed Forces”. This new entity would be in charge of matters of internal security in addition to its previous responsibilities (art. 329),

effectively bypassing regional law and order, and making the President Commander in Chief of all policing agencies of the state.

Given the previous redraft of 1999, and the accelerated tone of this proposal, both members of the opposition and partisans of the Revolution questioned the Constitutional value of the reform. The most notorious reaction was that of General Baduel, defence minister of Chávez's government, who officially rejected the proposal claiming that it would "finalize a coup d'état" and "concentrate powers in the Executive"<sup>46</sup> (CNN 2007). At the time, support for Chávez had been questioned rarely, and Raul Baduel had been a key ideologue of the project since the creation of the Bolivarian front MBR-200 in the 1980s. Considered to be a means to prolong indefinitely Chávez's presidency, the Constitutional reform became the first internal challenge of the Bolivarian faction. And on 2 December 2007, the final proposal was rejected in a national referendum in which 50.65 per cent of the people voted "no" against 49.34 per cent for the "yes" (Ramírez 2009). This was Hugo Chávez's first electoral defeat<sup>47</sup>.

By then, Chávez would often speak of himself in the third person, deferring special powers to his figure and reinforcing the idea of it being bigger than just him. However, his linguistic choices often emphasised his authoritative position in the group.

President Chávez: You've forced me, well, not you, I know that all those who are here voted "yes". But the result [of the referendum] forced me to slow down the process (...) When they saw that Chávez had recognised the defeat, it didn't fit into their code because they say I'm a "tyrant". What kind of tyrant recognises a defeat? (...) I'm not afraid of anything. But I wasn't mad, I'm not mad. It's all a lie. (Episode 299 2008)

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<sup>46</sup> General Raúl Baduel had previously been pinned "hero of the Revolution" by Hugo Chávez after he had played a key role in returning the power to Chávez during the attempted coup d'état of 11 April 2002. He served as Minister of Defence from 2006 to 2007 when he was offered to retire from his position. In 2009, Baduel was charged of embezzling funds while in office and sentenced to 8 years in prison (*El Universal*, «Juez militar ordenó poner preso a Baduel en cárcel de Ramo Verde» 04 de April de 2009).

<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of the causes behind the victory of the "No", see Margarita López Maya, «Venezuela: Hugo Chávez y el bolivarianismo,» *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 14, no. 3 (2008): 55-82 and Pedro Nikken, «La sorpresiva congruencia democrática del 2 de diciembre,» *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 14, no. 2 (August 2008): 183-193.

Formerly presented on *Aló Presidente* as a member of the Bolivarian group, Chávez had progressively become the main figure of the common identity. This can be seen in the semantic choices he made when addressing the audience and when talking about himself. By continuously referring to the “will of the people”, and speaking of himself in the third person, Chávez had developed a rhetoric that avoided any potential claims to difference in the group, making it clear that, beyond the demarcation between Bolivarians and “the other”, there were no distinctions among the group. These chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) had always been a part of Chávez’s articulation of the Bolivarian identity. More than a decade in power and 1000 hours of *Aló Presidente* later, this rhetoric had become engrained in the dynamic of the show, reinforcing time and time again the unity of the group. Hence, Chávez would speak of the public by using the pronoun “us”, and he would use the plural “you” when addressing members of the opposition (Erlich 2005).

Nevertheless, the support for Chávez’s proposal was put to test for a second time in 2009 when, right after the regional elections of 2008, Hugo Chávez announced his intention to propose a series of Constitutional *amendments* this time, instead of a full reform. A second referendum was called on 15 February 2009 aimed at allowing the indefinite re-election of the President of the Republic, as well as that of governors, mayors, and MPs. This time the “yes” won with 54.85 per cent of the votes. As for the remaining proposals of the Constitutional reform, most articles were amended thanks to the fast-track authority (Rivas Leone 2012), effectively centralising powers into Chávez’s hands and marking a certain authoritarian tone to Chávez’s proposals. In spite of having been questioned at the party and electoral levels, Chávez’s determination to go through with Constitutional changes made it clear that the decision-making power of the group took place at the leadership level.

### *The Poder Comunal*

This is pure socialism: the community goes first. Capitalism does the opposite: it gives priority to individual interests over the needs of the community (...) We are here devolving the power to the people, not to regional elites. It is a new concept of decentralisation and of federalism (...) my dream is to install the Confederations of Communal Councils as the basis of the Communal Power. (Chavez 2011, pp. 43-44)

In terms of social policy, in addition to the three traditional powers, the *Project Simón Bolívar* included complete devolution from the institutions to the people, and set up an additional power called “communal power”. This new power would not be elected but instead encompass local communities in the form of “human groups” (art. 136), like constituencies that would not elect a representative but work directly with the Cabinet. Replacing municipalities and provinces, the idea rested on the creation of Communal Councils<sup>48</sup> (CC) considered as “primary units of the new socio-political order” and aimed at self-managing and resolving issues of the local communities. The Councils would be composed of a citizen Assembly that represented between 150 and 400 families and the Councils would execute their own budget, dispose of a self-managed communal Bank, and conduct their own financial inspections. But the impression of power devolution to grass-root organisations in a “protagonistic democracy” seemed to be undermined by the fact that Communal Councils had no connection to their elected representatives at the municipal, local, or regional levels.

Legally, CCs responded directly to Presidential Commissions for the Popular Power, commissions created by the President and directly financed by him. This established a vertical relationship between the participative, popular, decentralised entities and the President of the Republic, effectively giving the head of the state full political control over the devolved entities. Many argue that this was a political move aimed at undermining the work of the opposition who had gained strategic regions and municipalities in the 2008 elections<sup>49</sup> for it incurred the risk of clientelism and took away the competences of the regional levels in favour of the President himself (Goldfrank 2011, García-Guadilla 2006).

### *The Role of Hugo Chávez*

In the previous chapters, it was argued that the relationship between Chávez and his supporters underwent a series of transitions. Albeit present at all stages of his mandates,

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<sup>48</sup> See Ley Orgánica de Consejos Comunales 2006

<sup>49</sup> The opposition had 5 of 23 states in the elections of 2008. Among them were: the Mayor of Caracas, a key victory in a metropolitan country like Venezuela; and the highly populated states of Zulia, Carabobo and Miranda, of paramount importance because they hold the industrial poles and the oil basin of the Maracaibo Lake. In total, these states represent 48,6% of the Venezuelan population. After the elections, Chávez designated a vice-president for the city of Caracas, effectively stripping all competence and funding from the elected Mayor (El Universal, «Jacqueline Farías es la Jefa de Gobierno del Distrito Capital,» 19 de April de 2009).

certain aspects of this relationship were heightened and predominant at different moments in the evolution of his presidency. As an extension of the mediated experience of the Bolivarian subjects and a constant point of contact between citizens and their representative, *Aló Presidente* had offered access to the political realm as well as given way to techniques of governance of Chávez's political regime. Part of the claim was that the show facilitated the articulation of a Bolivarian identity, first constructed around the notion of participation and then perceived as an acquired series of values and behaviours internalised by the Bolivarian subjects. The progression of this articulation meant that viewers of the show had identified themselves with the group, performing as a public on the set of *Aló Presidente*. It also meant that, presented with a threatening "other", the public had been interpellated according to a set of values that hegemonised their understanding of the political process in place. It is important to note that Chávez's privileged position as convenor of this hegemonic space had reduced significantly the articulation of discourses that did not fit the Bolivarian norms. As seen in previous sections, contributions from opposition members as well as criticisms of the regime were excluded from the set of the show, and the rhetoric employed when addressing the opposition had been of accusations, dismissals, and insults. Although many aspects of *Aló Presidente* had resembled the confessional tone of daytime talk shows in its first years, participants rarely interacted with each other, focusing all communication on the host and his panellists. Additionally, as was observed, many contributions to the show concerned people's everyday life dilemmas and needs. In the continuous articulation of an equivalential chain, the performance of participation through testimonials of hardships or support for the regime had brought a sense of communal identity among members of the audience.

At this point, it is important to stress that participants' modes of address on *Aló Presidente* had become fully performative of the self-managed Bolivarian citizen, reinforcing with every phone call or vox pop the full support of the audience to the host of the show. Ever since the early stages of *Aló Presidente*, participants would celebrate Chávez's proposals and share words of encouragement and affect with him. However, contributions in the later years of the show had been strictly reduced to "agenda-seeking" questions (Wood 2001), and these reflected an emotional attachment to the host/star as well as deference to the decision-making host/political representative. More than an "emotional public sphere" (Livingstone & Lunt 1994), *Aló Presidente* had lost its participatory nature in favour of the carefully controlled and managed performance (Haarman 1999, Woods 2001) of a discussion between the

president and the electorate. This resonates with what Horton and Wohl call the “simulacrum of conversational give and take” that they call “para-social interactions” (Horton & Wohl 1956). Somewhat embedded in the relationship between Chávez and the electorate, on *Aló Presidente* the audience “responds with something more than mere running observation; it is, as it were, subtly insinuated into the program’s action and internal social relationships and, by dint of this kind of staging, is ambiguously transformed into a group which observes and participates in the show by turns” (Ibid).

Having been significantly reduced, participant interventions on the show only served as a responsive chorus for Chávez’s announcements. Interactions with the audience became strictly limited to interviews conducted by Chávez over the phone or in live two-ways where selected participants were asked leading questions on topics related to the agenda of the day. In the following excerpt, Chávez interviews a nurse during a live two-way from a medical centre. As can be observed, far from fulfilling a participatory purpose, the conversation is aimed at introducing the viewership to the newly inaugurated centre by staging an informal conversation between the host and a member of the public.

President Chávez: What’s your name? Where are you from? Tell us everything, what are you doing there?

Cuban Doctor Caridad Pestana Morales: From Pinar del Rio in Cuba<sup>50</sup>.

President Chávez: Pinar del Rio...

Audience: [applause]

President Chávez: All right! And how long have you been in Venezuela?

Cuban Doctor Caridad Pestana Morales: I have been in Venezuela for three years.

President Chávez: Three years in Venezuela. And how is your family? Do you have children? How are they doing in Pinar del Rio?

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<sup>50</sup> As part of a trade agreement with Venezuela, Cuba sent personnel for the Bolivarian missions in exchange for preferential oil rates. For more information see Richard Gott, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2011): 312-315

Cuban Doctor Caridad Pestana Morales: My family is doing fine, I have a 13-year-old son, he's OK, he's on holidays at the moment. I am getting ready to go to Cuba soon, I will be teaching at the Latin American School for Medical Training there.

President Chávez: Thank you very much, Doctor, God bless you, your son, and everyone in Cuba. And God bless Cuba forever. (Episode 289 2007)

Another important characteristic of the show was the fact that Chávez would design new guidelines for the *Misiones*, allocate budgets, receive requests -and instruct his Cabinet on how to satisfy them- on the air. These interactions were reminiscent of talk show giveaways such as those witnessed on *Oprah*, or makeover programmes like *Extreme Makeover House Edition* in the US. In the former, selected audiences often receive cars, holidays, and all sorts of sponsored products, in what appears to be a spree of generosity stemming from the host (Shattuc 1997). In the latter, carefully selected families that cannot provide for themselves get help rebuilding their houses, generally portrayed as being in pitiful condition (Murray & Ouellette (eds.) 2009, p. 318). In the following excerpt, Chávez announces the allocation of 135 social houses. During a live two-way, he chats to one of the beneficiaries about the apartment she will be receiving shortly, and enquires about the different infrastructures of the newly built estate.

President Chávez: Today we'll be handing apartments to 135 families.

(...)

President Chávez: Which one is your apartment? Tell me.

Recipient of social housing, Doria: I only know that it's in building 5, ground floor, apartment 4.

President Chávez: This one here. You get the garden one (...) Imagine your daughter playing there. And we're not going to charge you any deposits, nothing, nothing, this will be financed from 20 up to 100 per cent, depending on the family income (...)

President Chávez: Have you seen the Communal Centre as well?

Recipient of social housing, Doria: Yes, we've seen it. We've been visiting everything.

President Chávez: What do you think? Give me your opinion.

Recipient of social housing, Doria: It's beautiful President, really, if it wasn't for you or for this government...

President Chávez: Doria, first I'd say [thanks to] God.

Recipient of social housing, Doria: Of course, first God (...) (Episode 370 2011)

To Murray and Ouellette, these programmes portray participants as “defined by their problems”, emphasizing their “reliance on outside institutions to repair [their] personal problems” (Murray & Ouellette (eds.) 2009, p. 317). In the context of a television show involving the president of the country, the fact that audience participants that appear as “passive” and “grateful” (Sender 2005, p. 137) to receive housing or medical care on the air carries an extra dimension of political significance. Far from exerting an active role in their interactions with political representatives, citizens are portrayed as beneficiaries of governmental handouts. In an analysis of the system of *Misiones* in Venezuela, Gómez Sánchez (2006) argues that welfare measures during Chávez's administration had served as a way to legitimise political figures. In her account, the Bolivarian missions were aimed at replacing former institutions connected to the Punto Fijo era. As such, matters of efficiency, she argues, were “positively subordinated” to the dominant interests of the political power. Seen in this light, *Aló Presidente* had become a weekly stage for the interplay between welfare distribution and “passive” recipients who would frequently phone the show or use their airtime as vox-pop interviewees to ask for favours and help with their everyday life problems. With this dynamic in place, the role of Hugo Chávez on the show, as well as in the Bolivarian Revolution, had been elevated to a benevolent figure whose apparent decision-making power met no limits and solely relied on his discretionary will.

More and more, the articulation of the Bolivarian public borrowed narratives from the familiar genres of daytime television, establishing connections between participants who benefitted from similar treatment and stressing the role of the host in convening the activities on the set. Interestingly, in spite of the wide array of possibilities that came with the hybrid



nature of the show, it was the primordial place of Hugo Chávez that had taken priority over other dynamics that had originally been developed on *Aló Presidente*. Having slowly been filtered over the years, the spaces for participation had been reduced to a very scripted minimum, and the portrayal of Chávez as a benevolent figure had permeated the production of the show. In this somewhat ‘natural’ evolution of the dynamic of the show, the relationship between the anchor and the audience seemed articulated by the recipients. As can be seen through their reactions, the public of *Aló Presidente* performed primarily a supportive role, fulfilling their duties as a cheering audience and encouraging Chávez’s performance as the central character of the programme. Indeed, on the show, Chávez rhetoric always highlighted the fact that he was but the mouthpiece of the people, a humble servant of the Bolivarian people’s will. In this sense, the show reinforced the identification of the audience with the talk show host but also the legitimacy of Chávez’s position as a decision-making political leader. And part of this legitimacy was heightened by the fact that *Aló Presidente* was broadcast live.

### *Reducing Pluralism*

#### *United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)*

On the political front, in addition to centralising powers and passing legislation aimed at bypassing middle levels potentially lead by the opposition, Chávez had introduced a series of measures that would reduce pluralism inside the Bolivarian faction. On 15 December 2007, 13 days after his re-election, Hugo Chávez called for the dissolution of all political parties affiliated to the government into one united socialist party of Venezuela (PSUV). He was clear in his intention to exclude from government any party that would not join the PSUV and exhorted several former allies to step away from the new party. The PSUV was supposed to follow a participatory model. Its structure, reflecting the revolutionary ranks, would favour participation over hierarchies and establish networks of “battalions” created in a principle of subsidiarity, favouring the smallest possible geographic circumscriptions. But, according to Medero, despite its horizontal claim and membership of 5.7 million, the party relied heavily on the leadership figure of Hugo Chávez. This had been seen during the lead up to the referendum of 2007 when, for health reasons, Chávez had been absent for some time. “The system of battalions, socialist circumscriptions, spokespersons, assemblies did not manage to transmit the successes of Hugo Chávez’s administration (...) the PSUV was not able to

overcome Chávez's absence during the campaign. This demonstrates that the strength of Chavism resides in his leader (Medero Sánchez 2009, p. 43)".

The decision to merge all parties into one had reflected Chávez's desire to harmonise the heterogeneous ideologies and numerous crises and divisions that had undermined the Chavist ranks<sup>51</sup>. Chávez had declared when announcing his project of a united socialist party, "I want to govern with one party (...) I have been wasting my time with the different debates about maintaining identities in the coalition (...) I was listening to the television and hearing some say "our party won x votes, the other got z...I will be honest here, these votes belong to Chávez! These votes don't belong to any party! (...)" (Chávez 2006).

Rivas argues: "The PSUV is a forced unity among an archipelago of ideas, visions and leaderships around the figure of Chávez with a clear monolithic and exclusive vision in which criticism, doubt, and dissidence are not allowed" (Rivas Leone 2012, p. 29). And, since the creation of the PSUV, *Aló Presidente* also became a platform for the announcement of party lines and reinforcement of Chávez's leadership.

President Chávez (addressing the vice-presidents of the PSUV): Remember that the party is now entering a new dynamic; you cannot let it be caught by bureaucracy, sectarianism, etc. (...) [Follow] the five strategic aims. (...) Communication, communication, and more communication. That is another strategic aim: a platform for agitation, propaganda. It has to be done every day. Every Minister, every entity must have a team for this. Spread [the word] (Episode 373 2011)

President Chávez: On Friday, the new phase of the PSUV will take off. This is the deployment of the Bolivarian patrols. I have designated the vice-presidents of the Socialist Party for the South (...) West (...) East (...) Centre (...) North (...) The opposition is complaining about the fact that I am nominating vice-presidents [but] this is a year of great battles and we are deploying our forces. (Episode 376 2012)

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<sup>51</sup> For further information on this topic see Rickard Lalander, «El contexto histórico del chavismo y los partidos políticos venezolanos de la izquierda,» *Reflexión Política* (Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga) 10, no. 19 (2008): 36-48.

### *Trade Unions*

In a similar way, Trade Unions in Venezuela had been facing confusing times. The Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV), founded in 1936, lost a great deal of its influence after participating in the national strike that paralysed the Venezuelan economy from December 2002 to February 2003. And, after being associated to the opposition, the CTV had to face the creation of the pro-Chávez National Workers Unions (UNETE). According to Shapiro, the government had resorted to political tactics in order to raise membership for UNETE. The strategy had ranged from calling a referendum for the “reorganisation” of the CTV aiming at reshuffling the leadership, to freezing collective agreements negotiated with the CTV, calling for referendums in the middle of negotiations, and using legal incongruities to slow internal election processes for over a thousand unions (Shapiro 2007, Human Rights Watch 2008).

Additionally, and despite the government’s success in increasing the membership rate of UNETE, internal factions criticised the lack of autonomy they were granted. The tension increased in 2007 when Chávez called for UNETE to join the PSUV. At the time, Chávez had declared: “unions that won’t join the party, that want to be independent, are in fact blackmailers...they are insipid” (Chávez in Tejero Puntos 2009). The left-wing members of the UNT made it clear that they wanted to ensure its autonomy from the government (Debbaut 2007).

In 2008, Human Rights Watch declared that trade union regulation fell under the jurisdiction of the National Electoral Council (CNE) and failed to meet international standards in labour law (Human Rights Watch 2008). In addition, Hugo Chávez personally took measures that undermined the legal protection and legitimacy of trade unions, making him an actor in labour regulations. The main example dates to the national strike of 2002 and 2003 when, going against the immunity of trade unionists in case of a strike, Chávez dismissed over 18,000 PDVSA workers<sup>52</sup>. In one of the most famous interventions of the show, Chávez had announced the dismissal of top executive members of the oil company, enouncing their full names and offices. To add a dose of sensationalism to the scene, the President asked to be handed a whistle so that he could blow the whistle against members of the private sector in

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<sup>52</sup> For an analysis of the strike and its consequences, see Luis Lander, «La insurrección de los gerentes: PDVSA y el gobierno de Chávez,» *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 10, no. 2 (2004): 13-32.10

the same way that referees sign offside players. Humour and irony are common strategies in the talk show genre. They serve as rhetorical techniques in a process of shadow boxing of “winners” and “losers” (Löffler 1984) and as ways to opening the text for “polysemous” interpretations (Fiske 1987, p. 40). In a constant command of discursive strategies, irony, jokes, and comedic displays are aimed at positioning the interviewee in a relationship of submission with regards to the interviewer (Hoffmannová & Čmejrková 2012). The following excerpt has become one of the most notorious interventions of Hugo Chávez on *Aló Presidente*. The episode, from an earlier programme, illustrates Chávez’s use of humour in his performance of authority, with the added effect that he actually had the power to decide people’s fates.

President Chávez: Is there a whistle anywhere around here? (...) The elite [members] of PDVSA stepped over the line. We have tried to dialogue, to negotiate, to show good intentions, but they are going too far and I have decided to dismiss them. I announce the dismissal of the following people: Eddy Ramírez, Managing Director of Palmaven until today, you’re out [whistle blow](...) Mr. Juan Fernández, Manager of Planning and Finance Control, thank you for your services, you are fired from Petróleos de Venezuela (...) These people have been sabotaging a company that belongs to all Venezuelans. You are out! [The list goes on until the 7<sup>th</sup> person] (...) My instructions are clear: from now on, any member of PDVSA calling for the strike will be automatically fired from the [Venezuelan] oil industry (...) Enough! (Episode 101 2002)

Other cases include the announcement of new minimum wage and pension increases that were decided unilaterally by the president and did not involve the input or participation of organised labour. According to Shapiro, this undermined the value of collective bargaining and the legitimacy of trade unions, and enhanced the image of Chávez as sole decisionmaker (Shapiro 2007, pp. 22-23). Hugo Chávez had started to announce new decrees on the show, finalising and signing pending legislation. Performing his decision-making on the set of the show, he made a habit of concluding episodes in a way that reminded his audience that he was the head of the state,

President Chávez: Before [the end of the episode] I need to sign this decree because I left it so I could sign it right here. This decree was agreed a few weeks

ago but it had not been published because I had not signed it yet. Now it can be executed (...) We have decided to increase the minimum wage by 25% (...) This is justice for our workers (...) Have this decree published in the [Venezuelan] Official Gazette, and execute a salary increase of 25% as of 1 March please. (Episode 352 2010)

### *Economic Power (FONDEN)*

The reach of Chávez's authority had grown exponentially. In terms of financial management, Hugo Chávez seemed to hold the strings of an infinite purse. He had created, through presidential decrees, a Development Bank (BANDES) in 2001, and a Development Fund (FONDEN) in 2005. Both had been financed by the Central Bank and *Petróleos de Venezuela* and were under direct command of the President himself. Fonden was created to finance social programmes, among which the Bolivarian Missions. This afforded the presidential budgets of over 6 billion dollars per year to spend to his discretion, for the fund never underwent any legal supervision or independent review. On this matter Coronel argued, "the truth is that the money of this fund has turned into a parallel budget and has been used without the need for transparency or legislative approval" (Coronel 2006, p. 4). And, as seen with previous excerpts, Chávez would often display his ability to manage the funds freely during interventions on the show.

There are other instances in which Chávez's management of the Venezuelan economy reflected a tendency to centralise the monetary and financial institutions. One example is how the Central Bank was progressively stripped of its competences. In 2005, the National Assembly agreed to pass new legislation allowing the Government to access what was defined "excesses in the reserves". In addition, a Treasure Bank was established that same year, taking the Central Bank's competences in matters of taxes and custom revenues. The consequences were a spike in liquidity and in inflation rates. For Coronel, "the monetary policy of Hugo Chávez is based on progressive controls: control over the type of exchange rate; control over the use of public funds, parallel budgets, and complete control over the economy" (Rojas in Coronel 2006, p. 5). Chávez attempted to increase this control with the modification of art. 156, 236 and 321 in the Constitutional reform. The proposal included "the regulation of the Central Bank, monetary system, currency exchange, financial system and capital market, emission and minting of currency" ; the "regulation of the monetary

policy”, and the power to handle the international reserves (Guerra 2008, p. 469). Hugo Chávez had managed to gain enormous financial liberties, and he often enacted this power on the set of the show. These interventions had the effect of presenting a powerful leader who had the financial backup to act on his decisions, there were very little obstacles to the reach of Chávez’s power.

President Chávez: I want to sign these documents before I go (...) these are funds for Barrio Adentro II. Five hundred and fourteen million (Bs) to Barrio Adentro II. Alright, let’s sign this. It is for the Governor, the Mayor [of Caracas] for the big hospitals that we are restructuring. These funds will go to Fondo Miranda<sup>53</sup> for free, good quality healthcare (...) it amounts to almost US\$ 500 million [Chávez signs the cheque] (Episode 352 2010)

The budget for the Presidency for 2010 increased by 638 per cent with regards to the previous year, allocating \$1.545 million for the discretionary expenses of the president. Part of this budget was aimed at subsidizing social *misiones* and dealing with the requests addressed directly to the president. Effectively, Hugo Chávez disposed of a charitable purse that allowed him to respond to individual requests whenever the bureaucracy had failed. In this light, the image that he portrayed was that of a wealthy philanthropist, directly linking social welfare to his own making (Primera 2009). Additionally, the way Chávez disposed of his budget required no transparency. Critics of the government expressed concern over the fact that Chávez had not provided the trimestrial and annual reviews of the use of Fonden’s budget since 2008 (El Universal 2012); and that the new reforms of the organic laws about the Fondo Simón Bolívar and of the Administración Financiera del Sector Público effectively provide the President with the power to decide and emit public debt (Tal Cual Digital 2012). Chávez announced during the same ceremony the creation of FONDEN:

President Chávez: With this new law, everything above 29 million. “Ka-ching”.  
Come to daddy.

Audience: laughter

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<sup>53</sup> Fondo Miranda works under the umbrella of FONDEN

President Chávez: It will go straight to FONDEN. That will be around 7 billion. Giordani [Minister for Energy], am I right? Around US\$ 7 billion, that is my account, the account I have. Then we will figure it out together but this is the sum I have in my notes (...) these exceeding US\$ 7 billion in the reserves are now to be sent to FONDEN in order to accelerate the social and economic parts of the Revolution. (Ibid)

### *Nationalisations*

Having by now reduced resistance at all levels of power, Chávez announced a second wave of nationalisations and expropriations that superseded what had until then been the economic pillar for the Bolivarian project: the oil industry. With the path to socialism came the need to create a “social production model”, and the private sector underwent a hail of nationalisations that was perceived as a political vendetta<sup>54</sup>. With the backup of the fast-track powers of 2007, Chávez declared: “all that was privatised will be nationalised. Let’s regain the social property of strategic means of production” (Chávez in Chirinos 2007)<sup>55</sup>. Among the most important state acquisitions was EDC (Electricidad de Caracas), Banco de Venezuela, the oil reserves of the Orenoco strip, and the telecommunications company CANTV (Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos de Venezuela).

President Chávez: We have already announced the nationalisation of basic industries such as CANTV, EDC, and a series of private companies (...) Now, I want to announce the following -[Minister for Planning] Jorge Giordani, and [Minister for Energy] Rafael Ramírez, I want you to take note- I am announcing the creation of the Venezuelan Electrical Corporation (...) that will encompass all the electrical companies that we are recovering. (Episode 283 2007)

During the following years, Chávez also nationalised ports, hotels, universities, agro-industry, residential developments, and supermarket chains (Colmenares 2012). But, as the

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<sup>54</sup> About the Argentinean steel company SIDOR, Chávez had originally declared that he would not nationalize it, for it represented an example of “good capitalism”, giving the impression that nationalisations were indeed a punishment for those companies that did not want to “behave”.

<sup>55</sup> For an exhaustive recapitulation of all nationalisations since 2007, see Martha Colmenares, «Expropiaciones de Venezuela. Amplio reportaje.» *www.marthacolmenares.com*, 26 January 2012, <http://www.marthacolmenares.com/2011/01/09/expropiaciones-en-venezuela-amplio-reportaje/> (accessed 01 October 2012).

following example demonstrates, the power of expropriation of the President seemed limitless, and any area deemed important for the Bolivarian project fell under the all-encompassing label of “strategic means of production”. The interesting aspect of this is that Chávez’s authority to expropriate was presented as absolute. By now used to a discourse that articulated the Bolivarian identity against capitalism, opposition parties, and the US “empire”, the president would speak on behalf of the Bolivarian public, emphasising his role as representative of their needs.

President Chávez: Let’s expropriate six urban developments. These come mainly from the areas of the middle class, and [the contractors are] urban vultures. Urban developers [are] private companies that exploit the middle class because these contractors don’t build houses for the people, the poor, the humblest part of the population that earn the lowest salaries. No, they always build expensive houses for the middle class. And they exploit the middle class [sic] (...) We are expropriating six urban developments in order to finalize the construction and allocate the apartments to those who have been waiting for them (...) The middle class should feel protected by the Bolivarian project, and this is an example of this (...) (Episode 366 2010)

The biggest series of nationalisations regarded land ownership. Chávez had started this trend in 2002 with the presidential decree on “expropriation in the name of public or social utility”<sup>56</sup>, that entitled the State to take possession of any activity considered important for the interest of society (art.3). This measure was principally aimed at landowners and agricultural exploitations resulting in thousands of acres being expropriated on charges of “idleness”.

President Chávez: I will be announcing a new nationalisation in a few minutes. Bourgeoisie: get ready, for I am going to be announcing a new nationalisation. Pay attention to the drums (...) [3 hours later] I am reading the following recommendation from the Ministry for Oil and Energy: “We suggest to the President Commander Hugo Chávez, to authorize [Chávez lifts a pen and shows it to the audience], authorize (sic) the forced acquisition of (...) Venoco Industries Ltd., and any company related to Venoco Industries (...). I authorise it;

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<sup>56</sup> *Ley de expropiación*, (10 July 2012)  
<http://www.gobiernoonlinea.ve/legislacion-view/sharedfiles/103.pdf>



have Venoco expropriated! [Chávez signs the decree]. The minister vice-president Rafael Ramírez will be in charge of this. (Episode 365 2010)

And, similarly, small businesses were part of the series of expropriations announced on his Sunday show, thus taking by surprise entrepreneurs and small landowners. The seemingly spontaneous decisions were announced in the spur of the moment, in front of an acquiescing Presidential team.

President Chávez: This plaza is looking very good, very good. But we need to pay attention to detail here, Jorge [mayor of the municipality]. Detail; we need to add details to this plaza; but it is a nice place (...) That building for instance used to be a theatre, and it is now in the hands of the government, right?

Mayor of municipality Libertador, Jorge Rodríguez: Yes, it is in the hands of the government.

President Chávez: What about that building?

Mayor of municipality Libertador, Jorge Rodríguez: That building is owned by a private company. There is a jewellery store there.

President Chávez: Have it expropriated!

[This Q&A is repeated for several buildings]

President Chávez: Bolivar lived in that little house when he was a newlywed. Expropriate those shops! This is the heart of Caracas, we need to transform this into the great historical centre it is (...) (Episode 351 2010)

### *From Centralisation to Legitimacy*

The abovementioned excerpts of *Aló Presidente* have presented a series of legislations and events that lead to the absolute centralisation of power in the hands of Hugo Chávez. They have illustrated how the show continued to serve as a direct channel between Chávez and the Bolivarian public, highlighting how the role of the president had become prioritised over audience participation and how the rhetoric on the show progressively reinforced his authority and decision-making power. The question that arises from this observation regards the surprising platform that used to broadcast what was considered in many circles as a breach to

democracy. In spite of his lay rhetoric and charismatic abilities as a host, the fact that the president of Venezuela chose to announce on the air measures that undoubtedly reduced political pluralism and facilitated a stronghold of power in the hands of the Executive raises curiosity. It can be argued that the very fact that these decisions were broadcast on live television was a deliberate choice of the president's communication strategy. None of the decrees, measures, or decisions announced on the show required such a channel of communication for their legal legitimacy. *Aló Presidente* was not the Official Gazette, nor a Parliamentary tribune. On the contrary, common sense would suggest that such attacks on the Constitutional separation of powers of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela should perhaps be made in the highest possible secrecy, behind closed doors. Instead, Hugo Chávez chose the stage of his live Sunday show to sign pending legislation and display his authority in the most widespread medium of all.

The following part of this chapter will look into this question in more detail and argue that the reason why Hugo Chávez made the strategic choice to announce the centralisation of his powers in front of live television cameras lied in the fact that the source of his legitimacy was popular support. Indeed, despite rhetorical allegiance to democratic values, members of the Bolivarian movement pledged support to the leader of a historical political programme that they saw as a rupture with the past institutions of the Punto Fijo era. Hugo Chávez, in his position as guide and main figure of the Bolivarian Revolution, did not partake in a political scenario that followed the usual practices of liberal democracies. Instead, he embodied the political system that he was building, christening the project with his own name and conferring the title of "Chavista" to his supporters. In this sense, Chávez was not seen as a representative of the state, he embodied the revolutionary state.

### *Populism as Legitimacy*

In order to understand the legitimacy of Hugo Chávez, it is crucial to leave aside notions of governance, separation of powers, and pluralism, and examine the special place of the figure of Hugo Chávez in the Bolivarian Revolution. An ontological shift is necessary in order to view Hugo Chávez not as the President of Venezuela, or as the conductor of a television programme, but as the leader figure of a populist movement and of a revolutionary project. Once the distinction is made, the question is no longer to understand how the President of Venezuela maintained his popularity in spite of his disrespect of the Constitutional

foundations from which his very appointment stemmed but to understand how Hugo Chávez's legitimacy was linked to his performance as a populist leader.

President Chávez: Marta [Harnecker] named her book "Hugo Chávez: one man, one people". But it is more a people than a man, really, a people. What I see here is a people and a humble man, a man assuming his responsibility in a specific moment, due to circumstances. What is big here is not Chávez; it's the people. Paraphrasing our father Simón Bolívar, I am a piece of straw that got swept by the hurricane of the people. (Episode 125 2002)

As previously noted, the conditions under which Chávez arrived in power in 1999 resulted from the tensions of the *Caracazo* and the attempted coup against the established bipartisan system of the pact of Punto Fijo. It is in this context that Chávez ran as the leader of a movement opposed to what was regarded as elitist party politics. The role that Hugo Chávez played in articulating the demands and frustrations of Venezuelans affected by the status quo of the oil parties gave him a unique position as the key figure and embodiment of the movement. Not only had he been a fierce opponent of the establishment, but he also embraced the leadership of a movement towards a 'peaceful revolution', the future chapter of Venezuela's history. It is Chavez's capacity to understand the general frustration of the time and to present himself as a member of the public that provided him with the legitimacy of a popular leader. If seen through this lens, Chavez's victory in the elections of 1999 reflect the victory of a populist movement that resisted the established political system and entrusted their leader with the power to change it. Based on Ernesto Laclau's famous work "On Populist Reason" (Laclau 2005), the election of Hugo Chávez can be seen as the result of a populist movement of resistance against the political system in place.

Following Laclau and Mouffe's logic when introducing the "myths" that populate the discourse of politics, the audience as a collective identity, or *people*, exists only through the acceptance of certain symbols as constitutive of the society they live in. In his sense, identification is not only a means of persuading the audience but, above all, the very process through which social identities are formed. They argue that when interpellating a "nation", the discourse that is being articulated attempts to hegemonise the field by providing a clear-cut narrative that encompasses a series of floating signifiers. In order for the audience to be persuaded of its subject position, it needs to acknowledge its own existence in the discourse.

As introduced in greater detail in Chapter 3, Laclau's notion of populism is closely associated with the realm of politics. Described as: "putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent – i.e. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand" (Laclau 2005, p.47), Laclau argues that populism "is the same as politics" (Ibid). Contrary to a "democratic subject", Laclau argues, the particular demands of different individuals need to be aggregated into an equivalential chain to reduce their diversity. A subject whose demands are defined according to this logic is called a "popular subject". It is in the degree of systemic satisfaction of individual demands that the equivalential chains of the populist group are developed. This also implies that an antagonistic relationship is necessary in defining the group against the 'other' and that a series of chains of equivalence among members of the group is necessary for the articulation of the common identity.

As has been argued when describing the articulation of the Bolivarian identity at the beginning of the show, the aggregation of demands of empty signifiers may extend to a point of identification of the community at large. In this case, the group in its totality is encompassed in the notion of the "people". The result is a tense relationship in which popular subjects claim the universality of their demand. The definition of the "people" in Venezuela followed an antagonistic relationship between a series of signifiers associated with the followers of the Bolivarian doctrine against those who were dismissed as "oligarchs", "antipatriotic", and "traitors" by the movement. The rhetoric of the Bolivarian apparatus reflected the necessity to demarcate its members from the common enemies, which helped defining and reinforcing this essential "common" identity.

President Chávez: The enemies of the Revolution are everywhere and they will try to hit us from the inside. They will always try to weaken us, to divide us.  
(Episode 368 2011)

Laclau suggests that the homogenisation process reaches its limits when all demands have been reduced to the smallest common denominator. At that point, a single individual carries out the articulation of all demands and the name of the leader becomes the signifier of the general will. The leader embodies the ultimate unification of active subjects that depart from a logic of difference and the symbols employed to create a universal representation are generally empty signifiers.

[Empty signifiers'] function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content. At the limit, this process reaches a point where the homogeneizing function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader. (Laclau 2005, p. 100)

In the context of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution, it was argued that his election was the reflection of a logic of equivalence during which a large majority of Venezuelans aggregated their dissatisfaction against the Punto Fijo regimes and acknowledged Chávez as the legitimate representative of their demands. Populism as understood by Laclau explains the election of Hugo Chávez as the legitimate embodiment of a populist movement dissatisfied with the bipartisan system of Punto Fijo, and the allegiance to the figure of the leader that has been described in the literature (Bosoer and Cortés 2001, Leiras 2008).

When President Hugo Chávez won the elections in 1998 he stood practically alone; he was the only leader putting forward a project that was an alternative to neo-liberalism. (Harnecker 2007, p. 30)

Nevertheless, the case that has been studied took place after the election of Hugo Chávez and the analysis has highlighted clear stages of public formation during the evolution of *Aló Presidente*, reinforcing the logics of equivalence between supporters of the regime and the legacies of Simón Bolívar and Jesus Christ, as well as the continuous efforts to define antagonistic "others". What has been observed is that, after his election, Chávez continued to articulate the role of the leader of a popular movement during the entire duration of his mandates. After he won the elections as an independent candidate in 1999, Hugo Chávez promised to break away from the corrupt ways of the traditional parties. He drew a clear demarcation from the institutions that he inherited by drafting a new Constitution and executing a series of institutional transformations (such as eliminating the second Chamber of Parliament and renaming the country), but the polarising discourse with regards to members of the opposition reflected a vocabulary reminiscent of the antagonistic relationship from which the popular movement had originally stemmed.

The key to understanding Hugo Chávez's behaviour in front of the television cameras is thus not to observe him as the President of Venezuela but as the leader of the popular movement that he embodied, namely "Chavismo".

Chavismo is a paradigmatic populist movement whose leader and many of its followers share an antagonistic outlook that divides and polarizes Venezuelan society. Populism, moreover, is a much deeper and more consistent attribute of Chavismo than is the movement's increasingly leftist ideology. (Hawkins 2010, p. 21)

This relates back to the question of institutionalism asked in Chapter 5 when considering the role of *Aló Presidente* as a space for deliberation under the newly created "participatory democracy" in Venezuela. At the time, it had been argued that, under the new Constitution, participatory and representative institutions had been at odds, questioning the legitimacy of traditional powers and seeing the role of the Hugo Chávez as both the president of a liberal democracy and as moderator of a participatory space. Borrowing from Lefort's work on the "empty place" of power in democracies, Panizza (2005) offers an interesting note on how populism might expose the "blind spots" of liberal democracies. One of the consequences of the homogenisation of demands from the group is the claim to universality. As the enactment of the will of the people, the hegemonic discourse of populism no longer recognises the contingency of its articulation. In other words, in the name of popular sovereignty, the group ignores that political power is always only "provisionally occupied". That is why, argues Panizza, "taken to the extreme populism descends into totalitarianism" (Panizza 2005, p. 29). This connects to the idea that if populism implies an antagonistic frontier, it is also a form of politics that requires a constant revolution as well as the continuous construction of an enemy. The fact that the political project that has been articulated as the 'Bolivarian Revolution' in Venezuela suggests that this might be the case, if not permanently, at least during Chávez's administration and on the discourse that was being articulated on *Aló Presidente*. This also implies that, beyond the traditional duties of the Executive power in liberal democracies, the role of the *Presidente* was to secure the advancement of the revolution.

### *The Role of the Leader*

As posited by Laclau, the limit of the popular movement, or when the aggregated requests are homogenised to a point where there is no difference between the subjects' individual needs, comes when the figure of the leader becomes the embodiment of all demands. In this position, all dissatisfactions are carried out by one person that acts in the name of "the people". This passing of power from the group to the leader is what Bourdieu calls an "act of delegation". According to Bourdieu, the *delegate* is in a "metonymic relation with the group; he is part of the group and can function as a sign in place of the totality of the group" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 207). In certain cases the "act of symbolization through which the spokesperson is constituted, the constitution of the 'movement', happens at the same time as the constituting of the group" (Ibid). From this perspective, the spokesperson must identify himself with the group in order to appropriate the authority delegated by the group. In this context, Bourdieu develops the notion of symbolic power, or a form of violence granted with the complicity of the group. Quoting Nietzsche, he argues that the "delegate performs a transformation of himself into something holy (...) and resorts to the strategy of 'impersonal duty'" (Ibid, p. 210).

Delegates base universal values on themselves, appropriate values, 'requisition morality', and thus monopolize the notions of God, Truth, Wisdom, People, Message, Freedom, etc. They make them synonyms. What of? Of themselves. 'I am the truth'. They become, as Nietzsche says, 'the measure of all things'. (Ibid, p. 211)

By incarnating the "sacred", the delegate becomes the "truth". This is what Bourdieu calls the "oracle effect", or the effect through which the spokesperson transcends the nature of an ordinary into a "moral person" (Ibid, p. 211). In an act of absolute devotion to the group, the spokesperson abolishes his/her individuality to become the group. The transformation allows him to become nothing but the delegate of the people, in this case the delegate of the Venezuelan people.

Believe me, I here, I do not feel like a President, I am not here as a President, it has happened that I am President, but I am not the President, I am Hugo, I am not the President. I just happen to be fulfilling the role like any other role on a team: the goalkeeper, the striker, the pitcher, the catcher,...(Chavez in Reyerez 2009, p.

105).

At this point, the people no longer represent individual realities, their subjectivities have merged entirely into the spokesperson. They identify with the discourse of the delegate and authorise him to speak on their behalf. The actions performed by the delegate thus become full extensions of the collective will and the collectivity recognises the delegate's authority on them. This is what Bourdieu calls "recognised constraint", or the delegated right to be commanded (Bourdieu 1991, p. 212). The group has, therefore, no choice but to obey, in its own name. Examples of this identification with Hugo Chávez can be found in slogans such as "with Chávez, the people rule", and the sported "I am Chávez" motto worn in support for Chávez's absence to his Presidential inauguration on 10 January 2013.

Bourdieu adds an element of veracity to the delegate's actions. In his view, the oracle effect by which the delegate abandons his status as ordinary person and becomes the embodiment of the "truth" in the name of the "people" can only take place if the intention is genuine. He argues, "legitimate imposture succeeds only because the usurper is not a cynical calculator who consciously deceives the people, but someone who in all good faith takes himself to be something that he is not" (p. 214). In other words, the perceived nature of the delegate's intentions is key to his success in receiving and maintaining his legitimate status. Translated into televisual terms, the perceived "authenticity" of the performance is paramount for the audience's attachment to the host (Murray and Ouellette 2009, Tolson 2001, Coleman 2003, Dyer 1986). During one of his televised speeches aired months after the show had been put on hiatus because of the declining state of his health, Chávez had broken into tears and had prayed to Jesus to let him live. In an ultimate display of vulnerability, Chávez once again linked himself to the people of Venezuela and to the Bolivarian project.

Please Christ, don't take me yet. Give me your crown and I will bleed, give me your cross, give me one hundred crosses, but give me life, because I still have things to do for the people, for the fatherland. Don't take me yet. (Chávez in Shoichet and Quiñones 2012).

### *Charismatic Leadership*

A transformation thus took place in the hearts of the popular movement. From an aggregation of needs and the articulation of a common identity, the group slowly identified with the



delegate: the one member who, for diverse reasons, came to incarnate the ideals of change. From there, the shift from delegation to leadership was naturally performed, and the “moral person” slowly acquired unique features in the people’s minds. It is undeniable that, beyond his legitimacy as the embodiment of a popular movement and the excessive power that he managed to confer to his title, Hugo Chávez benefitted from particularly strong affective support from his followers. To the political dimension of his arrival as a viable candidate for change, it is important to value the emotional, paternalistic, and centralising elements of Chávez’s presidency. Members of the Chavist ranks continuously emphasised his “exceptional qualities” (Villaroel and Ledezma 2007, Arenas 2005) and often referred to him as a “messiah”, a “mortal God”, “father of Nation”, “Comandante”, etc.

Political activist Lina Ron (via phone): Comandante! My dear, my beloved, my respected, my honourable Comandante! How are you my Commander-in-chief?

President Chávez: My dear Lina, you might already know about this, but I am asking you to take part in this committee in order to start the first step of the Socialist Party: the promotion.

Political activist Lina Ron (via phone): Look my Comandante, first and foremost, above anything else, you command and I obey. It is an honour for me; there are no words to express what I feel at this moment. Those of us who accompany you faithfully -who love you- we feel extremely honoured, grateful, that you exist; that you live; that you are here. I was telling my children that I thank God for having allowed me to live in this era, in this moment; to be in your company and follow faithfully a man such as you. You might not have thought about it in this way, my Comandante, but in this historical moment of our fatherland, the most important thing we have -in addition to the Venezuelan people and Almighty God that has provided for us- is you (...) God chose Venezuela and he chose you. So, I reiterate: command, command (sic) and I will obey. (Episode 272 2007)

These characteristics attached to Hugo Chávez’s leader figure have been widely addressed in the literature. Works abound on the origins of the phenomenon and the role of caudillos in Latin America (Abreu Sojo 1998, Castro 2007, Laclau 1987); on Venezuela’s “populist”

tradition and its idiosyncrasies (Ramos Jiménez 2008, Ellner 2012); on the socio-economic context of Chávez's election and the consequences of the Punto Fijo era (Hernández 2008) (Petkoff 2005); and on the impact of discourse on Chávez's image (Erllich 2005, Reyez-Rodríguez 2009). Even in the partisan literature, the figure of *pater populi* is readily embraced, and members of the PSUV allude to Chávez as their "leader" on a daily basis.

We are facing an invincible leader supported even by deities (...) In his discourse, the speaker presents himself as a hero gifted with "know-how" and "willingness to do" that seeks power in order to save a society that is coming to his final stage. (Molero de Cabeza 2002, p. 97)

Villaroel and Ledezma (2005) conducted a group interview of Hugo Chávez's supporters based on Weber's notion of "charismatic authority" where participants were asked to describe their understanding of the figure of Hugo Chávez. They concluded that his followers perceived Chávez as holding extraordinary qualities and heroic traits including some that spoke of "mythical powers". According to Weber, charismatic leaders possess characteristics linked to heroic deeds or religious revelations and, although not reducible to rational explanations, the quality of charisma generally encompasses traits that are considered to be supernatural, or that inspire support. For Weber, the power of charisma lies in "the emotional conviction as to the importance and the value of a manifestation be it religious, ethical, artistic, scientific, political, or another kind" (Weber 1978, p. 1116). Highlighting the extraordinary qualities of the charismatic leader, it influences the inner dispositions of the followers and leads them to change their beliefs. However, the legitimacy of the charismatic leader cannot lie on outer structures or institutions, it must come from his intrinsic qualities. For that reason, charisma must be continuously performed, or "routinised" into everyday experience. This requires constant investment in the reinforcement of the charismatic attributes.

For Pitkin (1967), a political leader must become "a symbol-maker, making himself into an accepted leader through (...) a kind of activity to foster belief, loyalty, satisfaction with their leaders, among the people". She also argues "the emphasis (as with symbols) must fall on the nonrational or emotive elements in belief, and on the leadership techniques which exploit those elements" (Pitkin 1967, p. 107). In other words, leaders must perform a continuous articulation of the qualities that make them fit for the role. Never fixed, these articulations

occur on all discursive levels. And as has been argued alongside the analysis of *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez performed the role of the leader through constant re-articulations of the available means. This was achieved through the articulation of chains of equivalence between members of an audience, the connection between historical figures of the Venezuelan imaginary, the rhetorical reinforcement of his place in the Bolivarian project, and the appeal of a medium generally associated with entertainment and intimacy. In this sense, *Aló Presidente* supported the construction and maintenance of the leader figure, staging his performance and providing a space for a wide range of articulations. Being itself a “nexus of all sorts of talk-journalism, fiction, criticism, politics, research, Hollywood films” (Munson 1993, p. 7), the talk show genre offered the ideal space for the job. Hugo Chávez translated his initial appeal as a revolutionary leader into the more modern figure of the “celebrity politician” (Van Zoonen 2005) who, in addition to any political abilities, must navigate personal and professional, private and public with a sense of ease. Van Zoonen highlights this requirement: “[t]he politician appearing in these shows, therefore, must be able to switch easily from his position as a candidate, party leader, or minister to his status as a spouse, parent, or sports or movie fan” (p. 78). The leader thus gains legitimacy on the public arena due to his political abilities, but also in the intimate setting of people’s homes, through the television screen, and into the everyday lives of his followers.

The televisual performance of the celebrity politician thus involves a special relationship with his audience. Both members of the electorate and spectators to his performance, citizens also become fans. And in the case of *Aló Presidente*, every Sunday the president of the state turned to the cameras to share stories concerning his work, his family life, his introspective dilemmas, and his projects for the future. On *Aló Presidente*, the role of the audience, originally presented as the object of the show, was slowly relegated to that of a cheering crowd, supportive of his political work and admiring of his leadership qualities. In a slow process of public formation, the audience had been brought together around the common Bolivarian identity. At the time of the first episodes in 1999, Hugo Chávez had presented himself as a member of that group, repeatedly using the common pronoun “we” when addressing the audience on the show. But, as time went on, the public of *Aló Presidente* had been presented with a series of common enemies. These posed a threat to the fulfilment of the Bolivarian project and were therefore defined and discussed at length on the show. By then, the role of the Bolivarian group in the common political project required further definition.

Stepping out of their audience shoes, the group had also needed to perform on the political scene, taking part in numerous elections and referenda organised by the Revolution. Hugo Chávez thus acquired the role of an educator, of an enlightened member of the group in charge of providing guidelines and wisdom. Progressively, the group lost any claim to differences. Strongly articulated around a chain of equivalence that shut out any individual demands, it projected the common identity onto the leadership figure of Hugo Chávez himself. This process was reflected in the strong self-centred rhetoric of Hugo Chávez (Erllich 2005), the political measures he announced on the show, and the lack of interest that was paid to individual participants on *Aló Presidente*. It was also strengthened through performances of political authority and staged demonstrations of his decision-making powers. In this hybrid mix of television and politics, Chávez articulated a hegemonic discourse where his legitimacy was reinforced on Sunday live television in a permanent performance of his leadership of a populist movement.

### *Conclusion*

Hugo Chávez was indispensable for the Bolivarian process. His role was not only that of an ideologue, or of a qualified administrator, but it was presented as that of the only possible representative of the people, a benevolent shepherd without which the Bolivarian flock would lose its course. It is this connection between Hugo Chávez and his followers that was fuelled through the television programme. The last years of the show saw participation turn into demonstrations of support and admiration of a leader that was perceived as having restored the dignity of a marginalised people. And the impression of transparency provided by over 1600 hours of live talk reinforced the sense of adequacy of their president that Chavistas felt. As has been argued, the role fulfilled by *Aló Presidente* was not to facilitate a political debate, or to provide the structures for a participatory democracy, but to strengthen and preserve the bond between a leader and his followers.

Ignoring his official rank as President of a democratic Republic with the legal responsibilities that the title entailed, this relationship meant that the perception of Hugo Chávez's role was that of a benevolent leader, a leader that had acquired the legitimate stance as bearer of all truths, and that needed to reinforce this status on a regular basis. Hugo Chávez was the consequence of a long trajectory of political dissatisfaction in Venezuela and the leader of a populist movement aimed at transforming the old Punto Fijo regime. In this context, the

television programme did not serve a democratic, but a populist purpose: it bolstered the Bolivarian movement's legitimacy by highlighting its leader's authority.

President Hugo Chávez: They are talking about my “hyperleadership” (...) I respect your opinion (...) but come and discuss it with the people. Where do you see my hyperleadership? (...) I think I am doing the role that I am meant to do. I actually think that, on some matters, I should be even more involved. What does “hyper” mean? Something that is over dimensioned (...) and in that case am I supposed to lower my leadership? Ha! This is what the enemy wants! (Episode 333 2009)

This chapter has introduced the authoritarian trend that was exacerbated towards the latter period of the TV show *Aló Presidente*, from 2007 onwards. It has argued that, after his third re-election, Chávez increased the measures geared towards centralising and consolidating his power in front of the cameras of the show. These measures succeeded without a doubt in reinforcing his figure as the absolute leader figure of the Bolivarian process and in maintaining the degree of support that Hugo Chávez needed as head of the Venezuelan state. Proof of the success of this communication strategy can be found in the results of the last presidential elections on 7 October 2012 when, despite the controversy of his candidature, Hugo Chávez was re-elected for a fourth time.

Borrowing from Laclau and Mouffe, Hawkins argues that “populism is [an] aspect of culture that reflects basic, interrelated beliefs about history, the nature of self and the community, and the metaphysical. It is a worldview and is expressed as a discourse” (Hawkins 2010, p. 10). Seen in this light, it has been the purpose of this analysis to demonstrate that the role of *Aló Presidente* as a staple channel for communication was intrinsic to the very movement that brought Chavez to power, for it constituted the identity necessary to support the process. The structure of beliefs, historical interpretation, ideological values and political analyses shared by the populist movement called “Chavismo” originated in, and were expressed through, the discourse of *Aló Presidente*.

“I can’t imagine my life without Hugo Chávez. I can’t imagine my Sundays without *Aló Presidente*”<sup>57</sup>

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

After battling for nearly two years, with the love of the people, with the blessings of the peoples and the loyalty of comrades, you passed away. We take over your challenge, comandante Chávez (Maduro 2013).

It all ended on television. On 03 March 2013, Venezuela’s vice-president, Nicolás Maduro, announced the death of the president. Hugo Chávez had recently returned to Caracas after battling an undisclosed form of cancer in Havana since his fourth re-election the previous October. Amidst conspiracy accusations on both sides – Chavistas accused opponents of having poisoned the president and opponents accused the government of having withheld the announcement of his death for months in order to stay in power - now interim president Maduro swore to continue the Bolivarian Revolution in the name of his predecessor. It was the end of an era. Thousands poured onto the streets of the country to pay tribute to Chávez’s legacy. An eleven-day mourning period was announced, foreign dignitaries travelled to Caracas to commemorate the deceased, and the body of Hugo Chávez was carried in procession across the city in a grandiose display of military fanfare.

### *Introduction*

This thesis has explored the role of a television programme that occupied the screens on Sundays for the first decade of the 2000s in Venezuela. The show, *Aló Presidente*, was anchored by the president of the country during the making of his political project, the “Bolivarian Revolution”. Because it accompanied Hugo Chávez’s mandates for the entire time of his presidency in Venezuela, it was argued that *Aló Presidente* and the political project were intrinsically related. This set the premise for the investigation and formulated the first research question: what was the role of *Aló Presidente* in the Bolivarian Revolution?

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<sup>57</sup> Rojas, Maria. Interview by Sunthai Constantini. Caracas, (January 16, 2013).

Informed by Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, the first step was to locate the television show and the political landscape as complementary articulations of a same hegemonic discourse. Much like the Revolution, *Aló Presidente* was seen as a "work in progress", a continuous articulation of the Bolivarian identity in light of the political events and technological advancements of the time. This meant that, in addition to some characteristics intrinsic to television –it's capacity to bridge time and space and tap into our everyday lives and establish a sense of intimacy (Thompson 1995)- the discourse of *Aló Presidente* also contributed to reinforcing television's production of a sense of socialisation by articulating an understanding of the world that interpellated a Bolivarian public with a shared sense of identity. The television show was thus seen as the televisual leg of a hegemonic discourse under the Chávez administration. As such, the work aimed at deconstructing these articulations and assessing their evolution in relation to their political context. Hugo Chávez and his capacity to take the stage for an incredible amount of time made the show the cornerstone of his political communication, for the president preferred the stage of *Aló Presidente* to the traditional communication outlets and would rarely give press conferences. Describing his experience when working as correspondent for the *Guardian* in Caracas, Rory Carroll recounts:

When the comandante was not performing the lights went out, the show stopped, draping a great virtual curtain across government. Chávez abolished individual ministry press conferences and centralised all news through the Ministry of Communication and Information (...) but [I] could never arrange interviews, because officials and ministers were not authorised to speak. (Carroll 2013, p. 26).

By the time of his death, Hugo Chávez had become the central figure of the Bolivarian Revolution, embodying the values and ideals of a project that he had been articulating in Venezuela for over a decade. No one but the president knew exactly what the political project was to become: he had always been in charge of its definition and had made sure to occupy every critical position when it came to choosing the strategic direction of the *Revolución*. After his third election in 2007, Chávez had managed to centralise most powers in the hands of the Executive. The audience of *Aló Presidente* had witnessed his decision-making on the air, legitimising the authority of the president and trusting the leader with the fate of the state.

### *Chavismo without Chávez*

For the last three months of his mandate, Chávez had disappeared from the public eye, unseen and unheard except for a set of photographs with his daughters from a hospital bed in Cuba. The pictures had surfaced in the midst of protests from the opposition. Despite his having dismissed any doubts with regards to his ability to complete a full term during the general election campaign in the autumn of 2012, Chávez had failed to attend his inauguration on 10 January 2013 and details about the state of his health had been kept confidential. Chávez had designated Maduro as his successor before leaving for Cuba for treatment, and the vice-president had effectively taken office in his place. Maduro, a former union representative and bus driver, had learned the ropes of the craft as speaker of the National Assembly and then as foreign minister under Chávez's administration. On 14 April 2013, and after a month of emotional campaigning, Maduro was sworn in to the presidency under heavily contested results.

The news had struck an emotional chord among the Bolivarian public. Chávez's death had come as a surprise for, although conscious of his weak state, supporters had not expected him to pass away. The level of popularity during his absence had been at its highest. The streets of the capital had been covered in words of support for the recovering leader. Banners and billboards reminded the country of Hugo Chávez's legacy and of his fundamental role in the Revolution. More than a man, slogans argued, Chávez was the people, "drops of life sprung from his hands". I had travelled to Caracas for Chávez's inauguration, hoping to gain access to the show at the beginning of his new term. If previous attempts had been unfruitful, I had hoped that doors would open more easily after a successful campaign. However, Chávez's absence from office had brought the political machine to a halt, the whole country was paralysed waiting for the president's return. I unsuccessfully contacted the production of *Aló Presidente*, the Ministry of Information, the president's press team (Prensa Presidencial), and the union of Venezolana de Television (VTV). No one seemed to be willing to speak; unsure of what was to become of the Revolution.

People were not ready to let Hugo Chávez go. Days after the state funeral, Maduro announced that VTV would be broadcasting three-hour reruns of *Aló Presidente*. The show, a compilation of the best moments of the series, was to be called "Aló Comandante" in honour of the late Bolivarian leader. The programme was introduced by the Communications



Minister as “a three-hour summary of the best moments of that political and humanist lecturer that *Aló Presidente* used to be” (Villegas in Este domingo VTV estrena el programa "Aló Comandante" 2014). Even after Chávez’s death, *Aló Presidente* seemed to serve as a repository for the Bolivarian identity, bringing together members of the audience, and bridging the distance between the political realm and the intimacy of the home. Speaking of the social value of television reruns, Weispenning (2003) argues that they have the potential to promote social continuity and collective memory:

Reruns provide a degree of stability unattainable elsewhere in life. Jobs, living arrangement, and friend all change with time, but reruns do not. Reruns are inherently antichange (...) when viewers choose to watch a familiar rerun, they are choosing to reexperience the past. (Weispenning 2003, pp. 172-173)

Somehow, *Aló Presidente*’s anachronism did not seem to matter. The show no longer stood for its participatory nature, or for the informative value of its discussions about public affairs. *Aló Presidente* had become a means to maintain a sense of continuity in the Bolivarian spirit. After Chávez’s death, *Aló Comandante* had served the purpose of tranquilising, sustaining, and easing the transition to Maduro’s government. Not only was the programme restored to the air to its original slot on Sunday mornings, but the name was also restored to its original title. *Aló Presidente* once again became *Aló Presidente*, and Chávez once again returned to the screens. With the *Presidente* on the air, part of the routine of everyday life had been restored. It has been argued in these pages that television can perform the role of a “transitional object” (Silverstone 1994), a safe space between individuals and their experiences of the world. As an object of transition, television may provide the comfort of a security blanket, a teddy bear, or a peeping hole. It protects the viewer from that which is outside of themselves while offering a peak into it. By definition, the transitional object is temporary; it provides an ally in the transition between the known and the unknown. This also implies that television can be seen as the space in which individuals forge their sense of identity, a means to experience that which is not yet. In this case, the reruns of *Aló Presidente* fulfilled this role. They provided the viewership with the familiar landscape of a decade’s worth of Sunday show; a time when they had felt secure in their understanding of the world, when the articulation of their identity had found temporary fixation around the leader figure of Hugo Chávez.

### *Summary of the Analysis*

Chapter 2 set out the ground for the investigation. It worked on two levels in order to bridge the articulation of meaning in the construction of the self and the role of television in the process. The first step was to take a discursive approach and to understand social identities as created in discursive practices. Borrowing from Laclau and Mouffe's work, meaning was seen as contingent on articulations that build our understanding of history, politics, and identity. As such, our assessment of the world does not depend on absolute truths but on constructions that circulate and challenge each other, that "struggle" in the field of discursivity. This position also understands discourse as social action, for it is in these negotiations of meaning that social relations and public life are articulated. This is not to say that, because of the contingent nature of meaning, nothing matters. It is to say that different readings engender different actions according to the worldview that they represent, and that it is in the negotiation of these meanings that identities are forged. The social construction of meaning therefore also influences social action in a constant flux of articulations and tensions.

This approach also implies that truth is seen as dependent upon the regimes that articulate and maintain them. Statements and ideas often circulate in similar ways, resembling each other to the point of giving the impression that they hold an immutable truth. This is the case of what is often called "common sense" or "reality", and pertains to a shared understanding of the world. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this happens when discourses manage to fix, or reduce, the polysemy of signs into a coherent and all-encompassing articulation. It is what they call "hegemonic" discourses. From this perspective, if the social world, as well as the subjects and objects in it, is constructed in discourse, the regimes of knowledge that produce discourses have the power to create the social world. Power and discourse traverse and limit the possibilities of knowledge, the understandings of the self, and the practices of the social. Linked to Foucault's understanding of power as a "productive" force, discourse is seen as multidirectional and pervasive. In this context, the goal of this research was to unpack the discourses and articulations that permeated the relationship between Chávez and his audience on *Aló Presidente* in order to locate the underlying structures of power that were created through the show during Chávez's presidency.

The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution. It is in this sense that one has to differentiate the social from the political. The social is the realm of sedimented practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political constitution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded. Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society; not all social bonds are put into question at the same time. (Mouffe 2005, p. 17).

Because discourses traverse all areas of life, the second step of Chapter 2 was to understand the way in which discourses about television contributed to this articulatory process. Hartley's reading of television as "textual" informed this process. The idea was that "textual and social power, connected in the form of meaning, can be justified as a proper object for television studies" (Hartley 1992, p. 86). Following a discursive understanding of meaning, television is seen as a system of circulation of texts, a "hub" (Corner 1999), or "switchboard" (Newcomb 2010), at the intersection of numerous fields (economic, technological, political, etc.). Borrowing Torfing's terms, attention can be brought to discourses *of* the media, *about* the media, or the understanding of media *as* discourse (Torfing 1999). With this perspective in mind, the goal became to analyse the discourses about social life and social identity that were articulated on the programme in light of the political context on the one hand and the narratives and genres of television on the other.

Chapter 1 explored the general format of *Aló Presidente*. Part of the originality of the show was that it lasted for many hours, that it was broadcast live, and that included a participating audience. The wide array of activities that took place on the show, as well as the informal tone of the programme, were reminiscent of the entertainment segments of variety shows. There was singing and dancing, and juggling and animal petting, and storytelling and poetry reading. But the president of the country answered phone calls on the show. In this sense, *Aló Presidente* resembled phone-in talk shows where guests, audiences, and hosts discuss topical themes for 60 minutes, offering a direct contact with members of the public, albeit in regulated ways. And, indeed, *Aló Presidente*'s original format did resemble these shows. However, it has been argued, the format very quickly (after the first episode) surpassed its allocated time, slowly growing into five, six, and seven-hour-long episodes. In the process, the host disappeared, making way for the president to convene the show on his own. Because

of the political office of the anchor, and because many topics touched upon current affairs, matters of national security, and ideological analyses of political events, *Aló Presidente* also resembled the informative genre of pundit talk shows. It discussed the news, set the agenda for the week, and placed the anchor in a position of expertise, as an insider of the political realm. Moreover, because it also incorporated discussions between Hugo Chávez and members of his administration as well as live announcements about nationalisations or budget allocations, the activities presented on the show gave an impression of transparency in the political decision-making process, recalling the claims to authenticity of the documentary and reality genres. Elements regarding the informal tone of the conversation, the willingness to favour “commonsense” argumentation over the more traditional language of politics or expertise, these genres opened the floor for questions regarding the nature of participation and the emancipatory potential of such claims. *Aló Presidente* was seen as being embedded in the discourses, or narratives, of its medium, making it a purely televisual programme.

Silverstone (1994) was key in providing the conceptual bases by proposing an understanding of television as a “potential space”. According to this view, it is television’s capacity to be a part of the different realities of everyday life that makes it conducive to bridging the distance between politics and the political. Everyday life is seen as the terrain for meaning-making, for discursive struggles, and for identity formation. Rejecting the dichotomy by which it is seen as either the site of ideological domination or emancipatory resistance, Silverstone’s work opens the floor for an interpretation of everyday life as filled with possibilities, the terrain where the social is performed, where discourses are created, and where they circulate. Everyday life is therefore the locus for social action and for the negotiation of what is understood as “common sense”. It is unique in its potential and ordinary in its ubiquity. But, more importantly, Silverstone’s grounding of television in everyday life fully sets out the primer for the investigation of *Aló Presidente*, for it provides the medium with a connection to this fertile terrain.

This meant that the investigation needed to happen on two discursive planes in order to fully deconstruct the articulations that were being made on the show: the first had to do with the political events that informed the agenda of each episode, for the reading of the political context would define the way in which the overall project of the Bolivarian Revolution was to be framed. The second was more intrinsic to the medium, recalling and reproducing the

activities and interactions typical of the television genres, and building upon previous articulations of what television normally does.

It was also important to bear in mind that, in order to fully articulate the identity of the Bolivarian subject in the context of the show, the process was presented against a background of antagonism. From a discourse theoretical perspective, the definition and maintenance of a threatening “other” was necessary for the consolidation of the group. The climate of polarisation was thus pervasive and voluntarily maintained both in and outside of the show. This added an important layer of emotional articulations to the discourse. *Aló Presidente*, as has been showed, contained tremendous amounts of affective displays. People cried with joy, children sang odes to the president. The president read personal poems, love letters. On *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez shared his fears, he expressed his love for the people, for his family, for God. But on *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez also showed his fury, insulted opponents, spoke of enemies and traitors, described how they presented a threat to the country, to the social advancements of the Revolution, and even to his physical integrity. Chávez often spoke of death, of the many “parricide” plots that had been dismantled on time, of the fact that a true revolutionary must fight until the end of their life, of his famous motto “Fatherland, Socialism, of Death”.

No discourse happens in a vacuum. In this sense, both the format and the topics discussed on the show were familiar enough for members of an audience to engage and respond to the subject positions that interpellated them. However, it is because no discourse happens in a vacuum that reading a television programme such as *Aló Presidente* presented an incredible challenge, for each of these two planes functioned against their specific field of discursivity. The political articulations implied chains of equivalence and logics of difference through which citizens were interpellated in contrast to threatening others and in view of interpretations of events that consolidated their common sense of identity. The televisual narratives meant that viewers and guests were constantly presented with dynamics that articulated a relationship of trust, familiarity, authenticity, and admiration according to the different subject positions that were set on the stage.

Framing this investigation in such a way also required accepting that discourses are never fully fixed but are rather in continuous flow. Meaning is constructed through an interminable suite of articulations that aim to encompass every new situation into a coherent formulation

of the whole, permanently engaged in an attempt to “fix” the interpretation of the world. The hegemonic nature of the political project that was taking place in Venezuela implied that every step needed a coherent definition, making the role of the show paramount in the process. Time and time again, the president would describe the political project, suggest readings to the audience, and instigate action from the stage. The work carried out by the Ministries of Information and Culture surpassed by far the scope of this research, however, it would be interesting to explore the discursive articulations of the different communication outlets employed during Chávez’s administration. In fact, in addition to *Aló Presidente*, the political communication of the regime included: permanent billboards, Bolivarian schools and universities, dozens of websites dedicated to the propagation and analysis of the revolution, a publishing house, hundreds of hours of president’s addresses, leaflets, partisan television shows, etc. The fact that this investigation was made possible in the first place was indeed thanks to the government’s investment in their communication campaign, for I would not have been able to have access to the entire data set of the show if the transcripts had not been available on the website [alopresidente.gob.ve](http://alopresidente.gob.ve).

Another interesting arm of the hegemonic work of the Revolution was the creation in 2006 of the film studio, Villa del Cine, and distribution company, Amazonia Films. Hugo Chávez had invested \$42 million, hoping to further disseminate the values of the Revolution. Presented as usual in antagonistic terms, the plan was to counter Hollywood’s presence in Venezuelan cinemas and offer cultural productions aimed at empowering the people against the values of capitalism. At the time of its inauguration, Chávez had said “Hollywood sends a message to the world that tries to sustain the so-called American way of life and imperialism (...) They inoculate us with messages that have nothing to do with our traditions” (Chávez in Kozloff 2008). Many films and documentaries recounted the histories of Latin American heroes such as Simon Bolivar and Francisco de Miranda. The studio also attracted the attention of American renowned artists such as Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, and Danny Glover, who has announced his intention to direct and co-produced a film on Haitian independence leader Francois Dominique Toussaint Louverture. After Chávez’s death, the studio issued a documentary titled “La Siembra: el Adios al Comandante Eterno” (The Sowing: a Farewell to the Eternal Commander). The documentary follows the mourning period of the state funeral and is accompanied by excerpts of Hugo Chávez’s speeches. On the website, the film is described as “a way to praise the impact on a people who lovingly believed in their leader

and have decided to continue his legacy”. It also describes the voiceover from Chávez “as if he continues to speak to us from eternity”.

Perhaps it is useful at this stage to recall the particular context in which *Aló Presidente* was created. This was a “revolutionary” time, a time where Venezuelans had hoped to change the dissatisfying ways of the political status quo of the Punto Fijo years. As a young democracy, the country had accumulated during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a series of mechanisms that had built the effective bipartisan management of a petro-state. Increasing structural crises and a rapid-growing demography had tipped the fragile equilibrium of an unsustainable oil-dependent economy. On the social front, large sectors of the population had long felt marginalised from the political realm, creating a divide that no longer found representation in the available party landscape. Hugo Chávez had become a beacon of hope for a deeply frustrated electorate, proposing an alternative form of political organisation at the time called “participatory democracy”. At the end of last century, the traditional structures of liberal democracies had lost much support in many Latin American countries, due in large part to the economic crises and authoritarian experiences of their neoliberal regimes (Lopez Maya 2005). I am aware that other readings can account for the process of change that took place in Venezuela, for history is after all as flexible a discourse as any. However, the main claim that this implies is that the general context of Chávez’s arrival to power and the creation of his television programme was a of structural change or, to put in into Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, a “hegemonic” moment of clash between old and new articulations. The fact that Chávez’s main electoral promise had been to redraft the Constitution in light of these ideals illustrates the climate of transition that reigned at the time. Seen in this light, the Bolivarian Revolution- along with its institutions, actors, and norms- required a long process of articulation in order to bring a clear (hegemonic) narrative to what doing politics under these new premises actually meant. And it has been the contention of this work that the television show *Aló Presidente* played a fundamental role in that articulatory process.

The question of participation in the newly christened “Bolivarian” republic was addressed in detail in Chapter 4. These were the first years of Chávez’s presidency and of *Aló Presidente*. At the time, the rhetoric around the concept of “participatory democracy” permeated all aspects of the political discourse. Backed by a successful referendum, the new Constitution

had been drafted: two new powers –‘electoral’ and ‘popular’- had been added to the traditional three of liberal democracies, and a series of delegated structures of grassroots participation had been put into place. Chávez’s discourse was laden with ideas of citizen-centred politics. The people were now to be called “protagonists” of the political realm and decision-making levelled in a horizontal distribution of power. These were powerful images, a promise for structural change. And this was the premise of Chávez’s show.

Mouffe’s distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ provided an interesting approach to these questions, for it gives an account of the institutional realm of *politics* as grounded in a more broad, and fundamentally social, ontological definition of *the political*. Seen as the social landscape against which identities are formed, human relations cannot but pertain to the political realm.

By “the political”, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. “Politics” on the other side, indicated the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political” (Mouffe 2005, p. 8)

Seen in this context, the first goal of the analysis was to unpack this heavily loaded concept. Because of its omnipresence and the wide variety of ways in which it was put to use, “participation” was understood as an empty signifier following Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of the term (2001). At first sight, the idea of opening a space for the interaction between political representatives and their electorate seemed to suggest a space for rational-critical deliberation, openness, and inclusivity, something along the lines of a Habermasian public sphere. The introduction of the first episodes read: “we will be here talking to you, listening to you, writing down your criticisms, your suggestions, your ideas. The reason for this [programme] is the paramount necessity that the President of Venezuela, as one of Venezuela’s citizens, be in touch with the majority of Venezuelans” (Chávez, Episode 1 1999). Albeit not fully autonomous from the state, the show had the potential to create somewhat of a public forum, inviting discussions and exchanges of ideas in order to mutually define the greater good. However, once this potential was tested against the practices that took place on the show during its first years, the findings showed that the form of



participation fostered on *Aló Presidente* had not created a deliberative space. On the contrary, interventions had tended to exclude voices opposed to the projects advanced by Chávez, and the vast majority of contributions had reflected the needs and concerns of a supportive audience.

The articulations of meaning on *Aló Presidente* therefore functioned at different discursive levels. First, the original format of the show and the political rhetoric that surrounded it were framed to construct the concept of ‘participation’. Secondly, in a series of narratives that borrowed from the discourse of television, members of the audience were brought together to form a public (Dayan 2005) with a shared sense of identity. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, members of the Bolivarian public were conflated with the “real” electorate of the country as opposed to the undeserving “others”. In these chains of equivalence, viewers were interpellated as public, citizens, and fans under the all-encompassing “Bolivarian” discourse. The overriding theme of this research has been to untangle these chains of equivalence and identify the means through which each of these interpellations was accomplished. In this process, it became clear that the relationship between interpellation and articulation was being made through the performance of Hugo Chávez as anchor of the show, celebrity, pundit, and leader of the revolution. It is the constant reframing of these subject positions that the place of *Aló Presidente* can be found, as a meeting point for those discourses that pertain on the one hand to the political and on the other to everyday life. And it is in this negotiation between the domestic and the public that the articulation of the Bolivarian identity took place.

Having excluded the possibility of a deliberative space, attention was turned to the practices of participation on *Aló Presidente* as a way of decoding the articulation of the term. The emotional tone of the contributions, as well as the way in which everyday life concerns were brought to the centre of the discussion, indicated that the dynamic of the show favoured the creation of an intimate bond between members of the audience over rational assessments of “the better argument”. By sharing their experiences on the show, participants and president contributed to the consolidation of a common identity around the impression of lay knowledge and common sense. Participation was thus seen as the aggregation of testimonials from supporters of the regime in the context of a television programme that fostered an intimate relationship between the president and the electorate. At this point, Chávez had

brought down a series of barriers, speaking informally about his personal life and sharing his ideas for the Bolivarian project while on the air. The articulation of the notion of participation as sharing experiences and common sense, it was argued, had crystallised a common identity in members of the audience. The first few years of the programme were thus understood as having interpellated a public around a shared subject position, namely the Bolivarian subject, and having therefore consolidated a group. Beyond the different articulations of the term in other areas of the revolution, on *Aló Presidente*, ‘participation’ was understood as the actions and performances of a Bolivarian public.

Chapter 5 explored more in depth the processes and mechanisms of articulation of the Bolivarian identity once the public had been formed. After having faced a general strike and an attempted coup, Chávez had made of social welfare a priority. Without the dedicated support of the working class, Chávez would not have been able to retrieve the presidency from the self-declared interim government that had followed the violent protests of 11 April 2002. The satisfaction of the needs of those supporters had become a focal point in his policies. A key ingredient was the emergence of *Misiones* aimed at procuring fast-relief in all areas of social welfare, mainly in health and education. These had originally been designed as temporary structures and were directly financed by the president. However, with time the missions became parallel structures of governance, principally connected to supporters of the regime and unrelated to the official instances of welfare management.

An important outcome of the struggles that took place in the early 2000s had been the clear expression of an opposition force in Venezuela. The capital had become a rally point for weekly demonstrations against Chávez’s administration, and signatures were collected in order to recall the president. This climate of antagonism had permeated the show and Chávez would often criticise members of the opposition during his interventions on the air. It was during this middle phase of the Bolivarian Revolution that the discursive foundations of the political project were set out. In this context, the role of *Aló Presidente* became paramount in defining and consolidating the identity, behaviours, and values of the Bolivarian public that had come together during the first years of the show. First, in a long series of chains of equivalence, Bolivarians were linked to Chávez, Simon Bolivar, Jesus Christ, and many more important figures of the social imaginary, in discursive articulations that engrossed a large array of signs and histories of the Venezuelan culture. Secondly, the group was set out

against an important enemy, a threatening “other” that included all those who did not support the regime. Here again a series of chains of equivalence was created between opponents, capitalists, North America and the general capitalist world. These were depicted as anti-patriotic, disrespectful of Bolívar’s legacy, and altogether dismissed as non-citizens of Venezuela.

In the process of definition of the Bolivarian project, the role of Hugo Chávez had become even more prominent on the show. His tone had become that of a pedagogue. Activities on *Aló Presidente* had come to include readings of Latin American intellectuals, classic philosophers, biographies of heroic figures of Venezuelan history, and all sorts of discussions around the ideological foundations of the political project. At this point, it was argued, the show had become a platform for the governance of Bolivarian subjects by which modes of behaviour were dutifully internalised and performed in a series of participatory activities such as vox pops and phone calls. Interpellated as the “nation”, subjects were invited to practice their subject positions and interact with each other in a carefully rehearsed way, asking the right questions, delivering the right discourses, and responding to the right interpellations.

*Aló Presidente* stood for all of the confusing and mixed messages of the Bolivarian Revolution. First, it was the rather unusual format of a conversation with the president under the premises of a “participatory” model of democracy. In itself, the way the concept of participation was developed in Venezuela during the Chávez administration merits detailed attention, for it opens the floor for political investigation both in terms of its discursive foundations and in terms of its impact on Venezuela’s neighbouring states. Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution, and more specifically the socialist turn of the second part of his mandate, had an undoubted influence on other Latin American countries as well as on the geopolitics of the region. And, in this context, the original claim of this work, namely that *Aló Presidente* can be seen as a “black box” of the political project advanced by Hugo Chávez, has much to offer beyond the scope of what could be discussed in these pages. Secondly, what caught my attention while reviewing the hundreds of transcripts of *Aló Presidente* was the incredible variety of topics, activities, guests, and locations that would happen on every episode of the show. Albeit my reading was limited by the textuality of the data, a certain aura of familiarity encompassed the tone of the show. This was certainly the type of television that recognised the need to entertain its audience if it was to keep their

attention for hours on end. *Aló Presidente* was colourful, varied, jovial, and, most importantly, it seemed accessible to all. Hugo Chávez was certainly the cornerstone of the show: a political representative but also a familiar face, an admirable character, and a friend.

By the time of his re-election in 2007, the place of Hugo Chávez on *Aló Presidente* had become so predominant that episodes of the show had become a locale for the display of Chávez's authority. The idea of a socialist alternative for the Venezuelan project had won popular support and, after the election, Chávez's programme began another ideological turn. This was the time of the centralisation of powers. The coalition of parties that had backed Chávez's government since his arrival was turned into a united socialist party, trade unions followed a similar path, federal powers lost part of their remit, and decentralised forms of citizen participation relied heavily on the direct financial support of the president.

Chapter 6 discussed the Chávez-centric aspect of the show, focusing on the final years of his mandate as those who relied more heavily on the president's leadership figure. It was argued that, over the years, the public articulated on *Aló Presidente* had come to embrace a submissive subject position with regards to Hugo Chávez. More than the president of the country, he embodied the group, leading it towards the common project of the Bolivarian Revolution. Thirteen years after his first election as an alternative against the traditional structures of the Punto Fijo institutions, Chávez was still regarded as the leader of a populist movement, the delegate of a group that had articulated their identity against the dissatisfactions of previous regimes. Seen as such, *Aló Presidente* had been the locale for the constant articulation and maintenance of this relationship, continuously presented with opponents and threats in order to consolidate its strength. *Aló Presidente* was somehow a transitional space within a transitional object.

The realm of institutional politics is often approached with reticence. Its rules, actors, and language make it difficult to grasp, relegating it to a space that needs to be conquered before it can be accessed. The literature seeking to understand the disenchantment with regards to modern democracies abounds. Citizen disengagement, their lack of trust, their scepticism and overall sense of detachment from expert elites are cause for much soul-searching in the social sciences. Official business seems to require a lot of understanding of the political game, continuous updating about the state of affairs, and the willingness to engage with conflicting expert voices (Coleman 2007). One of the main questions that political communication seeks

to address is this sense of ‘disconnection’ between the electorate and their elected representatives by exploring the means to (re)establish the bond that politics is supposed to secure between the mass and the institutions that organise them. One way of approaching this issue has been to question the modes of address of political actors, often seen as favouring a technical-rational discourse over forms of emotional representation (Richards 2004). However, matters of disengagement from the political realm also imply questions around the agency of citizenship, the place of participation, and the modes of engagement that surround political issues. Talk shows and other television programmes (reality TV, documentaries, docu-soaps) have inspired research on the participatory potential of non-traditional political spaces (Livingstone and Lunt 1994, Shattuc 1997, Tolson 2001, Coleman 2005), or their capacity to foster a closer relationship between entertainment and civic engagement (Van Zoonen 2005, Jones 2005).

Be it with regards to their support for rigid structures of political alienation, or as spaces for resistance and scrutiny, it is clear that the media play an important part in the modern articulation of public life. And, in a sense, all these questions have guided the research on *Aló Presidente*, helping in the process of deconstruction of what hundreds of hours worth of televised talk could contain. What was the use of a television programme in the making of the Bolivarian Revolution? How did the dynamic of the show influence the way in which politics was conducted? What was the place of the audience on the show and how was the notion of participation articulated in their contributions? How did this affect the relationship between the electorate and the president?

The narratives and articulations of *Aló Presidente* opened the floor for many of these issues. The underlying rhetoric of participation was the first nodal point of the research. Here was a talk show that actually brought citizens together on the topic of the common good under the premises of paradigmatic shift in Venezuelan politics. Members of the audience contributed their experiences and grief, they spoke of their desires and their personal dreams. Participation was thus articulated as the practice of disclosing one’s vulnerabilities and wishes on *Aló Presidente*. These practices had elicited the identification of members of the audience with each other. Actively engaged in the issues and activities of the show, atomised viewers had become a ‘public’ as Dayan (2005) understands it, an “ensemble characterised by shared sociability, shared identity and a sense of that identity” (p. 46). With its familiar

narratives and dedication to lay expertise, *Aló Presidente* seemed to accommodate the affective lack of a traditionally disenchanted public. Silverstone (1994) speaks of everyday life as the abode of social identity, where domesticity meets the potential space of television. In this sense, *Aló Presidente* served as a meeting point between politics and everyday life. No longer attached to the traditional rigidity of formal politics, the show had brought public life into the homes of its audience. Processes were eagerly explained, decisions were taken in front of the viewer's eyes, and institutions and other political instances seemed to lose their relevance to the hands of the president/host.

Asking questions about the effect of *Aló Presidente* on the articulation of a 'revolutionary' project inevitably raises a series of adjacent issues regarding the nature of the circulation of power in the Bolivarian Revolution, the forms of participation outside the programme, the actual state of the transition from a liberal to a participatory democracy –and the articulation of citizenship as a result- etc. With regards to this last point, it is interesting to note that it meets one of the long-lasting debates surrounding the nature of democracy and the role of citizenship in the everyday management of the state. In trying to locate the place of the citizen in relation to the political institutions, liberals have argued that individual liberty must be understood as a negative, equating freedom to the absence of coercion. As such, it is argued, active participation around notions of the "common good" bears the risk of sparking totalitarian consequences, touching upon areas of life considered to be beyond the scope of the social contract. This investigation cannot claim to provide a contribution to this debate, however, analysing the different stages of the Bolivarian discourse inevitably raises questions with regards to the ideological nature of the "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" and the other "participatory" aspects of the political project. What did Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century mean in terms of citizen participation? Did the Bolivarian Revolution result in a transition from a liberal democracy to a participatory one? As far as the television programme is concerned, it has been argued that *Aló Presidente* activated a participatory dynamic based on the interpellation of a Bolivarian public and its performance of a shared sense of identity. By borrowing the familiar narratives of television and everyday life, the show spoke the language of a domestic audience, making the political a common topic in Venezuelan households. However, the fact that the president hosted the show, and that the articulations of the Bolivarian identity included elements from all areas of life, suggests that the television

programme was never far from institutional politics, bringing politics closer to home yet never far from the hands of the state.

Seen from this perspective, *Aló Presidente* can hardly account as a space for ‘creative’ citizenship, or, as Habermas suggests, part of “unsubverted circuits of communication” (Habermas 1996, p. 485). The participatory nature of the show was rather located in the performance and contributions of a public that identified itself with the values and norms of a hegemonic discourse within the structures of formal politics. In fact, in this negotiation between the realm of politics and of the political, *Aló Presidente* can be seen as a space that was ‘neither-nor’. Much like other institutions created during the Chávez administration -in particular the Bolivarian missions- *Aló Presidente* rearticulated the relationship between the citizens and their elected representatives around the leadership of Hugo Chávez. The show was neither a public sphere independent from the influence and interests of the political institutions, nor the space for citizen scrutiny and engagement with institutional politics. However, as was argued in the latter chapters of the analysis, the way in which Chávez was presented actually surpassed the competences of an elected representative. Many of the measures that were announced on the show showed a centralising tendency in the hands of Hugo Chávez, raising the question of the legitimacy in his role as head of a Constitutional state. This suggests that, if the traditional structures of a liberal democracy were being addressed differently on the show, it was not from the bottom up. On the contrary, what surfaced was a challenging of the institutions by the president of the state under the supportive gaze of a public/electorate.

Media studies and political communication will always be interested in understanding the relationship between our mediated and our social worlds. There is little doubt that these are but one intertwined matrix for the articulation of our selves, our sense of identity, and our actions within that world. In a globalised landscape, with the permeability of the Internet and its infinite meaning-making possibilities, the place of individuals as active participants to their political life has raised a lot of enthusiasm. The technological advancements of the media afford easier interactions between what is inside of the box and who is outside of it, making it more and more common to see the boundaries between the two dissolve. This also means that the language of the media, or as Torfing would put it, “media *as* discourse”, has become part of our discursive landscape, continuously creating new articulations of our

cognitive maps and deeply affecting the ways in which we interact with each other, the way in which the social is framed. Television, and in particular talk shows, have been framing a particular understanding of the social for the past few decades. Intellectuals have wondered about the democratic potentiality and ideological risks of such spaces, audiences have internalised the discourses and activities that make up the virtual conversation as common talk, and producers have identified, tested, and expanded the norms and articulations of the different formats. *Aló Presidente* was born in this context. It borrowed and reproduced the narratives so familiar to the viewer. It embedded itself in a tradition of national broadcasting, and contributed to the articulation of a new format of political talk shows.

### *The Legacy of Aló Presidente*

Fifteen years after Chávez's election as president of Venezuela, his iconic television show *Aló Presidente* has marked the way in which political communication is articulated in Venezuela and, more broadly, in the region. The talk show hybrid seems to have become somewhat of a template, copied and emulated across the subcontinent. Fellow Bolivarian leader Rafael Correa inaugurated in 2008 *Enlace Ciudadano* in Ecuador. The show, a very close version of *Aló Presidente*, is simulcast on 54 radio stations and on Ecuador's state television channel ECTV. The president receives phone calls from the audience, discusses current affairs, and introduces new policy. Similarly, Evo Morales premiered a solo radio programme in 2012 aimed at "telling nothing but the truth to the people of Bolivia" (Noticias 24 2012) and, after a failed attempt on television, Mauricio Funes debuted in 2012 *Conversando con el Presidente*, a radio phone-in in El Salvador.

Each with their own national idiosyncrasies, television and radio programmes starring political leaders have been growing in numbers. This is not a new phenomenon per se, and politicians have attended to their communication strategies in many ways. From Question Time in the UK, to presidential addresses in the US; Berlusconi's controversial affair with his media empire *Mediaset* in Italy, or Putin's recent creation of a new character for the children's puppet show *Good Night, Little Ones*, the intertwining of entertainment and politics has been spreading across all media outlets, including Facebook profiles and Twitter conversations. And, as far as television is concerned, the creation of hybrid political reality shows is advancing all over the world. In 2013, Lebanese television channel "Al Jadeed TV" aired a reality programme called *al-Zaim* (the Leader) aimed at selecting a candidate for



parliamentary elections. In a political version of Britain's Got Talent, contestants ran against each other in a series of challenges demonstrating their capacity to handle crises and political tasks. The two finalists won the cost of their campaigns. Similarly, in Palestine independent network Ma'an broadcast in 2013 *al-Rais* (the President), a game show aimed at voting a fictional president under the age of 35. In the context of a heavily controlled political landscape, the channel described the show as "wanting to teach youth how to be political leaders and let them be part of political life" (Van Tets 2013).

In the case of Venezuela, doing politics on the air has become a common sight. After Chávez's death, the president of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, started his own television programme, *Con el Mazo Dando* (Keep Hammering), in which he discusses themes relating to the "Bolivarian battle". The show airs on Thursday evenings for a minimum of 60 minutes (like *Aló Presidente*, issues of timing do not seem to apply) and is broadcast on national channel VTV as well as on National Assembly Television. Most of the segments are aimed at "exposing the Capitalist threat" in Venezuela and reinforce the antagonist position necessary to maintain the Bolivarian group. Seen as the iron arm of the Revolution because of his participation with Chávez to the attempted coup in 1992, the anchor conducts a sharp-tongued opinion programme in which he unveils opposition plots and capitalist conspiracies, and beats the path for the defence of Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

On the other side of the spectrum, opposition leader and state Governor, Henrique Capriles has taken to social media and the Internet to broadcast citizen assemblies on his website Capriles.tv. Although it does not follow a weekly schedule, the series is reminiscent of *Aló Presidente* in that it sees the Governor in different locations, discussing local projects and inaugurating public works. The conversation tends towards the inclusion of self-avowed Chavistas and displays a conciliatory tone, favouring a rhetoric of unification over the antagonistic tendencies of its counterparts. Capriles's Assemblies also invite members of the audience to debate current events. However, because of Capriles' status as leader of the opposition, interventions on the programme tend to interpellate the audience as members of a movement of resistance against the Bolivarian administration. In spite of the more deliberative tone of the show, partisanship and politics continue to take precedence in the discussion.

Additionally, given the current blackout of opposition broadcasts in Venezuelan television<sup>58</sup>, Capriles.tv would at first sight appear to have a restricted reach, relegating the programme to niche audiences and raising again questions about freedom of expression and government censorship in Venezuela.

As for the political communication of the president, *Aló Presidente* has become the template for the interaction between political leaders and their electorate. After airing a few episodes of *Diálogo Bolivariano*, a roundtable conversation with members of the audience during the weeks leading to his election in 2013, the current president, Nicolás Maduro, now stars in his own version of *Aló Presidente* called *En Contacto con Maduro* (In Contact with Maduro). The show follows a very similar structure to that of his predecessor with the difference that Maduro is presented as being endowed with the legacy of the real *Presidente*, Hugo Chávez. In fact, the programme airs on Tuesdays, leaving the Sunday morning slot to the reruns of the real *Aló Presidente*. As suggested in the title, the role of the anchor is reduced to that of simple citizen: not yet a political leader, Maduro speaks among his fellow Bolivarian brothers and on behalf of their common legacy. New policies are articulated as a continuation of Chávez's project, and the name of the *Comandante* is brought to the discussion time and time again. For example, speaking of Mision Vivienda on Episode 17, Maduro declared "we will be handing house number 600,000 on Thursday in name of our Comandante Chávez". On that episode, he also announced the budget for 20,000 new pensions, new cement factories, better dental care, and a plan to tackle the issues resulting from an ongoing drought. He spoke of the economic battle that Capitalism had declared on Venezuela in 2014 causing inflation to rise 60.9 per cent, and of the manifold attacks that Chávez had managed to defeat during the 15 years of the Bolivarian Revolution. Maduro attributed the responsibility of foodstuff shortages to the opposition, accusing them of smuggling produce through the Colombian border in order to bring the stocks down. This gave him the opportunity to introduce the newly appointed Strategic Chief of Command and Control of Contraband Vladimir Padrino López and to announce the deployment of 17,000 troops at the border with Colombia. The bourgeoisie, oligarchy, and capitalist enemy were presented as the oppressive force from which the legitimate Venezuelan people needed to become emancipated. But, it was argued, if Fidel had managed to keep imperialists at bay, Chávez's Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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<sup>58</sup> See the media landscape and the cases of RCTV and Globovision in "Chávez and the Media" Introduction p.15

certainly could. And, “by the way”, Maduro added, “happy 94<sup>th</sup> birthday Fidel” (Maduro 2014).

The first weeks of Maduro’s presidency had brought doubt and concern: “this is no Chávez”, people had said. He lacked charisma, he lacked empathy; he lacked that special ingredient that had propelled Chávez to celebrity. Maduro did not master the art of rhetoric, he did not even master the necessary lexicon to make a decent public speaker. During his interim months, he had invented new words, confused genders, and made schoolteachers cringe with basic grammar mistakes. During an interview worthy of a headache for his communication team, Maduro had spoken of a transcendental experience in which he had felt Chávez’s spirit give him his blessing through a bird. He simply did not look like *Aló Presidente* material. But, the political show must go on even if the role of the *Presidente* is not an easy one to perform. Turning Maduro into a Chávez seemed like a long shot. These are indeed big shoes to fill, for rearticulating the Bolivarian identity on a weekly basis requires constant work. However, the template is there, and Maduro seems to be committed to delivering the part. Seventeen episodes in, this is the beginning of a vaguely familiar tale, the interaction of a newly elected president with his audience/electorate in the making of a Revolutionary project.

### *Conclusion*

Timberg and Erler (2002) argue that “breakout moments in television talk-show history, when certain shows challenge the form and substance of TV talk, tend to come out of periods of social and cultural conflict” (p. 83). It has been the contention of this thesis that the television programme *Aló Presidente* was created during a time of ideological transformation in Venezuela, a time where the dissatisfactions of a group that had previously felt marginalised were being articulated through a political project called the “Bolivarian Revolution”. Because the show replaced press conferences and was anchored by the president himself, *Aló Presidente* was seen as having replaced the traditional channels of political communication and having developed a hybrid political show that borrowed the familiar narratives of different television genres. It has also been argued that *Aló Presidente* supported the articulation of the relationship between the anchor/president, Hugo Chávez, and a public/electorate that responded to a common interpellation, namely the “Bolivarian public”. The programme, instrumental in the construction and reinforcement of this identity,

accompanied Chávez's political project throughout his presidency, adapting its content to the political context of the time. On *Aló Presidente*, Chávez narrated the ins and outs of the Revolution, defined the Bolivarian group against a series of negative "others" and established himself as the embodiment of the "common will". As such, *Aló Presidente* was found to have supported the articulation of a hegemonic discourse called the "Bolivarian Revolution" in Venezuela and to have reinforced the legitimacy of its populist leader, Hugo Chávez.

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"Episode 9." *Aló Presidente*. August 08, 1999.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: List of Interviews

(The following list comprises the names and titles of participants interviewed during fieldwork conducted in Venezuela in July-August 2011 and January 2013)

Cañizález, Andrés, *Professor in Communication at the Universidad Central de Venezuela and Universidad Católica Andrés Bello* Caracas, (July 25, 2011).

Colmenares, Harry, *Presidential Correspondent for Radio Nacional de Venezuela* Caracas, (January 28, 2013).

Cortés, Maria, *Member of the Communal Council "Luchadores por la Patria de Bolívar" in La Vega, Caracas* Caracas, (July 23, 2011).

Evans, Nicmer, *Professor in Politics at the Universidad Central de Venezuela* Caracas, (July 27, 2011).

Gamardo, Arion, *Public Servant for the Baruta Mayor's office* Caracas, (January 29, 2013).

Gonzalez, Gabriela, , *Headteacher at Bolivarian Kindergarten "Simoncito" in Bellas Artes, Caracas* (16 de January de 2013).

Hernandez, Maira, *Housekeeper* Caracas, (January 17, 2013).

Ibarra, Raúl, *Co-owner of a catering service* San Felipe, (January 05, 2013).

Lucien, Oscar, *PhD in Communication, Filmmaker and author of "Cerro Rojo a la Libertad de Expresión"* Caracas, (July 21, 2011).

Mago, Marlin, *Teacher at Bolivarian Kindergarten "Simoncito" in Bellas Artes, Caracas* Caracas, (January 16, 2013).

Mogollón, Carlos, *Cameraman for Vive TV and Aló Presidente* Caracas: Phone Interview, (July 20, 2011).

Navarro, Margarita, *Member of the Communal Council "Luchadores por la Patria de Bolívar" in La Vega, Caracas* Caracas, (July 23, 2011).

Pacheco, Jose Leonardo, *Political Activist for the Venezuelan Communist Party* Caracas, (July 14, 2011).

Pasquali, Antonio, interview by Sunthai Constantini. *Professor in Philosophy and Communication at the Universidad Central de Venezuela* (August 12, 2011).

Ponte, Maricsa, *Member of the Communal Council "Luchadores por la Patria de Bolívar" in La Vega, Caracas* (July 23, 2011).

Quijada, Maria Josefina, *Official Interpretor of Hugo Chávez* Caracas, (July 27, 2011).

Rivas, Johan, *Political Activist for Movimiento al Socialismo* Caracas, (July 05, 2011).

Rojas, Maria, *Main Cook at Bolivarian Kindergarten "Simoncito" in Bellas Artes, Caracas* Caracas, (January 16, 2013).

Useche, Richard, *Caretaker at Bolivarian Kindergarten "Simoncito" in Bellas Artes, Caracas* Caracas, (January 16, 2013).

Villegas, Vladimir, *Journalist, Former Director of Venezolana de Television and Former Venezuelan Ambassador to Brazil and Mexico* Caracas, (July 18, 2011).

In addition to these interviews, I conducted numerous participant observations in Venezuela throughout the two field trips. I was also embedded with a municipal police patrol on 15 July 2011 during which I conducted informal participant observations in shantytowns in Caracas but was not allowed to conduct official interviews.

## Appendix 2

### The Venezuelan Political Landscape: a Brief Timeline of Historical Events

- 1522: The Spanish Colonisation and the birth of Venezuela

The first Spanish expeditions resulted in settlements in the northern Island of Margarita and the Caribbean shore where pearl exploitation allowed for the development of small coastal cities. These were followed by three centuries of Spanish dominion, and the establishment in the late 1700s of a Creole aristocracy that relied largely on land exploitation and trade with the old continent.

- 1811-1823: Simón Bolívar and the War of Independence

The rising power of an economic elite, combined with the revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that saw the North American Independence and the rise of French Enlightenment ideals, provided the foundations for an independent movement in Venezuela. Caracas-born Simon Bolívar led a series of battles against the Spanish royalist army that eventually led to the independence of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Brazil and Peru, and earned him the title of *Libertador* of Latin America.

- 1859-1899: Caudillos and Federal Wars

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Venezuela was characterised by the intermittent rule of rival *caudillos*, or local warlords, who battled each other during what is known as the Federal Wars.

- 1908-1935: Juan Vicente Gómez and the Discovery of Black Gold

Gómez instituted a dictatorship until his death in 1935. His rule was characterised by the institutionalization of a Venezuelan army and the subsequent eradication of caudillo uprisings. Combined with this sense of security, the demand for “black gold” rose during the First World War and attracted European companies to the vast oil fields of Venezuela. By the 1920s, the country was the first exporter in the world and benefited from extraordinary income from the petroleum refineries.



- 1948: Romulo Gallegos and the First Venezuelan Election

At the death of Gómez in 1935, a series of military leaders appointed by Congress were soon overthrown by their own army. A short attempt at a democratic progress followed with the election in 1948 of praised novelist Rómulo Gallegos by a sweeping majority of 74 per cent in the first free and popular elections of Venezuela. But the liberal tone of Gallegos was met with hostility by the middle and upper classes that saw their interests endangered by his programme.

- 1948-1958: Marcos Perez Jimenez and the last Caudillo

Gallegos was replaced by the dictatorship of conservative military leader, General Marcos Perez Jimenez, during which the fascist military invested in public works as well as strong political repression and media censorship. His anti-communist take ensured him the support of the United States, and the oil revenue financed his projects of infrastructure development. On 23 January 1958, after a long series of popular uprisings, Marcos Perez Jimenez fled the country, bringing Venezuela's last dictatorship to an end.

- 1958-1999: Democracy and the 'Exception' of Latin America

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the end of military dictatorships in Venezuela and the advent of a democratic tradition deemed "exemplary" by comparison to the political processes of other Latin American states during the same period. The main political parties were AD; Unión Republicana Democrática (URD), Partido Comunista Venezolano (PCV); and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI).

- 1958: Punto Fijo

On 31 October 1958, the leaders of the three parties (excluding the PCV) signed the *Pact of Punto Fijo*. The agreement ensured cooperation between the parties in a commitment to: 1) respect the Constitution and protection against any attempt to employ the force against a democratically elected government; 2) a unitary government that would include members of all parties as well as the establishment of a Committee for permanent dialogue between the different party leaders; 3) a basic common programme that all parties would enforce when in power (Pacto de Punto Fijo 1958). This pact effectively ensured the rotation of power between these parties until Chávez's election as an independent candidate in 1998.

- 1983: Economic Decline and Black Friday

The 1970s energy crises of the industrialised world brought a period of economic bonanza to the country and unprecedented levels of public and private consumption. The strong economic reliance on oil export (up to 90 of total exports) and dramatic increase in public spending from all administrations had accumulated unsustainable amounts of foreign debt. Confident that oil prices would continue to go up, every new government would maintain a steady borrowing policy. But by 1983, oil markets were facing a glut, and Venezuela's exports had decreased 30 per cent. On 18 February, the government imposed a devaluation of 30 per cent on the bolivar, until then the most stable currency of Latin America. The measure, known as "black Friday", also withdrew the bolivar from international markets and established different currency rates for its use.

- 1989: Carlos Andrés Pérez and the Caracazo

Nostalgic of the economic boom of the 1970s and hoping to find a way out of the crisis, the people of Venezuela re-elected former president (1974-1978) Carlos Andrés Pérez. Pérez tried to stimulate the economy with what he called the "big economic turn", a series of neoliberal measures aimed at reducing public subsidies, devaluating the bolivar, privatising state-owned companies, and opening the economy to international capital. What followed was a series of popular protests that culminated in violent confrontations between the rioters and the armed forces on 27 February 1989 known as the "Caracazo".

- 1992: Hugo Chávez and the Attempted Coup

The rise in oil prices that followed the Gulf war afforded some stability to Pérez' budget, but popular unrest was still tangible and on 4 February 1992, 5 lieutenants colonels led an attempted coup d'état against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. Among the young officials was Hugo Chávez, leader of a clandestine political movement among the armed forces known as Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR200). The putsch failed to seize the city of Caracas after the original plan to capture Carlos Andrés Pérez on his way back from the airport fell through. Hugo Chávez unilaterally decided to surrender and delivered a famous 72-second speech calling for his troops to surrender and insinuating that that their objectives would have to be postponed but not abandoned.

- 1999-2013: Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution

Upon his release from prison, Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998 as an independent candidate with 56 per cent of the votes. His popularity had risen since the attempted coup of 1992 and Chávez was presented as the alternative to the Puntofijo agreement.

- 1999: Referendum and Constitutional Reform

Following his electoral promise, Hugo Chávez called for a referendum to create a Constitutional Assembly and redraft the Constitution in accordance with a more “participatory and protagonistic” form of democracy. Reflecting Chávez’s popularity at the time, the “yes” vote won with 71 per cent of the votes. Among many changes, the country was renamed the “Bolivarian” Republic of Venezuela under the new Constitution. Two new powers (Electoral and Citizen) were also added to the traditional Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. Chávez called the process: “the Bolivarian revolution”.

- 2000: First re-election

According to the new Constitution, “mega-elections” were called for all public offices in the country. Chávez was re-elected as president of Venezuela with 59 per cent of the votes.

- 2002-2003: Attempted Coup and National Strike

Resistance against the Bolivarian project and reforms proposed by Hugo Chávez grew in 2001 and 2002 with a series of actions orchestrated by the Venezuelan opposition aimed at destabilising the regime. On 11 April 2002, hundreds of thousands marched towards the presidential palace to demand Chávez’s resignation. Amidst confusion, firearms were shot, 19 protesters lost their lives, and Chávez disappeared from power during 72 hours. In December of the same year, the opposition launched an unsuccessful general strike that included State company PDVSA and lasted until February 2003.

- 2007: Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In 2005, Chávez announced for the first time his intention to define *socialism* as the ideological foundation of his political project. In December 2006, Chávez won a third election with 64 per cent of the votes and renamed the revolution: “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.

- December 2007: Referendum and Constitutional Reform

In order to sustain the new socialist turn, Hugo Chávez called for another Constitutional reform in 2007. This time, the “no” vote won with 50.6 per cent of the votes. Many of the proposals were nevertheless implemented in constitutional amendments, among which the suppression of term limits for public offices.

- 05 March 2013: Chávez’s death

After having won a fourth election against Henrique Capriles in December 2012 with 54 per cent of the votes, Chávez struggled with cancer and could not attend his inauguration in January 2013. The president remained in treatment in Havana and then Caracas, where he eventually passed away on 05 March 2013.