

Kate Miller, **VENEZUELA: Framed By the Media**

...Both the American and Venezuelan news media have been guilty of ‘framing’ the Venezuelan situation, not just during the 2002 coup, but for years before and beyond. The term ‘framing’ involves a selection of “certain fragments of perceived reality and making them more prominent in text... [in a way that is] not necessarily neutral in a political or ideological sense. By emphasizing [these fragments] and omitting others, [the] media can promote their own political agendas” (Delacour, 2005). The Venezuelan media used this method to propagate anti-Chavez sentiments that fueled the coup, and the American media used the same method to draw support from the otherwise uneducated recipients of the ‘framed’ news reports.

While Chavez, like most leaders, has definite imperfections in governing tactics, he was democratically elected by the Venezuelan people, and that fact deserves more respect than it is given. News coverage from Venezuela and America constantly attempt to “undermine the legitimacy of [a cesspit] government and destroy the president’s popular support” (Lemoine, 2002). This situation could be manageable and unthreatening if the truth of the matter were more widely publicized, but the danger arises when people around the world begin accepting every “framed” story that is printed about Venezuela. Whether the biased news is the cause or the legitimate product of mounting concern, the corrupt press is gaining power over the situation.

The prime example of media injustice is seen in the reporting done during the coup from both Venezuela and America and the blatant lies it turned out to be several days later, when the truth was finally circulated. Many newspapers and television stations were forced to either print a retraction or apologize for their shameless attempt at manipulating the opinion of its readers; some did so, others did not.

Preceding and following the days of the coup, the private media owners made sure that no news was broadcast containing any content with anyone in Venezuela and around the world, protesting the forceful removal of a popular president or condemning the coup itself. On the contrary, not only did the media stations not remain neutral, ads shown on Venevisión, a privately-owned opposition station, done with the intent to rally Venezuelans to protest Chavez and instigate a coup, were all paid for by the oil industry. Another powerful image, that, ironically, at the time turned many people against Chavez, was of armed counter-demonstrators firing on the crowd of peaceful pro-Chavez demonstrators. It was not shown to the public in this way however, as it has been proven that the film was manipulated to frame the news to show the exact opposite. (*The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, 2002)

The Chavez administration tried to force the television and radio channels to give them fifteen to twenty minutes of air- time to broadcast their presence and views and refute the misrepresentations of Chavez supporters. The broadcasters, however, divided the screen into two and continued to air the “public sentiment” represented by Chavez protesters (Klein, 2003). Islas Rodríguez, Venezuela’s attorney general, held a press conference in which he began to condemn the coup and was immediately taken off the air (Lemoine, 2002). The opposition went so far as to remove all equipment from independently-run radio stations and shut down the only government-controlled television station, Venezolana de Televisión (Lemoine, 2002).

Andrés Izarra worked as a reporter for RCTV in April of 2002. His station along with the three other major television stations (Venevisión, Globovisión and Televen) and two of the major newspapers (*El Universal* and *El Nacional*) dedicated their airtime to covering only the opposition activity for two weeks leading up to the coup. The public did not know that the complete avoidance of Chavez supporters was intentional, and therefore were given to believe that what had happened on April 12 was not a coup, but rather a voluntary resignation by Chavez. There were no official documents to confirm this, but since no one was allowed on the air to report anything to the contrary, it went uncontested. Not only did RCTV refuse to cover the action and manipulate what footage they did show, they went out of their way to film footage in parts of the town where absolutely nothing was happening. (Dinges, 2005) Chavez supporters were very active during this time, but all their efforts were very similar to ‘a tree falling in the forest.’ If no one was there to hear it, no one knew it had happened.

The American press, far from remaining unbiased during this affair, openly flaunted their glee at the forceful removal of Chavez from office. The American coverage of the Venezuelan coup was pretty standard across a whole slew of American newspapers. Stories were published stories that, upon Chavez’s return to office, quickly unraveled and proved to be wrong on many accounts.

The *Guardian* published a story which read that “on Friday [April 12, 2002], Hugo Chavez, the unpopular, dictatorial potentate of Venezuela, resigned. When confronted over his ordering the shooting of antigovernment protestors, he turned over the presidency to progressive, democratic forces, namely, the military and the chief of Venezuela’s business council” (Palast, 2002). Although, this accurately reflected what the influential high-powers of America (government, media and oil industry) enthusiastically hoped to convey to the public as truth, there were very few statements that could hold up to a fact check. The *Guardian*, along with most other American media forums, leapt over the fact that Hugo Chavez had been democratically elected president by sixty percent of the Venezuelan population, a higher margin than President Bush can boast, and instead focused on solely what supported their agenda. The American public, however, that has been fed lies and distorted information for so long, has no way of understanding that the “news” is in fact not an accurate representation of the truth.

The embellished and unsubstantiated news was not confined to the *Guardian*, and spread in very similar words throughout America and Britain. The *New York Times* declared that, “Chavez’s resignation meant that Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator... Chavez stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader... Venezuela urgently needs a leader with a strong democratic mandate, [one who is not] a ruinous demagogue” (FAIR: US Paper Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move, 2002).

No paper stressed the undemocratic process of a military coup, and a few even praised the forceful military take-over. The April 14, 2002 issue of the *Chicago Tribune* cheered the overthrow of the “elected strongman” and could not mask its excitement in a statement declaring that, “It’s not every day that a democracy benefits from the military’s intervention to force out an elected president... [and now that Chavez] is safely out of power and under arrest, [Venezuela will hopefully be able] to move onto better things [because they would no longer be under control of a leader who] toasts Fidel Castro, flies to Baghdad to visit Saddam Hussein, and praises Osama bin Laden” (FAIR: US Papers

Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move, 2002). Long Island's *Newsday* praised the coup for ejecting Chavez, who had a "confrontational leadership style and left-wing populist rhetoric, ... openly flaunted his ideological differences with Washington, [and showed his] incompetence as an executive [by] mismanaging the nation's vast oil wealth."

Other countries, including Mexico, Argentina and France did not share America's views and openly condemned the coup, but their disgust was not broadcast in America or Venezuela (Klein, 2003). It was not until Chavez had been restored to office that the worldwide disapproval of how the Chavez opposition handled the situation, was finally able to pressure the media to revoke their misleading and offensive comments.

Three days after the *New York Times* initial April 13, 2002 statement, they published a follow-up statement saying that they were aware they may have taken it a little too far, but "in his three years in office, Mr. Chavez [had] been such a divisive and demagogic leader [and] his forced departure last week drew applause at home and in Washington. That reaction, which we shared, overlooked the democratic manner in which he was removed. Forcibly unseating a democratically elected leader, no matter how badly he has performed, is never something to cheer." The *Los Angeles Times* took a similar approach and while they were not willing to retract how they felt about the situation, saying "it goes against the grain to put the name Hugo Chavez and the word 'democracy' in the same sentence," they were slightly apologetic with a statement that "[by not opposing the coup] the White House failed to stay on the side of democracy, [and] Venezuela will benefit if the [coup teaches Chavez to stop isolating the Venezuelan people] along class lines" (FAIR: US Papers Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move, 2002).

The *Chicago Tribune* was confronted about the above April 14, 2002 statement by the committee for Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting, and while they published a follow-up two days later stating that "although Chavez's return may have come as good news to Latin American governments that had condemned his removal as just another military coup, that doesn't mean it's good news for democracy," they made no attempt to correct any errors they made in reporting Chavez's connection to Osama bin Laden and the inaccurate references they made about the details of the coup itself. *The Washington Post* took a very different approach and remained neutral by saying that "any interruption of democracy in Latin America is wrong, the more so when it involves the military (FAIR: US Papers Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move, 2002).

### **The Response**

Hugo Chavez himself, his administrators and his supporters have all borne the brunt of constant attacks with very little means of prevention or retaliation. The foci of these attacks are innocent people who are helpless against accusations of funding and planting weapons, as is Chavez against comparisons made between him and Idi Amin, Mussolini, Hitler, a fascist, dictator or tyrant. An overwhelming 95 percent of the Venezuelan media, including newspapers, radio and television are actively involved in not only promoting anti-Chavez sentiments, but going so far as to "mount unrelenting daily attacks on the government unhindered" (Pilger, 2006). It has become crucial to try and implement some changes in how news is spread in Venezuela and to diminish the media's abuses of their freedom of expression.

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