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### Devil or Democrat? Hugo Chávez and the US Prestige Press

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## Devil or Democrat? Hugo Chávez and the US Prestige Press

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**Abstract** Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has emerged as an outspoken challenger to US geopolitical preeminence in the Americas. This study explores the framing practices employed by mainstream newspaper outlets in the United States in their coverage of President Chávez over a ten-year time period—between 1998, the year he was first elected president, and December 2007. This content analysis examines media output from a number of influential newspapers: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. Using an inductive approach, I identify and critically assess the dominant media frames that emerged over this time period: the Dictator Frame, the Castro Disciple Frame, the Declining Economy Frame, and the Meddler-in-the-Region Frame. I also explore how journalistic norms—like personalization, dramatization, novelty, and authority-order—inform media coverage of this key Latin American leader.

### Introduction

In August 2004, after Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez emerged victorious in a national recall referendum, *The Washington Post* reported that this electoral success could allow the president to “tighten his grip on more of the country’s institutions.” Readers were reminded that Chávez is “a former army lieutenant colonel who led a failed coup in 1992,” whose triumph would allow him to attempt to spread his influence throughout the region, “championing like-minded movements throughout Latin America and maintaining close ties with Cuban President Fidel Castro.” Lest readers think this could be a positive development, *The Washington Post* turned to Michael Shifter, an analyst at Inter-American Dialogue, a DC-based policy think-tank, who asserted, “Most people in Latin America recognize that his record has been pretty bad as president of Venezuela. I don’t think this is the new hope, or the new way.” The article concluded, “US officials have expressed concern that Chávez could be emboldened to step up his activism in Latin America, where he has embraced anti-American groups in El Salvador, Ecuador, Bolivia and other countries,” despite President Chávez’s claims to the contrary.<sup>2</sup> Hard-news articles like this one were bolstered by opinion commentary, such as *The Wall Street Journal*

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Casey Nishimura at Pacific University for outstanding research assistance. Thanks also to Robin Hahnel, Regina Lawrence, and Kaia Sand for their helpful feedback as well as Joseph Peschek and the anonymous referees for their constructive comments.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan, “Chávez Defeats Recall: Monitors Endorse Venezuelan Vote, Margin is Wide,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2004, p. A1.

editorial that dubbed former US President Jimmy Carter a “dupe” for the Carter Center’s assessment that the election was free and fair. The editorial describes Chávez as “anti-American” and “a strongman,” a term usually reserved for unelected dictators. Typical of editorials during this time period, *The Wall Street Journal* asserted, “Chávez has a record of abusing the rule of law to gather ever-greater political control. He has allied himself with Mr. Castro and is promoting instability throughout the region.”<sup>3</sup>

How are we to make sense of these portrayals of Hugo Chávez? Is such deprecatory coverage common or rare? What are the main ways the US media describe Chávez and his Bolivarian movement for social, economic, and political change? Are there plausible alternative frames that the media could adopt in their depiction of this key geopolitical figure?

In *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*, Richard Gott contends: “The image of the Bolivarian Revolution that reached the outside world was seriously distorted by the writings of a handful of foreign journalists, notably those writing for ... *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Rarely have political developments in an important country ... been so inadequately reported and analyzed by the foreign media.”<sup>4</sup> In this paper I systematically and empirically test this claim.

### Mass-Media Framing and Journalistic Norms

The power of the mass media reverberates throughout the sociopolitical sphere. The media exert their power through agenda setting, a process by which the media select which issues and problems to depict as the most important. As media scholars Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer A. McGrady put it, “The media’s issue agenda becomes the public’s agenda. This is particularly true in the case of national and international issues, about which the public has almost no opportunity to learn from firsthand experience.”<sup>5</sup> The media also exert influence through priming: “a process by which news coverage influences the weights that individuals assign to their opinions on particular issues when they make summary political evaluations.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, news outlets shape the criteria that the news-consuming public uses to make political judgments, influencing what people think about and forging the contours and boundaries for how they think about it.

A central way the media offer discursive boundaries for political thought is through framing. According to media and communications scholar Robert Entman, framing is “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.”<sup>7</sup> By selecting certain aspects of the whirl and swirl of political reality and deeming them salient, the media play a vital role in the

<sup>3</sup> “Hugo, Jimmy and Colin,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2004, p. A12.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gott, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer A. McGrady, *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 5.

heave and flux of political power. Political scientist Thomas E. Nelson highlights the agency of journalists, asserting frames are “alternative descriptions or interpretations of the same information, problem, or solution.”<sup>8</sup> Media framing processes affect citizens’ formation of political beliefs and their reassessments of such beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

The mass-media processes of agenda setting, priming, and framing do not necessarily emerge from smoke-filled, clandestine enclaves where media owners, editors, and journalists huddle and plot. More often than not, such processes emerge as important byproducts of the network of norms and values that guide journalistic production. “First-order norms” of journalism include personalization, dramatization, and novelty.<sup>10</sup> Personalization is the media’s proclivity to foreground “the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events” while placing the bigger sociopolitical picture on the back burner.<sup>11</sup> With this norm, human-interest stories trump deeper structural analysis. The dramatization norm favors stories that brim with controversy and suspense. As such, this norm favors short-term, immediate crises over longer term social problems.<sup>12</sup> The novelty norm dictates that if information is not new, then it does not qualify as newsworthy. This penchant for newness privileges the fresh and new-fangled and eschews repetition and the known. These three “first-order norms” affect both the decision of what is news as well as the content of the news.

Journalism’s “second-order norms” build from this foundation through preference for authority-order and balance.<sup>13</sup> The authority-order norm favors turning to authority figures as news sources; these authority figures tend to assuage fears of social and political unrest, promising that order and normality will soon be reinstated. As W. Lance Bennett notes, such “political coverage involves keying a story to disagreements among officials—particularly officials with the power to affect the outcome of the developing news event.”<sup>14</sup> This norm quietly tightens the discursive band around sociopolitical issues. Another “second-order norm” is balance: telling “both” sides of the story. With balance, media workers, according to Entman, “present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equal attention.”<sup>15</sup> Referencing “legitimate spokespersons” points back to the authority-order norm and demonstrates the complex interlacing of journalistic norms. Related to these “second-order norms” is the mass-media concept of indexing. According to Iyengar and McGrady, “Indexing is the process of adjusting coverage of an issue according to the level

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Nelson, “Policy Goals, Public Rhetoric, and Political Attitudes,” *Journal of Politics* 66:2 (May 2004), p. 582.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas E. Nelson and Zoe M. Oxley, “Issue Framing Effects on Belief Importance and Opinion,” *Journal of Politics* 61:4 (November 1999), pp. 1040–1067.

<sup>10</sup> Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, “Climate Change and Journalistic Norms: A Case Study of US Mass-Media Coverage,” *Geoforum* 38:6 (November 2007), p. 1192.

<sup>11</sup> W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Boykoff and Boykoff, *op. cit.*, p. 1192; *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Boykoff and Boykoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 1192–1193.

<sup>14</sup> W. Lance Bennett, “An Introduction to Journalism Norms and Representations of Politics,” *Political Communication* 13 (1996), p. 376.

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. Entman, *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 30.

of disagreement and debate about that issue among policy elites.”<sup>16</sup> Although indexing can sometimes be an effective way for journalists to cut to the crux of an issue or problem, it can also artificially constrict discourse—thereby narrowing public debate—and often in ways that subsidize the status quo.

### Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, and the Bolivarian Revolution

Mid-20th-century Venezuela saw the intensification of economic modernization and a shift toward political liberalization. In 1958, Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown by a coalition of military leaders, Church officials, politicians, journalists, and a dissatisfied public, ending his ten-year regime. On the heels of the coup, the *Junta Militar de Gobierno* led by Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal helped swerve the country toward democratic governance. This was a historical pivot point, as Venezuela eventually became one of South America’s longest-lasting democracies.<sup>17</sup> In the early days, three political parties dominated the landscape of this democracy: *Acción Democrática* (AD), *Comité de Organización Política Electoral* (COPEI), and *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD). Top officials from these three parties signed the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* in 1959, vowing to respect the election outcome in anticipation of a power-sharing agreement. Representatives from the dominant parties assumed the mantle of leadership, with political leaders from AD and COPEI filling the presidency. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan military stood quietly on the political sidelines and petroleum emerged as a key source of revenue.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1980s, governmental corruption was rampant and Venezuela hopped with great hope and verve onto the train of neoliberal capitalism. In this period, real per capita income took a nosedive, plunging by more than 25%, which was more severe than anywhere else in South America. Consequently, poverty vaulted to 65% in 1996, from only 17% in 1980.<sup>19</sup> The two dominant political parties—AD and COPEI—were viewed by the general public as corrupt, ineffective, and out of touch with most of the population. Such dissatisfaction culminated in 1989 with the *Caracazo*, an uprising triggered by a severe gas-price hike. This economics-driven discontent buoyed the leftist *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), which scored high vote totals in the municipal elections of December 1989. The *Caracazo* was repressed viciously by the state with estimates of more than 1,000 people killed.<sup>20</sup>

This set the stage for the rise of Hugo Chávez, a military man from a lower middle-class family who made use of the armed forces as one of the few vehicles for social mobility in Venezuelan society. Unlike most militaries in Latin America, Venezuelan armed forces allowed soldiers to climb from the lowest to the highest ranks, along the way offering them a university education often secured outside the confines of the military academies.<sup>21</sup> Chávez followed this trail, ultimately

<sup>16</sup> Iyengar and McGrady, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> H. Michael Tarver and Julia C. Frederick, *The History of Venezuela* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 98–100.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101–121.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Wilpert, *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power: The History and Policies of the Chávez Government* (New York: Verso, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Michael McCaughan, *The Battle of Venezuela* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), pp. 63–66.

<sup>21</sup> Wilpert, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

spearheading a failed coup attempt in February 1992 amid the economic spasms and dislocations of the neoliberal era. After surrendering, Chávez experienced a flash of fortune when the government allowed him time to speak on national television to notify other coup participants that he had been captured and that they should surrender. In a key passage, he said “Comrades: unfortunately, for now, the objectives we had set for ourselves were not achieved in the capital city” so “now is the time to reflect. New opportunities will arise and the country has to head definitively toward a better future.” According to Chávez’s biographer Bart Jones, the unanticipated consequence of this television appearance was that Chávez “instantly captivated millions of people” while “giving a face to a faceless rebellion.” Chávez’s key phrase—“for now,” or *por ahora*—became “the most popular slogan on the streets,” infusing the population with hope that the rebels would return.<sup>22</sup>

The Venezuelan people would not have to wait long for Chávez to resurface politically. In 1998, running on a *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario* (MBR-200, or, Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement) ticket, Chávez railed against the neoliberal, Washington-consensus economic policies the Venezuelan government had promoted for roughly two decades. Such rhetoric helped him win the Venezuelan election on December 6, 1998.<sup>23</sup> Yet, unlike previous presidential candidates who had talked the anti-neoliberal talk, Chávez also walked the anti-neoliberal walk. According to Venezuela analyst Gregory Wilpert, “The key ingredients for Chávez’s revolutionary Bolivarianism can be summarized as: an emphasis on the importance of education, the creation of civilian-military unity, Latin American integration, social justice, and national sovereignty.”<sup>24</sup> Chávez has instituted a series of social and economic programs to press forward with what he calls “the Bolivarian revolution” or “21st century socialism.” In addition to launching a substantial adult education program, Chávez has used oil receipts to fund what the government calls the “social economy,” which is a network of programs—such as health care clinics and food subsidies—aimed at lifting the lowest socio-economic classes from poverty. The Chávez government also moved vigorously to create and support worker-owned cooperatives, and initiate communal councils that would exercise local autonomy and scaffold processes like participatory budgeting and other localized economic development projects. All the while, the Chávez government has, in the estimation of economist Robin Hahnel, gone “out of its way to not threaten the private sector.” Although the president brought Venezuela an ambitious plan for a radical restructuring of Venezuelan society, he has done so in a concerted, incremental fashion.<sup>25</sup> In a sense, Chávez has fomented more of a discursive-cultural rupture than structural political-economic rupture, but still, events are gliding in a non-neoliberal capitalist direction.

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<sup>22</sup> Bart Jones, *Hugo! The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution* (Hanover: Steerforth Press, 2007), pp. 157–158.

<sup>23</sup> McCaughan, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–85.

<sup>24</sup> Wilpert, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Robin Hahnel, “Venezuela: Not What You Think,” *ZNet*, December, 5 2007, available online at: <<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=14438>>.

### Data Sources and Methodology

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez emerged as a serious presidential candidate in 1998, the US media keenly followed his entrance onto the electoral political terrain. Since that time, the mass media have provided substantial coverage of his often-turbulent tenure as the president of Venezuela, since he has often met the baseline standards for first-order and second-order journalistic norms. A systematic reading of newspaper articles, editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor constitutes the empirical data for this study. The articles were compiled through three databases—*Lexis-Nexis*, *Newspaper Source*, and *ProQuest*—using the search term “Hugo Chávez.” Searches spanned the time period beginning January 1, 1998, and extending through December 31, 2007. Data sources include three major US newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.<sup>26</sup> Due to these news outlets’ wide circulation, national stature, and sway on public opinion, the three newspapers represent an influential slice of the US mass-media system.<sup>27</sup> Their power reverberates throughout the United States, as numerous regional and local newspapers republish both their hard news and opinion pieces.

The amount of news coverage varied from year to year based on happenings in Venezuela surrounding Hugo Chávez, geopolitical concerns, and the political climate in the United States. Combining all newspaper articles produced a total article count of 979 articles relevant to Hugo Chávez over the ten-year period (Figure 1).<sup>28</sup> Rather than reading a random sample of articles, we read all 979 news packets.<sup>29</sup> Of the articles collected, 79.8% of them were hard news stories, and 20.2% were opinion pieces (op-eds, editorials, or letters to the editor). Of the news outlets under examination, *The New York Times* offered the most coverage

<sup>26</sup> Originally, in order to gain wider geographical coverage, a research assistant and I included five major newspaper sources, the other two being *USA Today* and *The Chicago Tribune*. This gave us a total initial article count of 2,421. After compiling the articles from these two sources, we found that coverage of Chávez was quantitatively limited. Therefore, we decided to exclude these two sources, purging their 246 articles, giving us a new initial article count of 2,175 articles.

<sup>27</sup> In terms of circulation, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* rank 3, 2, and 7, respectively, according to media PR firm Burrells Luce. See: <[http://www.burrellsluce.com/top100/2007\\_Top\\_100List.pdf](http://www.burrellsluce.com/top100/2007_Top_100List.pdf)>.

<sup>28</sup> We arrived at this total of 979 articles, commentary, editorials, and op-eds through a two-step process. First, we carried out searches via *Lexis-Nexis*, *Newspaper Source*, and *ProQuest* using the aforementioned search terms. This process rendered 2,175 articles. Second, we read each news packet to detect and eliminate pieces that were either irrelevant or that considered Chávez only peripherally. This second step also included removal of duplicate articles produced by search-engine quirks. This reduction method served two purposes: (1) purging 1,196 superfluous articles, and (2) garnering an initial assessment of what the dominant frames were. Pressing toward parsimony, this list of dominant frames was refined by assessing a random sample of 40 articles (four from each year) from the three newspapers.

<sup>29</sup> A research assistant and I measured intercoder reliability by separately coding a random sample of 40 articles (again, four from each year under consideration, although this was a different set of 40 than we used for the frame identification process). Our reliability test achieved 92.9% coder agreement, well within the acceptable range of reliability coefficients articulated by Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002), pp. 142–143.

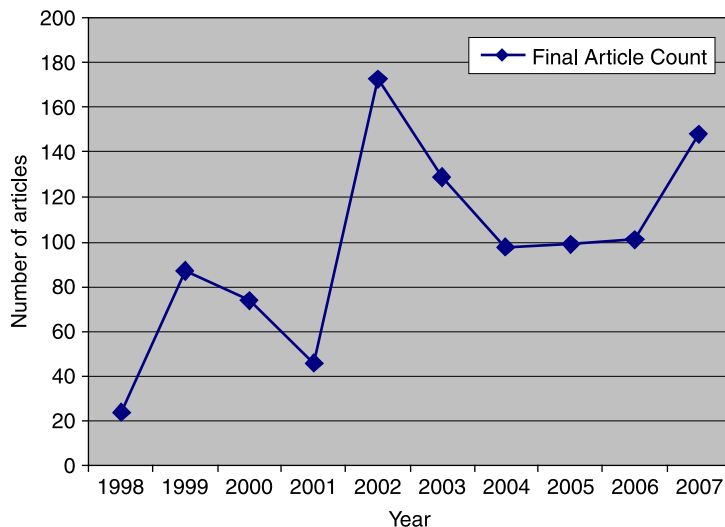


Figure 1. Longitudinal distribution of hard news and op-eds.

of Chávez (45% of the articles), followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (30%) and *The Washington Post* (25%).

### Framing Hugo Chávez: Four Frames

*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* adopted four dominant frames when covering Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian revolution: the Dictator Frame, the Castro Disciple Frame, the Declining Economy Frame, and the Meddler-in-the-Region Frame.

#### *Dictator Frame*

Despite the fact that during the time frame under study Hugo Chávez won three presidential elections (in 1998, 2000, 2006) and shepherded through a new constitution with the help of a Constituent Assembly (in 1999), the media frequently painted him as a dictator, demagogue, or autocrat with “authoritarian tendencies.”<sup>30</sup> Readers were often told Chávez was a dissent-muzzling human rights violator with a penchant for crushing the oppositional media. In signal phrases introducing Chávez, readers were regularly reminded that the former paratrooper was involved in an attempted coup against Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992. The Dictator Frame was common in both hard news and opinion pieces; in fact, it was the dominant frame that emerged in this study, with 53.4% of all articles in this study framing Chávez as a dictator or demagogue. *The Washington Post* applied the frame the most, in almost three of every five articles it printed (59.8%) followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (52.4%) and *The New York Times* (50.5%).

<sup>30</sup>Marc Lifsher, “Venezuela Wants Trading Company to Sell Oil in US,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2003, p. A13.



The Dictator Frame emerged as Chávez worked the campaign trail in 1998. In *The Washington Post* story covering the campaign, the opposition defined Chávez, predicting his future stance: “Branded by his detractors as a reckless dictator-in-waiting with leftist leanings, Chávez, 44, has created a sense of uneasiness with both his proposals and his defiant, high-voltage campaign style.” Such “high-voltage” campaigning included a vow to prevent voting corruption by mustering election monitors to ensure the integrity of the vote-counting.<sup>31</sup> The media allowed Chávez’s fervent opposition to demarcate the boundaries of the debate over Chávez, which was a common facet of coverage over the ten-year period. This makes sense, given the media’s aforementioned penchants for drama, conflict, and larger-than-life personalities.

After the 1998 election, *The New York Times* published an article titled, “In Latin America, the Strongman Stirs in His Grave,” with the following lead: “All across Latin America, presidents and party leaders are looking over their shoulders. With his landslide victory in Venezuela’s presidential election on Dec. 6, Hugo Chávez has revived an all-too-familiar specter that the region’s ruling elite thought they had safely interred: that of the populist demagogue, the authoritarian man on horseback known as the caudillo.”<sup>32</sup> In the years that followed, Chávez was often referred to as a “strongman,” a term usually reserved for unelected dictators.

The opinion pages also featured the Chávez-as-dictator assessment, with Mary Anastasia O’Grady—a columnist who penned numerous venomous screeds against Chávez in the ensuing years—bundling a number of the dominant frames: “Mr. Chávez is an ex-army lieutenant colonel who attempted a coup d’état in 1992 and failed. His strongest backing comes from the poor, to whom he directs bitter anti-establishment, nationalist rhetoric. His use of violence in 1992, his visit to Cuba in 1994, his left-wing demagoguery against ‘savage’ neoliberalism, his circle of friends ... and his pledge to draft a new constitution frightens many Venezuelans. They worry that he will try to create a dictatorship.”<sup>33</sup>

When Chávez used democratic mechanisms to push through a new constitution, which was promulgated in December 1999, the media again turned to the opposition to offer sharp criticism and claims that Chávez was a dictator-in-the-making. *The New York Times* article quoted opposition politician Senator Alberto Fanceschi of the Project Venezuela Party, who asserted that Chávez “wants complete power, as in a banana republic, so that his followers can go to the constituent assembly and propose tropical monarchy with Chávez as emperor.”<sup>34</sup> According to Venezuela analyst Gregory Wilpert, the vehemence of the Chávez opposition stemmed from “the elimination of the country’s former governing elite from nearly all centers of political power,” which “made Chávez wholly unacceptable to this elite.”<sup>35</sup> Over the years, this opposition would unveil an array of strategies to unseat Chávez, including a military coup.

<sup>31</sup> Serge F. Kovaleski, “Former Coup Leader Leads Race for President of Venezuela,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1998, p. A27.

<sup>32</sup> Larry Rohter, “In Latin America, the Strongman Stirs in His Grave,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 1998, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Anastasia O’Grady, “Venezuelans Brace for a Lurch to the Left,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Larry Rohter, “Power Quest Drives Leader as Venezuela Goes to Polls,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1999, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Wilpert, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

The coup occurred on April 11, 2002 amid a general strike that had been called by business leaders and union heads. The US became the first and only country to recognize the new government headed by ex-oil executive Pedro Carmona. Strangely, an unnamed US official even refused to recognize that what happened was in fact a coup, asserting, "That is not a word we are using. We do not think that is an accurate description of what happened."<sup>36</sup> White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer argued Chávez's unexpected ousting was actually the president's fault: "We know that the action encouraged by the Chávez government provoked the crisis." The lead of a story in *The Washington Post* demonstrated the authority-order norm: "The Bush administration yesterday blamed former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez for the events that led to his forced resignation and arrest, calling his toppling by the nation's military a 'change of government' rather than a coup. Officials said Chávez's departure was the will of Venezuela's people."<sup>37</sup> *The Washington Post's* editorial page concurred with the Bush administration, asserting that "facts from Venezuela suggest that the violation of democracy that led to the ouster of President Hugo Chávez Thursday night was initiated not by the army but by Mr. Chávez himself" and that Chávez might have been democratically elected but that since then he "seriously compromised the integrity of democratic institutions such as Congress and the courts."<sup>38</sup>

Through an unpredictable series of events, and throngs of people who had taken to the streets in protest of the president's removal, Chávez was rescued and restored to power, a mere 47 hours after he was forced to resign. In the immediately subsequent years, he proceeded with more rhetorical caution, survived a devastating oil strike in 2002–2003, and won a popular referendum in 2004 that kept him in power, much to the opposition's chagrin. Meanwhile, adhering to the journalistic norms of personalization and dramatization, the media railed against him, with *The Wall Street Journal* op-ed arguing "Mr. Chávez long ago ceased to qualify as a democratic leader. His verbal assaults and state-sponsored aggression against property owners, political opponents, the church, the judiciary and the media demonstrate his idea of how democracy works."<sup>39</sup> *The New York Times* quoted Representative Henry Hyde (R–IL) warning that the newly elected president in Brazil—Luis Inacio Lula da Silva—could possibly team up with Chávez and Cuba's Fidel Castro as a Latin American "axis of evil."<sup>40</sup> *The New York Times* also turned to Moises Naim, a former Venezuelan trade minister who attacked Chávez as a dictator, even comparing him to the Islamic revolutionaries in Iran in 1979: "What we know is that Chávez intends to stay in power at any cost." Given what we know about the president's efforts to advance

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<sup>36</sup> Scott Wilson, "Leader of Venezuela is Forced to Resign," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2003, p. A1.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Slevin, "Chávez Provoked His Removal, US Officials Say," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2002, p. A17. For an in-depth look at the role the United States government played in the coup, see Eva Golinger, *The Chávez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> "Venezuela's Breakdown," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2002, p. A20.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "The French Liberal Who Foresaw Venezuela's Mobocracy," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2003, p. A11.

<sup>40</sup> Juan Forero, "Latin America's Political Compass Veers toward the Left," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2003, p. 4.

his programs through democratic elections, the media's coverage could just have plausibly been reframed as a desire to maintain democracy at any cost.<sup>41</sup>

In what became the classic construction of the Dictator Frame, the journalist relied wholly on the claims of disgruntled members of the opposition, as with *The New York Times* story that reported, "Opposition leaders accuse Mr. Chávez, who promises to improve the lives of the poor, of governing like a dictator and mismanaging Venezuela, Latin America's fourth-largest economy."<sup>42</sup> This "he said" (often without the balance norm's "she said") construction frequently emphasized unsubstantiated oppositional claims. Often the US government played a key role in this equation of anonymity: "US officials say Chávez, who has been twice elected, is undermining democracy by centralizing authority and thwarting political opposition." These unnamed US authorities also argue through a guilt-by-association logic that, "Chávez flaunts his close association with Cuban leader Fidel Castro, says he may seek nuclear technology from Iran and suggests he may break off relations with the United States."<sup>43</sup>

The opinion pages of these three newspapers roiled with the Dictator Frame. *The Wall Street Journal* op-ed by Mary Anastasia O'Grady claimed there were gross "human-rights violations carried out by the Venezuelan military" and that "One is left to ponder why so many human-rights groups that have long monitored Latin American military abuses are now so passive toward Mr. Chávez's jackboots."<sup>44</sup> The same author asserted in a subsequent op-ed that Chávez has "totalitarian aspirations" and that his administration is "draining the last bit of freedom out of Venezuelan society." She argued that "Since he came to power in 1999 he has been perfecting his impersonation of an egotistical Cuban dictator, railing against his political adversaries, free enterprise, the media, the Catholic Church et al. He invites property invasions, foments hatred, and threatens opponents with retaliation."<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile *The Washington Post* editorialized that Chávez "continues to behave as if he has no intention of giving up his attempt to push through a quasi-totalitarian, quasi-socialist 'revolution,' regardless of what his people may want."<sup>46</sup> In an editorial titled "Coup by Technicality," *The Washington Post* also blamed Chávez's "crackpot populism and authoritarian methods" for the recall referendum of 2004. Portraying Chávez as the perpetrator of a "Kafkaesque coup," *The Washington Post* asserted, "Unless he can be restrained, Mr. Chávez may complete his destruction of one of Latin America's most enduring democracies."<sup>47</sup> To press the point further, Jackson Diehl penned an op-ed for *The Washington Post* claiming Chávez was "first elected on a platform of demagogic populism" and that he has "become a friend to otherwise friendless

<sup>41</sup> Ginger Thompson and Neela Banerjee, "In Anti-Strike Step, Venezuela Plans to Split Oil Company," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2003, p. A6.

<sup>42</sup> Juan Forero, "Venezuelan Leader, Battling a Recall, Mocks Bush," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2004, p. A3.

<sup>43</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Rice Urges OAS to Back Democracy," *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2005, p. A14.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Chávez's Law: The Beatings will Continue Until Morale Improves," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2003, p. A13.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Read the Fine Print on the Chávez Charm Offensive," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2003, p. A11.

<sup>46</sup> "A Vote on Mr. Chávez," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2003, p. A38.

<sup>47</sup> "Coup by Technicality," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2004, p. A22.

dictators, demagogues, and terrorists around the world. He was one of the last heads of state to visit Saddam Hussein in Baghdad; he has called Robert Mugabe a 'warrior for freedom.'<sup>48</sup> *The New York Times* followed up on this in December 2005 with an editorial that pointed to "dangerous concentration of power" under Chávez, "a quasi dictator" who is engaging in "petulant idiocy." It concluded, "The United States should not further feed Mr. Chávez's ego and give him more excuses for demagoguery by treating him as clumsily as it has treated his hero and role model, Fidel Castro, for the past four and a half decades."<sup>49</sup>

### Castro Disciple Frame

Speaking of Fidel Castro, journalists consistently linked President Chávez to the longtime leader of Cuba and to Cuba in general. As we just saw, Castro was sometimes pegged as Chávez's "hero and role model." In other stories Chávez was depicted as Castro's disciple, acolyte, apprentice, or protégé. Indeed, Chávez does have close ties with Castro and Cuba. As Michael McCaughan writes in *The Battle of Venezuela*, "what began as a strategic relationship would blossom into a lasting friendship."<sup>50</sup> But to foreground this fact time and time again is to tap into long-lasting US-American prejudices, since Castro has—since the early 1960s—been the *bête noire* of the US government. In public opinion polls, Castro has long been viewed as "unfavorable." In 2006, a *USA Today*/Gallup poll found 82% of those polled had an "unfavorable" opinion of the Cuban president. A few years earlier, in 2002, 78% assigned Castro the "unfavorable" assessment.<sup>51</sup> As such, linking Chávez to Castro and Cuba is tantamount to slapping the "unfavorable" label on the Venezuelan president via guilt by association.

To put this in comparative perspective, how often do the media introduce the president of the United States based on that president's closest allies? This usually happens when that ally is relevant to the story. However, relying on the journalistic norm of personalization, the media frequently invoked Castro or Cuba even when they were beyond the purview of the story being pursued. The Castro Disciple frame appeared in 31.4% of all articles, with *The Washington Post* employing the frame most (40.6% of articles), followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (35.6%) and *The New York Times* (23.3%).

<sup>48</sup> Jackson Diehl, "A Missile from the South," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2004, p. A17.

<sup>49</sup> "Hugo Chávez and His Helpers," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2005, p. A14. There was one striking exception to this framing trend. In December 2007, Venezuelans participated in a referendum on 69 proposed changes to the country's constitution supported by Chávez and his allies. In a close vote, the amendments were defeated and Chávez cordially accepted the results, leading to a rare moment where the US press depicted Chávez as having democratic credentials. In the run-up to the vote, Chávez was portrayed as a dictator making a power grab, but after the election he "looked unusually humbled," while "the results showed that Venezuela's institutions remained durable, for now, even in the gale-force winds of an overwrought political environment." Emblematic of this moment, *The New York Times* quoted Bart Jones asserting, "Chávez's detractors have claimed he is a dictator, but he proved his democratic credentials by accepting an electoral defeat. Dictators don't accept defeats." See Simon Romero, "Venezuela Vote Sets Roadblocks on Chávez Path," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007, p. A1.

<sup>50</sup> McCaughan, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>51</sup> These polls are available online at PollingReport.com: <<http://www.pollingreport.com/cuba.htm>>.

Both hard-news articles and opinion pieces regularly drew comparisons between Chávez and Castro. For instance, in an article covering Chávez's 1998 electoral success, *The New York Times* offered readers a description of the president elect: "A fiery orator who has visited Cuba and praised President Fidel Castro, Mr. Chávez has become a symbol of hope through radical change for the four out of five Venezuelans who are poor, and the dangerous devil to the 20 percent who are not."<sup>52</sup> A 1999 *The Wall Street Journal* op-ed built from there, asserting that "The potential dictator [Venezuelans] dread is their elected president, Hugo Chávez, a man who led a failed coup d'état in 1992 and who, upon his release from prison, went to Cuba to hug Fidel Castro."<sup>53</sup>

The "flirtation with Fidel Castro," as *The New York Times* put it in an article called "Venezuela's New Leader: Democrat or Dictator?," gained steam as the years passed.<sup>54</sup> An article in *The New York Times* titled "Venezuelan Leader Finds a Teammate in Castro" offered analysis of a five-day visit Castro was paying to Venezuela, judging the presidential duo as "garrulous" during Chávez's weekly radio show "Alo Presidente." Employing the personalization norm, the journalist called the program—the "Hugo and Fidel Show"—a "gabfest" that "at several points turned into little more than an exercise in stroking a mutual flattery." The reporter also covered a speech Castro delivered to the Venezuelan National Assembly, claiming "Mr. Castro's remarks had a valedictory tone that seemed to indicate that he regards Mr. Chávez as his ideological or spiritual heir."<sup>55</sup> *The Washington Post* editorialized about this same visit in a piece called "The Next Fidel Castro," calling Chávez a "strongman" whose "role model appears to be Cuba's Fidel . . . Mr. Chávez proclaimed that 'our two peoples are one and the same,' and strutted about with his mentor in copycat military outfits. Mr. Castro reminisced that the young Chávez government reminded him of the early years of revolutionary Cuba."<sup>56</sup>

Even when Castro and Chávez were not working together, the media regularly referred to Chávez's ostensible plan to impose a "Cuban-style government" in Venezuela.<sup>57</sup> This accusation often floated from the mouths of unsourced opposition members without affording Chávez supporters space to rebut such vague claims, thereby spurning the balance norm. Other accounts slipped into outright name-calling, with a front-page *The Wall Street Journal* article calling Chávez a "Fidel Castro wannabe" and asserting that his "worst sin, some critics contend, is his close relationship with communist Cuba's dictator Fidel Castro."<sup>58</sup> The prototypical construction of the Castro Disciple Frame often blended with the Dictator Frame, as in this account that appeared in *The Washington Post*:

<sup>52</sup> Diana Jean Schemo, "Venezuelans Elect an Ex-Coup Leader as Their President," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1998, p. A1.

<sup>53</sup> O'Grady, "Venezuelans Brace," *op. cit.*, p. A15.

<sup>54</sup> Larry Rohter, "Venezuela's New Leader: Democrat or Dictator?" *The New York Times*, April 10, 1999, p. A3.

<sup>55</sup> Larry Rohter, "Venezuelan Leader Finds a Teammate in Castro," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2000, p. A8.

<sup>56</sup> "The Next Fidel Castro," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2000, p. A28.

<sup>57</sup> See Ginger Thompson, "Gunfire Kills 2 in Venezuela as March Turns Into Street Fight," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2003, p. A3.

<sup>58</sup> Marc Lifsher, "As Nation Wobbles, Venezuelan Leader Tightens His Grip—Hugo Chávez Rules by Decree, Liberal Use of Television," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2003, p. A1.

“Opponents accuse Chávez of taking near-dictatorial powers after gaining political control of institutions such as the National Assembly. They say he is trying to install Cuba-style communism in Venezuela.”<sup>59</sup>

Whether the media labeled Chávez “an heir to Mr. Castro,”<sup>60</sup> a “disciple” of the Cuban leader,<sup>61</sup> a “Castro-wannabe,”<sup>62</sup> Castro’s “apprentice”<sup>63</sup> or Castro’s “protégé”<sup>64</sup> the media consensus was, as *The Washington Post* put it, that “Mr. Chávez does not genuinely accept democracy or the rule of law.”<sup>65</sup> Even electoral success ratified as free and fair by watchdog groups like the Carter Center were further proof of Castro-esque authoritarianism. *The Washington Post* editorial in the wake of Chávez’s victory in the 2004 referendum claimed the president’s triumphs at the polls “have prompted the erratic former military rebel to accelerate what he calls his ‘Bolivarian revolution’—a push toward authoritarian rule at home and a deepening alliance abroad with Cuban leader Fidel Castro and other antidemocratic movements.”<sup>66</sup>

In a 2003 op-ed for *The New York Times*, Moises Naim contended, “The marriage of convenience between Cuba and Venezuela is rooted in the close personal relationship between the two leaders, with Mr. Castro playing the role of mentor to his younger Venezuelan admirer.”<sup>67</sup> By 2007, some analysts were arguing that Chávez had made an ideological swerve so far to the left that it was he, along with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had become a negative influence on Castro and Cuba. *The Wall Street Journal* op-ed recommended easing the embargo against Cuba for fear this would contribute to Castro and the Cuban people “becoming servants to Mr. Chávez.”<sup>68</sup> Others, like *The Washington Post*’s columnist Eugene Robinson, couldn’t figure out who had taken the reins of the Latin American left: “But Castro’s protege, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, played Castro’s traditional role so effectively that I’m starting to wonder who’s Batman and who’s Robin in this leftist dynamic duo.”<sup>69</sup> Regardless of who was exerting more influence on whom, the media regularly relied on the personalization norm, perpetually underscoring the relationship between Castro and Chávez, thus tacitly offering readers political shorthand that Chávez was, at the very least, not to be trusted.

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<sup>59</sup> Pascal Fletcher, “Government, Opposition Sign Accord in Venezuela,” *The Washington Post*, May 30, 2003, p. A15.

<sup>60</sup> Bob Davis, “Cuban Economists Envision Role for Markets in Post-Castro Era,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2007, p. A1.

<sup>61</sup> “Venezuela’s ‘Revolution,’” *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2005, p. A18.

<sup>62</sup> Robert A. Sirico, “A Caracas Mayor Pays Dearly for Opposing Chávez,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2004, p. A11; Mary Anastasia O’Grady, “Why Fox’s Outrage? Chávez’s Meddling in Mexico,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2005, p. A17.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Anastasia O’Grady, “All About Evo,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2005, p. A15.

<sup>64</sup> Pamela Constable, “For Venezuela, US, a (Very) Little Civility,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2006, p. A14.

<sup>65</sup> “A Venezuelan Monitor,” *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2004, p. A18.

<sup>66</sup> “Watch Venezuela,” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2004, p. A18.

<sup>67</sup> Moises Naim, “Hugo Chávez and the Limits of Democracy,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2003, p. A23.

<sup>68</sup> Mario Loyola, “Reach Out to Cuba’s People,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2007, p. A13.

<sup>69</sup> Eugene Robinson, “Fracaso in Argentina,” *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2005, p. A19.

*Declining Economy Frame*

When Chávez assumed the presidency in early 1999, the Venezuelan economy was struggling to achieve growth. Chávez arrived on the political scene on the heels of the de-nationalization of the oil industry, a strategy not uncommon among countries toeing the neoliberal line. By the end of 1998, the poverty rate had climbed above 50% of the population, with more than one in five Venezuelans living in extreme poverty.<sup>70</sup> In combination with the denationalization—or privatization—trend, the Venezuelan government had internationalized the tentacles of the state oil company—Petroleo de Venezuela, or PDVSA—acquiring a number of oil refineries in Europe and the United States. This had the effect of shifting hundreds of millions of dollars to foreign subsidiaries. According to Gregory Wilpert, “The net result of the internationalization process . . . was that tremendous PDVSA costs that were incurred outside Venezuela were ‘imported’ to the national branch of PDVSA, thus lowering the overall profits and transfers to the government.”<sup>71</sup> This issue was compounded by the fact that Venezuela had a comparatively inefficient state-run oil company. These problems, in turn, decreased the capacity of the government to offer the general population social services and educational benefits.

After Chávez took office, Venezuela was wracked with political instability—including the coup in April 2002 and a devastating oil strike from December 2002 to February 2003—that transmogrified into economic malaise. By the end of 2002, poverty rates had climbed to more than 55%, and extreme poverty had reached 25% of the population.<sup>72</sup> But after enduring the oil strike, Chávez has overseen a steadily improving economy, boosted in part by sky-rocketing oil prices. According to Mark Weisbrot and Luis Sandoval of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, “Since the first quarter of 2003, the economy has grown by a remarkable 87.3 percent.”<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the Chávez government has jumpstarted social spending on education and literacy programs as well as health care, housing, and food subsidies for the poor, from 8.2% of GDP in 1998 to 13.6% in 2006.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, this economic progress is largely glossed over by the US prestige press. These media outlets often assert that Venezuela’s economy is in sharp decline because of the policies and personality of Hugo Chávez. Combined, the three newspapers under consideration featured the Declining Economy Frame in nearly a third of all articles (32%). *The Wall Street Journal* employed the frame at the highest rate (43.8% of its articles), which shouldn’t come as a surprise since the *Journal’s* central focus is the economy. *The New York Times* offered the frame 28.5% of the time while *The Washington Post* used the frame at a 24.1% clip. Longitudinally, use of the Declining Economy Frame tapered off after the oil strike was resolved in early 2003 and oil production started to vault back toward three million barrels a day. The sky-rocketing price of oil also contributed to the gradually diminishing use of this frame, although the frame’s frequency experienced a slight uptick in 2007 (Figure 2).

<sup>70</sup> Mark Weisbrot and Luis Sandoval, “Update: the Venezuelan Economy in the Chávez Years,” Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2008, available online at: <[http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/venezuela\\_update\\_2008\\_02.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/venezuela_update_2008_02.pdf)>, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Wilpert, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> Weisbrot and Sandoval, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

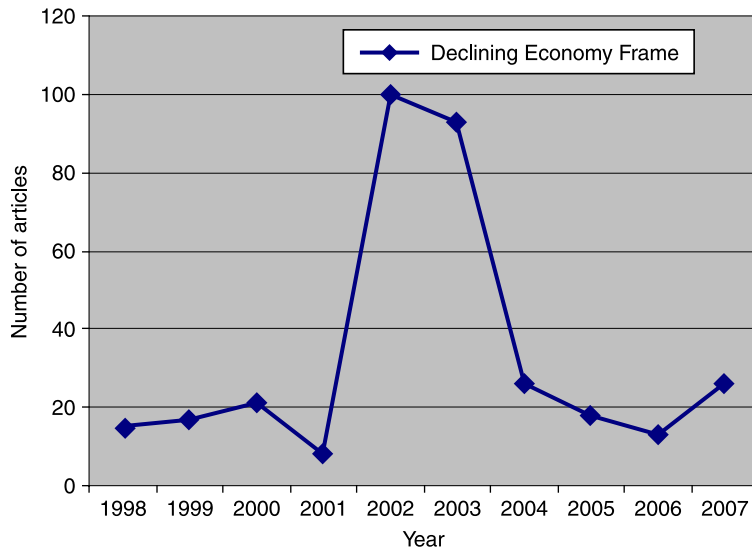


Figure 2. Longitudinal distribution of Declining Economy Frame.

Again, these numbers should not be surprising since, at least through the oil strike and its aftershocks, the economy was struggling. Yet, the newspapers all-too-often flattened the complex situation into a blame-game where Chávez was the prime force behind the economic woe. These media outlets often used unsourced economists to do this. For instance, during the oil strike, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, “Economists blame Mr. Chávez—who has a penchant for heated revolutionary rhetoric and revels in his friendships with Fidel Castro and Moammar Gadhafi—for the political turmoil that has engulfed the world’s fifth-largest oil exporter and brought the economy to a near halt. Economists say Venezuela’s economic situation will continue to worsen as long as Mr. Chávez rejects demands by a large chunk of Venezuelan society for a recall vote on his leadership, either through a referendum or an early election.”<sup>75</sup>

As the oil strike heated up, journalists repeatedly pointed an accusatory finger at Chávez. *The Wall Street Journal* article described a “maelstrom of looting and bloodletting at the hands of armed Chávistas.” After anteing up this violent picture, the article relied on the personalization and dramatization norms, asserting that “Many blame Mr. Chávez for the dark and superheated quality of the conflict” before arguing: “From the beginning . . . Mr. Chávez’s incendiary revolutionary rhetoric and erratic rule have had devastating consequences for the country’s economy, which shrank by an estimated 8% last year, as well as for his popularity. Between 60% and 70% of Venezuelans want him out, according to a range of polls.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Jose de Cordoba and Alexei Barrionuevo, “Venezuela Puts a Halt to Currency Trading—Capital Controls will Follow the Five-Day Suspension; Court Rejects Feb. 2 Vote,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2003, p. A12.

<sup>76</sup> Jose de Cordoba and Marc Lifsher, “Venezuelans, Torn Asunder by Politics, Brace for More—Caracas Residents Fear City May Sink into Maelstrom; Chávez’s Incendiary Rhetoric,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 2003, p. A13.



*The New York Times* continued this thread, questioning the decision of Chávez—"who has long wanted to tighten his control over the state-owned oil company"—to suspend about 100 striking oil executives. The *Times* asserted, "the president says he intends to stay in power. But the price to Venezuela's economy, analysts agree, is hardly sustainable." To hammer home the point, the newspaper turned to a striking oil worker who said, "The opposition underestimated President Chávez's determination to stay in power at all costs. Any other Western leader would have looked at this situation, at the economic and social distress, and would have left office. But Chávez is willing to govern over ruins."<sup>77</sup> In numerous articles, the media deemed Chávez's firing of striking oil workers problematic at best, if not dictatorial. The journalists failed to make the comparison between the mass dismissals and US President Ronald Reagan's firing of striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981. Reagan, a "Western leader," didn't evacuate the presidency when faced with "economic and social distress."

Not surprisingly, the opinion pages were more strident in their criticism of Chávez during the strike. *The Washington Post* editorialized that a "Latin American nightmare is underway." According to *The Washington Post*, "Venezuela [is] ruined and riven by the disastrous attempt of populist President Hugo Chávez to remake the country with half-baked socialism, is mired in a political standoff that risks civil war."<sup>78</sup> The Venezuelan president's op-ed-writing nemesis Mary Anastasia O'Grady went much further, weaving a thick web of deprecatory framing:

There is no question that Mr. Chávez is 'leveling' his country downward. One set of numbers that tell it all is the contraction in gross domestic product from \$120 billion at the close of 2000 to what New York-based investment firm Bear Stearns estimates will be about \$71 billion this year. A chimpanzee tossing darts to make policy could produce better results. Still, this is not fecklessness, but part of a methodical approach to destroying political enemies under the guise of "democracy." It goes hand in hand with so many assaults on the country's institutions. Freedom House's recent release of its 2003 assessment of global press freedom puts Venezuela in its most repressed category. The military and the national oil company PdVSA have both been gutted of professional leadership. Chávez loyalists have replaced them. The judiciary is demolished. There has been a "commanding heights" confiscation of all dollar flows. The government openly supports violent street gangs—called Bolivarian Circles—which enforce Chávez's "popularity" and are advised by thousands of Cubans who are guests of the government. Mr. Chávez has enjoyed warm relations with Castro, Colombian guerrillas and Saddam Hussein.

It's hard to imagine a harsher—and more racism-tinged—assessment than "A chimpanzee tossing darts to make policy could produce better results."<sup>79</sup>

The Declining Economy Frame continued to be employed even after the oil strike, when the Venezuelan economy took a strong turn for the better.

<sup>77</sup> Ginger Thompson, "Venezuela Outlook: Up and Down," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2003, p. A6.

<sup>78</sup> "Venezuela's Stalemate," *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2003, p. A18.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "At State, a Chávez Foe is Labeled a 'Terrorist'," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2003, p. A7.

Conforming to the dramatization norm, unsubstantiated oppositional claims paved a path for this frame, as in *The New York Times* report: "Opposition leaders accuse Mr. Chávez, who promises to improve the lives of the poor, of governing like a dictator and mismanaging Venezuela, Latin America's fourth-largest economy."<sup>80</sup> The opinion pages chimed in using the personalization norm, with *The Wall Street Journal's* O'Grady lamenting "the economic ruin he has wrought"<sup>81</sup> and *The Wall Street Journal* guest writer Vladimir Chelminski making inaccurate claims about "a dramatic deterioration in Venezuelan well-being" under Chávez's "disastrous handling of the economy."<sup>82</sup>

As watchdogs of the neoliberal economic order, *The Wall Street Journal* struggled to make sense of Chávez's economic decisions since they swerved so far from "free-market" doctrines. In this milieu, the newspaper attempted to exert economic discipline: "Statist economic policies have a sorry productivity record and in this case that record is highly unlikely to be improved. The big trouble is that Chávez has put Venezuela on a centrally planned economic path not much different from the failed experiments of the 20th century."<sup>83</sup> This tendency was only exacerbated when Chávez announced plans for what he called "21st century socialism" in January 2005. At this point, the media cast doubt on his economic policy, using "mainstream economists"—i.e., proponents of neoliberal capitalism—to attack his programs and policies. For example, *The New York Times* reported, "political analysts and mainstream economists warn of recession and dourly note that foreign investment is about a third of what it was five years ago. They say that Venezuela's vast oil profits give the illusion of prosperity—the economy's growth rate is 9.3 percent—but that if prices fall, or Venezuela's growing spending catches up, the economy could founder."<sup>84</sup>

Even in 2007, with oil prices catapulting toward \$100 a barrel, the media occasionally fell back on the Declining Economy Frame. In January 2007, *The Wall Street Journal* assured readers:

Mr. Chávez's power grabs have weakened the Venezuelan oil industry, once the pride of the nation ... Mr. Chávez has used the firm to fund numerous social programs that have left the company short on investment. As a result, oil output has fallen sharply, leaving the country vulnerable to a downturn in prices ... Mr. Chávez's free spending may ultimately undermine his expansion plans. Some analysts say that if the price of oil drops well below \$50 a barrel, Venezuela could have a harder time paying its domestic and international commitments.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Forero, "Venezuelan Leader," *op. cit.*, p. A3.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Money Fun in the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2004, p. A13.

<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Chelminski, "Oil Revenues Hide Chávez's Economic Ineptitude," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2005, p. A19.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Oil Wells Refuse to Obey Chávez Commands," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 20, 2005, p. A15.

<sup>84</sup> Juan Forero, "Chávez Restyles Venezuela with '21st-Century Socialism'," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> David Luhnow, Jose de Cordoba, and Raul Gallegos, "Chávez Moves New Socialism to Faster Track; Venezuela Leader Vows to Nationalize Telecom, Electricity Giants," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2007, p. A1.

The newspaper continued its criticism with a dash of alleged monomaniacal behavior: "President Hugo Chávez's threat to nationalize Venezuela's largest steel producer and its banks may have as much to do with the fiery leader's inability to deal with the country's galloping inflation and widespread shortages as with his ideological drive for total state control of Venezuelan economy."<sup>86</sup>

Along the way, numerous media accounts alleged that poverty was on the rise in Venezuela, which is incorrect. O'Grady was guilty of this inaccuracy on multiple occasions, writing in November 2005 that "Venezuelan poverty [is] growing"<sup>87</sup> and in January 2006 that "After six years of Chávez, Venezuelans, once ecstatic about their Bolivarian Revolution, are sinking deeper into poverty."<sup>88</sup> Readers were also poorly served by hard-news accounts that asserted "Venezuela has seen little progress on issues such as reducing poverty"<sup>89</sup> when in fact it had reduced its poverty rate from 62% in 2003 to 33% in 2007.<sup>90</sup>

#### *Meddler-in-the-Region Frame*

The final predominant frame in the media's coverage of Chávez was the Meddler-in-the-Region Frame. This took numerous forms: (1) Chávez as economic counterweight to supranational organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; (2) Chávez as meddler in internal Colombian affairs through support of leftist guerrilla group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and (3) Chávez as noncompliant in the "War on Drugs." Rather than framing Chávez's efforts to integrate Latin America—via the Bank of the South or other measures—as a plan similar to European integration along the lines of the European Union, the press tends to criticize, either explicitly or tacitly, his attempts. Combining all three newspapers, almost one in three articles (31.3%) contained a variation of this Meddler-in-the-Region Frame, with *The Washington Post* using it most often (35.3%), followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (30.5%) and *The New York Times* (29.5%). The frame was much more prevalent between 2003 and 2007 (Figure 3).

Meddler allegations emerged immediately after Chávez assumed office, with Colombian President Andres Pastrana telling *The Washington Post*, "I'm asking Chávez, please stay in your yard and we'll manage our own problems."<sup>91</sup> In 2000 *The New York Times* offered a second variation on this frame: "Mr. Chávez's planned August 10 visit to Iraq appears linked to his desire to persuade poor nations to band together as a counterweight to what he sees as United States hegemony."<sup>92</sup> Indeed this information is correct in that Chávez desires a multipolar world where the US is not the lone hegemon. Yet this foreign-relations

<sup>86</sup> Jose de Cordoba and Paul Glader, "Chávez Moves Suggest Inflation Worry," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2007, p. A4.

<sup>87</sup> O'Grady, "Why Fox's Outrage?," *op. cit.*, p. A17.

<sup>88</sup> Mary Anastasia, O'Grady, "Axis of Evo," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2006, p. A9.

<sup>89</sup> David Luhnnow, Bill Spindle, and Guy Chazan, "Could Weak Oil Cost Venezuela, Iran Clout?," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2007, p. A2.

<sup>90</sup> Weisbrot and Sandoval, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Nora Boutsany, "Venezuela's Aspiring Innovator," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1999, p. A28.

<sup>92</sup> "Breaking Pattern, Venezuela Leader will Visit Iraq on a Tour of Oil Nations," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2000, p. A8.

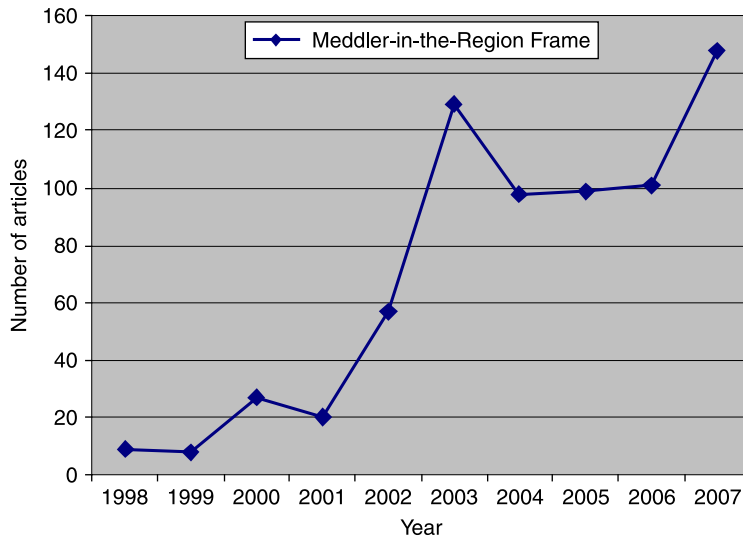


Figure 3. Longitudinal distribution of Meddler-in-the-Region Frame.

fact is rarely portrayed in the terminology of geopolitical balance. More often, Chávez is depicted as a menacing threat to the United States, especially since Venezuela provides the US with so much oil. Chávez's novel, amped-up rhetoric feeds the media's predilection for personalization and dramatization.

A second mass-mediated aspect to Chávez's desire to become a counterweight to the power of the US is that the Venezuelan president is engaging in cunning—and even conniving—calculation and that none of his foreign assistance—whether it be reduced oil prices or loans—comes out of other concerns. This is somewhat surprising given that, since winning office, Chávez has made it clear he's attempting to carry out a Bolivarian project—named after South American leader Simón Bolívar—that improves the integration and geopolitical friendliness of Latin America. Chávez even went as far as to make the point of changing the name of the country in its 1999 Constitution, from the Republic of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. According to Jones, Chávez created numerous initiatives that eschewed the standard profit-maximization impulse in favor of promoting Latin American solidarity: "Instead of competition, he fostered cooperation."<sup>93</sup>

Yet, the Bolivarian agenda was frequently framed less positively in the media, with his internationalism portrayed as "spending billions of dollars of his country's oil windfall on pet projects abroad."<sup>94</sup> *The Wall Street Journal* interpreted Chávez's cooperative efforts as cagey attempts to buy up friends in the international arena:

To his critics, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez comes across as a messianic radical, cozying up to anti-American figures like Iran's mullahs, blasting capitalism as the 'road to hell' and threatening to stop shipping oil to the US, which relies on Venezuela for about 14% of its oil imports. But when it comes to the country's

<sup>93</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

<sup>94</sup> Juan Forero, "Chávez Uses Aid to Win Support in the Americas," *The New York Times*, 4 April 2006, p. A1.

economic centerpiece, the oil industry, the fiery leader is more pragmatic than most realize . . . Mr. Chávez is using his oil billions to buy friends and influence nations, from the Caribbean basin to Patagonia. In the past year, Venezuela has emerged as a tropical version of the International Monetary Fund, offering cut-rate oil-supply deals and buying hundreds of millions of dollars of bonds from financially distressed countries such as Argentina and Ecuador.<sup>95</sup>

In a more toned-down version of the same narrative, *The Wall Street Journal* asserted: "Mr. Chávez is also taking advantage of high oil prices to buy goodwill around the region, emerging as the lender of last resort to cash-strapped countries. This potentially allows them to thumb their noses at the US and the International Monetary Fund, which usually impose conditions on their loans."<sup>96</sup>

The opinion pages implemented the frame in starker terms. For instance, Moises Naim wrote in *The New York Times* that "Venezuela is no longer boring. It has become a nightmare for its people and a threat not just to its neighbors but to the United States and even Europe."<sup>97</sup> *The Wall Street Journal's* O'Grady wrote that Chávez is "bullying, bribing and baiting Latin leaders in his bid for regional power . . . There are no secrets about the Venezuelan agenda. Chávez seeks to suppress dissent at home and expand his 'revolution' to other states in the region. Reaching his domestic goals is connected to his international endeavors because more serious Latin objections to his habit of roughing up the Venezuelan opposition could cause him trouble."<sup>98</sup> *The Washington Post* editorial board concurred with O'Grady, adding, Chávez is "meddling in the affairs of his neighbors and spawning anti-democratic movements."<sup>99</sup>

Surely one of those "anti-democratic movements" *The Washington Post* was referring to was the about-to-be-democratically elected president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, who won the December 2005 election. Morales's rise to power was not looked kindly upon by the mainstream press, and this often had to do with his high-profile connections to Chávez. For instance, in early 2006, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "Since Evo Morales took office as president here in January, the coca grower turned socialist politician has aligned his country so closely with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez that it is sometimes difficult to tell where one government begins and the other ends."<sup>100</sup> *The Wall Street Journal* summed up the media's Meddler-in-the-Region Frame in a 2006 editorial: "Few leaders also work harder than Mr. Chávez to undermine bipartisan US interests around the world."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> David Luhnow and Jose de Cordoba, "With Oil, Chávez Plays It Safe; Venezuela's President Pushes Foreign Companies Only So Far," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 2005, p. A7.

<sup>96</sup> Jose de Cordoba, John Lyons, and David Luhnow, "Despite Cafta, US Clout Wanes in Latin America; Superpower is Seen as Aloof to Concerns of the Region; Yankee Bashing on the Rise," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2005, p. A11.

<sup>97</sup> Naim, *op. cit.*, p. A23.

<sup>98</sup> O'Grady, "Why Fox's Outrage?," *op. cit.*, p. A17.

<sup>99</sup> "Pat Robertson's Gift," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2005, p. A18.

<sup>100</sup> Jose de Cordoba and David Luhnow, "Left Face: New President has Bolivia Marching to Chávez's Beat; Venezuelan Populist Pushes Anti-US Latin Alliance; Has He Gone Too Far?; Cuban Doctors in the House," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2006, p. A1.

<sup>101</sup> "Their Man in Caracas," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2006, p. A26.

### Spaces of Dissent: The Opinion Pages

As we have seen, the opinion pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* often ripple with the four frames that emerged inductively from the data. Yet, the commentary sections of these three newspapers also opened up democratic spaces of dissent where columnists—or more often op-ed guest writers and letter-to-the-editor writers—were able to provide ideas and information to counter, or at least question, the torrent of deprecatory Chávez coverage. A few full-on pro-Chávez op-eds were published as well as letters to the editor that were sympathetic to the Chávez government's political-economic plans.

Op-eds, editorials, and letters to the editor comprised 20.2% of all articles over the ten-year time period. Of the 198 opinion pieces published, 81 were op-eds, 80 were editorials, and 32 were letters to the editor. The framing rates were different in the opinion pieces with 75% employing the Dictator Frame, 38% offering the Castro Disciple Frame, 19% anteing up the Declining Economy Frame, and 35% using a Meddler-in-the-Region Frame.

Although the Dictator Frame was used in three quarters of the opinion articles, these pieces also made space for positive, nuanced coverage of Chávez. While letters to the editor were a place for spreading misinformation, such as a 2006 letter that claimed, "Mr. Chávez's largess toward the poor, the number of Venezuelans living in poverty has risen 10 percent since 1999, when he took office,"<sup>102</sup> they were also a locale for voicing support for Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. The Venezuelan Ambassador to the United States managed to place numerous letters to the editor in all three newspapers, as he attempted to correct information they printed. In fact, he had more letters to the editors published than appearances as a source in hard-news articles.

Some letters—including one from a Georgetown University professor of Latin American Studies—expressed support for Chávez's relationship with Cuba and Cuban doctors who were working in Venezuela.<sup>103</sup> Others, such as *The Washington Post* missive from Bill Fletcher, the President of TransAfrica Forum, chastised *The Washington Post* for "Calling on the United States to meddle in Venezuela's affairs," which "ignores the history of racism, economic oppression and corruption in that country (which resulted in the people choosing Mr. Chávez as their elected leader)." Fletcher also turned the tables in an effort to highlight US exceptionalism: "Where would *The Washington Post* stand if an illegal strike in this country tried to force President Bush from office because of his policies on Iraq?"<sup>104</sup> Such critical-thinking and creative table-turning was virtually nonexistent in the hard-news pages of these papers.

When an op-ed in *The Washington Post* accused Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) of exhibiting a nonchalant attitude toward political stress in Venezuela, Dodd responded with a critical letter to the editor that challenged the newspaper's coverage of the Venezuelan president: "But the reality is that he was democratically elected—a fact *The Post* seems to ignore." Questioning the George

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<sup>102</sup> Juan Carlos Hidalgo, "Poverty and Parallels in Venezuela," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2006, p. A26.

<sup>103</sup> Martin Austerhuhle, "Behind the Turmoil in Venezuela," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2003, p. A14.

<sup>104</sup> Bill Fletcher, "Leave Venezuela Alone," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2003, p. A20.

W. Bush administration's foreign-relations stance *vis-à-vis* Chávez—a stance shared by *The Washington Post's* editorial board—Dodd asserted, “I believe that the institutions of democracy must be nurtured and encouraged, regardless of who is in office. They should not be relegated to the shadows simply because we don't share the political views of an elected leader of the moment. That means we must keep the door open to dialogue.”<sup>105</sup> To their credit, these newspapers were willing to print letters critical of their coverage.

However, this courtesy was extended less frequently to op-ed writers. One exception was an op-ed Mark Weisbrot who wrote for *The Washington Post*, a commentary that widened the relatively banded dialogue about the Chávez administration and its policies. After visiting Venezuela, Weisbrot was surprised to learn that the country differed so vastly from media accounts. Challenging the Dictator Frame, he wrote, “Not only was Chávez democratically elected, his government is probably one of the least repressive in Latin America . . . While army troops are deployed to protect Miraflores (the presidential compound), there is little military or police presence in most of the capital, which is particularly striking in such a tense and volatile political situation. No one seems the least bit afraid of the national government, and despite the seriousness of this latest effort to topple it, no one has been arrested for political activities.” He also undermined the Castro Frame: “To anyone who has been in Venezuela lately, opposition charges that Chávez is ‘turning the country into a Castro-communist dictatorship’—repeated so often that millions of Americans apparently now believe them—are absurd on their face. If any leaders have a penchant for dictatorship in Venezuela, it is the opposition's. On April 12 they carried out a military coup against the elected government. They installed the head of the Business Federation as president and dissolved the legislature and the supreme court, until mass protests and military officers reversed the coup two days later.” Along the way, he offered a comparative lens through which readers could gain a deeper understanding of Chávez's actions, or lack thereof. Referring to the ongoing oil strike, Weisbrot wrote, “Chávez has been reluctant to use state power to break the strike, despite the enormous damage to the economy. In the United States, a strike of this sort—one that caused massive damage to the economy, or one where public or private workers were making political demands—would be declared illegal. Its participants could be fired, and its leaders—if they persisted in the strike—imprisoned under a court injunction. In Venezuela, the issue has yet to be decided.”<sup>106</sup> Readers were served well by this ‘against-the-media-grain’ analysis, as it expanded the range of information presented and offered an eyewitness account that challenged the dominant media narratives, complementing the hard-news repertoire, rather than simply reinforcing it. Not only did opinion pieces sharpen the pitch of the dialogue, but sometimes they deepened the dialogue, too.

<sup>105</sup> Christopher J. Dodd, “Words and Deeds in Venezuela,” *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2005, p. A24.

<sup>106</sup> Mark Weisbrot, “A Split Screen in Strike-Torn Venezuela,” *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2003, p. B4.

## Conclusion

In February, 2006, after Hugo Chávez expelled a US military attaché for allegedly engaging in espionage, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld compared the Venezuelan president to world history's most infamous Nazi: "He's a person who was elected legally just as Adolf Hitler was elected legally and then consolidated power and now is, of course, working with Fidel Castro and Mr. Morales and others. It concerns me."<sup>107</sup> This article demonstrates that Rumsfeld's hyperbolic assessment was not an isolated incident but the discursive culmination of a decade-long process of mass-media framing.

Such framing matters. In their article "Issue Framing Effects on Belief Importance and Opinion," Thomas E. Nelson and Zoe M. Oxley explain, "Through framing, communicators seek to establish a dominant definition or construction of an issue. In a way, issue framing is issue categorization: a declaration of what a policy dispute is really all about, and what it has nothing to do with. Like any social category, issue frames carry perceptual and inferential implications, guiding how their recipients ponder and resolve issue dilemmas."<sup>108</sup> In the case of Hugo Chávez and major press outlets, the Dictator Frame, Castro Disciple Frame, Declining Economy Frame, and the Meddler-in-the-Region Frame send clear "implications" to readers: the Venezuelan president is a demagogic dictator reminiscent of Fidel Castro who has inept political-economic policies and can't keep his mitts out of other people's business. Meanwhile, plausible alternative frames are out there ready to be employed, should journalists wish to do so.

Clearly the media could do better, and sometimes they do. Some journalists offered eye-witness accounts of on-the-ground projects in Venezuela, such as the "mobile field hospitals, which would be dispatched to remote villages and slums as if to a war zone,"<sup>109</sup> and without resorting to deprecatory name-calling. Scott Wilson's reporting for *The Washington Post* in 2003 was consistently notable for its depth and detail. He managed to avoid using the dictator label or quoting opposition figures who make that claim. He also did a reasonably good job widening the range of voices and viewpoints allowed into the discussion, affording space for both elites and non-elites to offer their thoughts on Chávez's policies and programs. In a 2005 *The New York Times* article, Elisabeth Bumiller and Larry Rohter did a commendable job covering a prickly issue—President Bush and President Chávez's impending clash at the Summit of the Americas—without resorting to the media's four go-to Chávez frames. Tenable voices for and against neoliberalism were allowed space to explain their positions.<sup>110</sup> Yet despite these admirable efforts, the media have room for improvement when it comes to covering Chávez. First, the media could cease using filler sources like "some economists" or "opposition members." All too often, these conventions become vehicles for peddling received wisdom. Second, if a source offers inaccurate information, journalists should correct it, rather than uncritically

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<sup>107</sup> Juan Forero, "Chávez Ousts US Diplomat on Spying Charge," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2006, p. A8. Rumsfeld was referring to Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia.

<sup>108</sup> Nelson and Oxley, *op. cit.*, p. 1059.

<sup>109</sup> Boutsany, *op. cit.*, p. A28.

<sup>110</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller and Larry Rohter, "Bush at Hemisphere Talks: Trade Fight Awaits," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2005, p. A8.



printing it as a quotation. Reporters could also do a better job slicing through the ideology being bandied about by all sides. For instance, *The Washington Post* published a wire story from Reuters that allowed televangelist Pat Robertson to spew a variety of unsupported claims (e.g., Chávez wiring \$1 million in cash to Osama bin Laden) without turning to a source to question or refute them.<sup>111</sup> This story coheres with the journalistic norms of dramatization, personalization, and novelty, but it neglects balance and is incompatible with critical journalism that refuses to treat every syllable that drips from a controversial figure's mouth as newsworthy. Journalists should also do their best to avoid falling prey to historical revisionism and tactical euphemism. For instance, the media repeatedly asserted that the US "tacitly backed" the 2002 military coup against Chávez when in reality it was the only country in the region to diplomatically acknowledge the short-lived replacement government. Additionally, journalists need to question their use of indexing and the authority-order norm. United States officials and their elite allies drive the discourse on Chávez. The media ought to more concertedly and consistently link the frames back to their sponsors so readers are clear who is determining the discussion of Chávez and why.

This research could be extended in numerous directions. First, coverage of Chávez in these newspapers could be compared with coverage of other democratically elected leaders who the United States is on better terms with, like Colombia's Alvaro Uribe, as well as flat-out dictators who are US allies like Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf. Also, cross-national comparative studies would tell us whether the results secured here are anomalous to the US media. Finally, a rigorous exploration of who is cited as a source in media accounts depicting Hugo Chávez would be welcome. The "indexing" norm—or, "the journalistic practice of opening or closing the news gates to citizen activists (and more generally, a broader range of views) depending on levels of conflict or political difference among public officials and established interests with the capacity to influence decisions about the issue in question"<sup>112</sup>—would predict that the sources cited would stay within the boundaries of 'acceptable' discourse as set by the president, congress, and other major leaders. This seems to hold for US sources, but the news gates open much wider for sources in Venezuela where the opposition was afforded copious column inches to lay out their anti-Chávez critique. Hopefully researchers will use this study as a stepping stone for additional research on this important topic.

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<sup>111</sup> "Robertson Accuses Chávez of Seeking Nuclear Material from Iran," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2005, p. A12.

<sup>112</sup> Bennett, *News, op. cit.*, p. 4.