

## **From a False Messiah to Just Another Latin American Dictator: Analysis of U.S. Mainstream News Media’s Coverage of Hugo Chávez’s Death**

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Combining constructionist framing analysis and thematic analysis, this research analyzes mainstream U.S. newspapers’ coverage of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s death. Overall, the mainstream newspapers defined Chávez as “a leftist revolutionary passing the torch,” “a populist, yet just another South American dictator,” “a false Messiah,” and “a friend of religious extremists and leaders sponsoring terrorism.” He left behind a “polarized and failed experiment.” As a result, Venezuela faces a “not-so-bright future,” unless it adopts a policy friendly toward the United States. Our findings indicate that the Cold War frame, in this case antisocialism, and the War on Terror frame continued in media coverage of international affairs. They also point to an emerging ideological and cultural framing package in the post-War on Terror era: the free market economy and liberal democracy frame.

*Keywords: image, framing, Hugo Chávez, Cold War, War on Terror, media*

### **Introduction**

In reporting international affairs, U.S. news media usually share and accept the official foreign policy premises and assumptions, and they rarely endorse the conduct of nations that are less than friendly toward the United States (Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). One reason for this is because journalists often heavily rely on governmental sources, which are readily accessible to them, and whose statements are deemed as authoritative and newsworthy (Hallin, Manoff, & Weddle, 1993). Another important reason is ideology, which is a socially shared organizing principal and institutionalized way of seeing the world (Reese, 2007).

In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (1984) argued that the U.S. news media used an anticommunism filter to report international news during the Cold War. This was empirically demonstrated by Entman’s study showing that U.S. media portrayed the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane as a technical problem and the Soviet downing of a Korean jet as a moral outrage. Entman suggested that

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such portrayals were made through "the Cold War frames imposed on international affairs" (Entman, 1991, p. 7).

The Cold War frame largely lost its validity with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. After the September 11 terrorist attack, the War on Terror has become another powerful frame that the media rely on to report international affairs (Reese, 2007). Studies have shown that U.S. media transmitted the Bush administration's War on Terror label as shorthand for government policy. The press reified the policy as an uncontested thing and naturalized it as a taken-for-granted worldview (Lewis & Reese, 2009). The frame shapes U.S. foreign and domestic policy and influences public and media discourse. The media actually contributed to the War on Terror's naturalization as it absorbed the discourse of public figures (*ibid.*). The Obama administration announced in April 2012 that the global antiterrorism war was over (Shapiro, 2012). In May 2013, President Obama said that "Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. But this war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. That's what our democracy demands" (Jackson, 2013, p. 1). However, regardless of the toning down of rhetoric, terrorism continues to be a major security concern. The prevention of terrorism has been advanced by the U.S. federal government as the primary justification for the National Security Administration's collection of metadata on U.S. citizens (Kravets, December 27, 2013). Thus, the War on Terror frame has likely changed over the past few years, but will it continue as an organizing frame in coverage of international affairs? Do the two ideological frames still linger in media reporting of nations hostile toward the United States? Are there any signs that a new ideological framework might be emerging?

Media coverage of the death of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in 2013 offers a unique case to address these questions. In this research, combining constructionist framing analysis and thematic analysis, we analyze U.S. mainstream media's reporting of Chávez's death. Specifically, through this analysis, we want to answer the following questions: What types of themes are manifested in the news texts about the death of Chávez? Are the themes related to the Cold War frame or the War on Terror frame? Or do they point to new frames, given that both the Cold War frame and War on Terror frame have been phasing out?

The case of Chávez's death relates to both the Cold War and War on Terror frames, but it does not fall squarely into either one. Chávez openly aligned Venezuela with Cuba and was a personal friend of Fidel Castro, who is a Cold War legacy (Orsi, 2013). Together the two men denounced global capitalism, free trade, neoliberalism, inequality, and the aggressions of the U.S. "empire" (Bustamante & Sweig, 2008). The Bush administration reportedly supported a coup attempt to oust Chávez (Forero, 2004). Chávez purchased billions of dollars' worth of defense goods from Russia (Associated Press, 2009). He routinely offered to supply the United States with free or discounted petroleum products, especially after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast states (Cole, 2007). All these, along with Chávez's socialist policies at home, echo the Cold War-era competition between the United States and the Soviet communist blocs.

At the same time, Chávez disputed the legitimacy of Bush's War on Terror. He built ties with Syria and Iran, which are openly hostile toward the United States. Chávez supported Iran's right to pursue

nuclear technology and seldom condemned terrorism. As a result, the U.S. Congress convened a hearing in 2006 to debate whether Venezuela was a hub for terrorism (Bonfili, 2010).

Chávez was also perceived as a charismatic leader. At home, his socialist-oriented policies brought dramatic changes to Venezuelans. Internationally, he changed the tenor of North-South relations in the Western hemisphere. His skill as an orator and his penchant for theatrics kept the international media's spotlight on him, and he built a powerful personal brand, which earned him thousands of news reports and media mentions ranging from praise to derision. His death on March 5, 2013, was no exception; it was covered extensively throughout the international media, including the U.S. mainstream media.

The next section explains framing analysis as the theoretical framework for this research. We will review literature on the Cold War frame and the War on Terror frame, the two powerful organizing ideological frameworks for U.S. news media in their reporting of international affairs. We will then introduce the research methods, including thematic analysis and constructionist framing analysis. Finally, we will analyze the news texts, report the findings, and interpret their implications.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This research is conducted within the theoretical framework of framing analysis, which attempts to explain how realities and meanings are constructed through communication and offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993). News is a socially constructed product. It combines journalistic professionalism, institutional structure, news routines as well as culture and ideology. In producing news, journalists use frames to simplify, prioritize, and structure the narrative flow of events (Norris, 1995). Once frames are established, they are institutionalized by news organizations and can be reinforced by professional training, practices, and cultures that strengthen a common interpretation of events (Tuchman, 1978). A frame changes very little or gradually over time, but this does not mean that frames are static. Instead, they are contested by political actors, journalists, and the audience. New frames are selected and others may disappear (Van Gorp, 2007).

Frames determine what is selected, what is excluded, and what is emphasized (Gamson, 1985). They are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion. Through frames, discourse is routinely organized. Frames become a self-reinforcing process that in turn shapes future decisions about the direction of news (Gitlin, 1980). In news texts, frames are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematic reinforced clusters of facts or judgments (Entman, 1993).

Framing is directly related to power and ideology (Gitlin, 1980). News frames are profoundly influenced by their sponsors, who are often the elites within a given society. Frame sponsors are people or groups that create a new frame or leverage an existing frame because it advances their interests (Beckett, 1996). These frames often legitimize existing power structures within a society while suppressing competing frames sponsored by less powerful groups within a society (Reese, 2001). Frame sponsors can

influence the creation of new frames or they can co-opt frames created by challengers, thereby negating their threat (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Thus, dominant news frames create and then perpetuate power inequalities between the elites and everyone else.

This research employs Entman and Van Gorp's theorizing of framing. Entman (1993) suggested that the framing process essentially involves selection and salience. Some aspects of a perceived reality are selected and made more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation from the vast pool of daily occurrences. Van Gorp (2007) suggests that there are three levels of framing: the manifest *framing devices*, the manifest or latent *reasoning devices*, and an implicit cultural phenomenon that displays the *package* as a whole. The manifest framing devices may include metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, visual images, and appeals to principle (Lee, Pan, Chan, & So, 2001). They point to the second level of framing, the explicit or implicit reasoning devices, or the "organizing themes." These themes provide the frame package, the third level of framing, with a coherent structure. Van Gorp (2007) further suggests that the organizing themes are related to the four framing functions that Entman (1993) defined.

In this research, we first identify the organizing themes, or the second level of framing in Van Gorp's categorization. We then identify the framing devices employed to present such themes. Finally, we will examine whether the findings are related to the overall cultural and ideological framing package that dominated U.S. media coverage of international affairs in past decades—namely the Cold War frame and the War on Terror frame. Through such analysis, we hope to answer the following questions: How did the U.S. mainstream media define Chávez as a politician? How did they define the causes that led to his ascendance to power? How did the media judge Chávez's legacy? And, finally, how did the media portray the aftermath of his death and the future of Venezuela?

### ***U.S. Media and Cold War Frames***

The Cold War began shortly after World War II and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As a news frame, it emerged from the conflict between the capitalist Western bloc dominated by the United States and the Eastern communist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union. Many elite Western journalists shared this ideology with their counterparts in government and business. Application of the Cold War news frames helped to perpetuate the ideological dominance of the liberal paradigm (Carragee, 2003), a political philosophy that embraces individual liberty, equality, democracy, and capitalist economic systems (Russell, 2000). However, this frame eventually became contested among Western journalists as it became less likely that the Soviet Union would present a serious military threat to the NATO alliance (Hallin, 1987).

Scholarly studies have shown that the Cold War ideology had a profound effect on how journalists reported world events (Aronson, 1970; Gitlin, 1980). It led Western journalists to select certain international events and issues as newsworthy because they were relevant to the U.S. struggle against the Soviet Union (Hallin, 1986b). These stories provided normative judgments about the issue and may have offered solutions to enhance the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union (Norris, 1995). Carragee

(2003) discovered that *The New York Times* defined the Cold War as an unexplained fact caused by Soviet pursuit of global dominance; thus, it tended to ignore the U.S. role in perpetuating that conflict. Anderson (1988) revealed that this frame had influenced media coverage of South American conflicts. Such coverage simultaneously ignored that these conflicts were often driven by long-standing local political and economic problems (Hallin, 1986a). Herman and Chomsky (1984) discussed how the frame resulted in favorable coverage of strikes in Poland but negative coverage of strikes in Western bloc countries. The Cold War frame has also shaped domestic press coverage of U.S. peace and antinuclear movements. Peace movements opposed to U.S. involvement in South American conflicts were often delegitimized by the U.S. press (Hallin, 1987).

The Cold War frame contains several key features. The first is the Manichean struggle between the good nations of the capitalist West and the evil nations of the communist East. Since the Soviet communists were inherently evil, their foreign policy actions were also usually sinister (Aronson, 1970). The second feature was the belief that the Soviet Union was compelled to continually expand its empire to advance global communism at the expense of free nations (Carragee, 2003). Another key feature of the Cold War frame was that U.S. defense spending and related military activities were justified by the necessity of protecting the world from Soviet imperialism (Meyer, 1995). Research showed that both the U.S. and Canadian press retained the Cold War frame for reporting about Cuba for years after the fall of the Soviet Union (Soderlund, Surlin, & Wagenberg, 1998). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the U.S. media might apply the Cold War frame to Venezuela.

#### ***War on Terror Frame and U.S. Media***

The War on Terror policy of the Bush administration in response to the September 11 attacks was immediately transferred to U.S. journalism and is still prevalent today. This frame was created out of expedience and is ambiguous due to the recondite nature of the conflict (Lewis & Reese, 2009). The frame is an ideological frame, which is broad and encompasses a set of ideological assumptions (Handley, 2010). This frame has much in common with the Cold War frame, since both embrace a Manichean us-versus-them struggle. The forces for good in this frame are the democratic and capitalistic nations of the liberal paradigm led by the United States. These good nations embrace freedom, secularism, human rights, and free markets. The forces of evil are Islamic terrorists, nominally led by Al-Qaeda. They embrace theocratic tyranny, oppression of women and minorities, and primitive economic practices (Powell & Abadi, 2003).

However, the War on Terror frame is more complicated than the Cold War frame. The enemy is not a clearly defined nation-state like the Soviet Union, led by rational men who wanted to avoid a nuclear holocaust. The new enemies are mostly nonstate international networks of loosely affiliated terror cells, allegedly supported by a few states such as Iran and Syria (McGeary et al., 2004). This ambiguity over who actually is a terrorist creates possibilities for many people or groups to be classified as terrorists. Any nation that is not friendly toward the United States, such as Venezuela, could be placed into this frame if it can be linked somehow to terrorism against the liberal world order.

Another key aspect of this frame is the portrayal of terrorists as people. The terrorists are often characterized as suicidal religious fanatics incapable of reason, and, unlike the Soviets, they cannot be

negotiated with. Thus, they will kill and destroy at every appropriate opportunity until they are dead or captured (Semati, 2010). Due to the ambiguous nature of the frame, people not connected to Al-Qaeda groups can be included in this frame. Handley (2010) found that the War on Terror frame was applied to the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel, because they employed methods similar to Al-Qaeda. Given that the U.S. Congress had attempted to brand Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism, we want to find out whether the War on Terror frame was manifested in U.S. media reporting of Hugo Chávez's death.

### **Method**

#### ***News Texts***

This research selected four major U.S. newspapers and one wire service: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the Associated Press. The newspapers were selected because they have an international news-gathering ability and extensive international coverage. They are major sources of information among U.S. political elites and command serious attention among U.S. policy makers (Cose, 1989). The newspapers used articles written by their own staff. A total of 32 news articles were selected from March 5, 2013, when Chávez died, until March 9, 2013, when his funeral was held. The articles were either obituary-style news stories about his life or stories about his death. We used online stories because they are usually lengthier and have more information than printed and broadcast news, which are shortened due to time and space limitations.

#### ***Analysis of Texts***

To analyze the news texts, we combined thematic analysis and constructionist framing analysis. Thematic analysis was used to determine what themes emerged from the text. Framing analysis was used to identify the framing devices that were employed to express such themes. As research methods, the two approaches may look at different aspects of a text, and they may overlap. Neuendorf (2002) suggested that in framing analysis, a series of manifest variables can represent a latent concept. This essentially means that explicit framing devices could be identified so as to reveal underlying themes. The concept of thematic framing, defined by Iyengar, (1993) as news frame that places public issues in some more general abstract context, also points to a close relationship between framing and themes. The second level of framing analysis as categorized by Van Gorp (2007) was the manifest or latent *reasoning devices*, which is also referred to as "organizing themes." This is where thematic analysis overlaps with framing analysis. Van Gorp suggests that the organizing themes are related to the four framing functions that Entman (1993) defined. Thus, a combination of framing analysis and thematic analysis are methodologically valid.

*Thematic analysis.* A theme is a pattern found in the information that describes and organizes observations as well as interprets aspects of a phenomenon. It can be observed at the manifest level and at the latent level (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). Thematic analysis as a qualitative research method searches for such patterns (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). Its goal is a latent understanding of underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies behind the data rather than simple enumeration (Hoy, Childers, & Morrison, 2012). There are two approaches to thematic analysis: a data-driven inductive approach and a deductive

a priori template of codes approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This research uses an inductive approach, identifying themes that emerge directly from the data.

Themes are identified during analysis through careful reading and re-reading of the text (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Boyatzis (1998, p. 11) outlined four steps of inductive coding: first, sensing themes, or recognizing codable moment; second, doing it reliably, or recognizing encoding moment and doing it consistently; third, developing codes, and, finally, interpreting the theme in the context of a theory or conceptual framework. The coding process is similar to the grounded theory approach, starting with detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories and to suggest relationships among categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We compared the emergent categories, and similar recurring categories were merged and grouped. The process continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories (Sanderson, 2008). Finally, the major themes were interpreted relating to theories on news reporting and foreign policy as well as ideology.

*Constructionist framing analysis.* In news texts, framing is manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforced clusters of facts or judgments (Entman, 1993). These are called framing devices by Van Gorp (2007) in his three-tiered categorization of framing. We used the four dimensions of Entman's framing theory—promotion of a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—to organize our findings, because they are essentially the major themes (Van Gorp, 2007). Next, when we identified the themes, we also recorded the framing devices that are used to express the themes, including metaphors, stock phrases, keywords, and key quotes and sources. We interpreted our findings in reference to the Cold War frame and the War on Terror frame.

### **Findings**

The dominant frame in the U.S. media was that Chávez was a typical South American dictator. The next most prevalent frame was that Chávez was "a leftist revolutionary passing the torch" (Forero & Diaz, 2013B, para. 3). The third most common frame was a portrayal of Chávez a "false Messiah" and "a friend of religious extremists and leaders sponsoring terrorism." According to this frame, Chávez ascended to power by "helping and utilizing the poor" and by "consistent manipulation." His death had "little impact on global markets." He left behind a "polarized and failed experiment," although for the moment he is an "irreplaceable man" for Venezuelans. As a result, Venezuela faces a "not-so-bright future" unless it adopts a policy friendly toward the United States. Finally, his successor is incapable of carrying on his legacy.

*RQ 1: How did U.S. mainstream media define Chávez as a politician?*

### ***A Leftist Revolutionary Passing the Torch***

Although Chávez was a democratically elected president, the newspapers consistently analogized him with leftist revolutionary figures, such as Lenin and Mao, who seized power through violence.<sup>1</sup> One *Wall Street Journal* article is titled "Like Lenin, Mao, Chávez to Be Embalmed" (Minaya & Luhnnow, 2013, para. 6). He was called a "larger-than-life firebrand socialist" (Sanchez & Bajak, 2013a, para. 1) and a "larger-than-life leader." His policy was called a "take-no-prisoners brand of socialism" (Haven, 2013, para. 15). All the newspapers stated that Chávez's "heir apparent," Nicholas Maduro, had stated that Chávez would be embalmed and displayed for the public. *The Wall Street Journal* stressed this comparison to leftist revolutionaries the most. It quoted a history professor as saying, "We are now going to have a tropical Lenin" (Minaya, 2013, para. 4).

Chávez was frequently compared to fellow Venezuelan Simón Bolívar, who led a successful continental revolution against the Spanish crown. This is a subtle allusion that Chávez fancied himself as the new Simón Bolívar fighting against the United States. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "Chávez sought to build a role as a regional leader by flamboyantly defying what he called the 'Yankee Empire'" (Kraul, 2013b, para. 2). *The Wall Street Journal* described how in 1983 Chávez and fellow officers swore a "secret oath" under a tree where Bolívar had camped (De Córdoba & Sara, 2013, para. 10).

The most common metaphor was that Chávez was passing or carrying the torch of revolution to his leftist anti-American disciples in Latin America (Forero & Diaz, 2013b, para. 3). The Cold War was referenced when *The Washington Post* depicted Chávez's ascendance to power: "Chávez was the first of wave of Latin American leftist leaders who have won and held on to office since the Cold War era" (Forero & Diaz, 2013a, para. 8). *The Wall Street Journal* stated, "With Fidel Castro's sway waned since the Cold War's end, Mr. Chávez took the mantle of 'revolution' fighting U.S. 'imperialism'" (Sara & Johnson, 2013, para. 3). He "revived the leftist movement" in Latin America and helped others such as Rafeal Correa in Ecuador rise to power (Forero & Diaz, 2013B, para. 19). However, the papers varied in rating Chávez's effectiveness as a revolutionary figure. *The New York Times* questioned his credentials as a socialist. He was called "an ideological . . . chameleon," because his policies were inconsistent and often contradicted his stated ideals (Neuman, 2013d, para. 16). *The Washington Post* openly doubted that Chávez's "self-styled revolution" would leave any lasting influence in Venezuela and throughout South America (Forero, 2013b, para. 22).

### ***A Populist, Yet Just Another South American Dictator***

Chávez was also defined as just another South American military dictator, albeit a very charismatic and more humane one. His 14 years of governing was "a virtual one-man show" (Sanchez & Bajak, 2013b, para. 11). The "ultra-charismatic Chávez" had "parlayed a folksy nationalism and stiff

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<sup>1</sup> A relevant example is that *The New Yorker* mistakenly reported that Hugo Chávez, "Venezuela's flamboyantly radical President," seized power through a military coup. See Anderson (2013).



resolve into a virtual one-man government" (Haven, 2013, para. 27). He was a "magnet for Venezuelans" (De Córdoba & Luhnnow, 2013a, para. 42). He had "a televangelist's gift for oratory" (Romero, 2013, para. 2). The persistent metaphor referred to Chávez as a caudillo—a military dictator. One *New York Times* article described Chávez as "strutting like a strongman in a caudillo novel," and that his followers called him "Comandante," but he was "not a stock figure" (Romero, 2013, para. 4). *The Washington Post* caustically stated that Chávez "walked a fine line between pop hero and strongman" (Arana, 2013, para. 5). *The Wall Street Journal* called him a "classic petro-dictator," meaning he was successful because oil money allowed him to buy loyalty. His leadership style was a "highly personalized brand of oil-enabled populism" (Miroff, 2013, para. 6).

A poignant *Los Angeles Times* article described how Chávez compared Venezuela to France in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The newspaper stated, "After all, he [Victor Hugo] wrote '*Les Misérables*' while in exile for protesting Napoleon's rule, a point Chavez seem to have overlooked altogether" (Hendrix, 2013, para. 10). The essential point here is that being a legitimate savior to the poor is thoroughly incompatible with imposing authoritarian rule. The Associated Press story extensively documented how Chávez was mostly eulogized by authoritarian leaders of countries such as Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba (Orsi & Satter, 2013).

#### ***A False Messiah***

Another common theme is that Chávez was a false messiah. He was deemed "a silver-tongued preacher-in-uniform" from the beginning (De Córdoba & Luhnnow, 2013, para. 18). The Associated Press described how Chávez's attempts to be a "savior of poor floundered in U.S.," and he would "never be able to foster" such an image within the United States (Armario & McGill, 2013, para. 2). He was a "quasi-religious figure, the Jesus Christ of the poor" (Kraul & Mogollon, 2013b, para. 4). He "breathed life into Cuba" (Romero, 2013, para. 7). His friends and supporters ascribed him godlike qualities and "compared him to Jesus Christ" (Haven & Castillo, 2013, para. 8). *The New York Times* cited President Ahmadinejad of Iran as saying, "Mr. Chávez would surely return to earth once the Shiite 12th Imam, who according to the sect's beliefs is a messiah, would come to liberate the world" (Burnett, 2013, para. 16).

These attributions appeared to be a subtle jab at Chávez's image. An American whom Chávez assisted was quoted as saying, "I told him that I knew he was not a God, but that I had a good cause" (Robles, 2013, para. 3). He was eulogized as a "Christ-like savior" who was "thrust into his new role without wanting it" (Forero, 2013, para. 3). His successor attempted to sustain such an image: "In death the government is ramping up the adoration of the messianic leader as it tries to ensure the survival of Chavismo" and "Chavismo is morphing into a type of religion" (De Córdoba & Sara, 2013, para. 1, 6).

#### ***A Friend of Religious Extremists and Leaders Sponsoring Terrorism***

All the newspapers mentioned that Chávez was more than casually associated with leaders of extremist nations alleged to have supported terror organizations. *The New York Times* cited Chávez's personal correspondence with terrorist Carlos the Jackal (Romero, 2013). The newspapers took notice of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presence at the funeral. *The Wall Street Journal* referenced

how Iran's unusually close ties with Venezuela made people in both countries nervous (Fassihi, 2013). Such references may have highlighted Chávez's anti-American stance, but more likely they are insinuations that he, to an extent, supported terrorism.

*RQ 2: How do the U.S. mainstream media define the causes that led to Chávez's ascendance to power?*

### ***Helping, but Also Utilizing, the Poor***

All the newspapers agree that Chávez rose to power through his populist appeals to Venezuela's poor. They used quotations from poor supporters referencing his care for them and how this earned their loyalty. The *Los Angeles Times* made frequent and prominent references to the fact that Chávez did, in fact, reduce poverty. The newspaper cites a quote as saying, "To millions of poor Venezuelans excluded from meaningful participation in politics, Chávez offered hope for a new kind of democracy that would open the doors of government to them" (Kraul, 2013b, para. 7). A *New York Times* article stated that Chávez's main achievement was transforming Venezuela's common citizens' perceptions of themselves. He awoke their "class-consciousness" and made them "feel respected" (Neuman, 2013b). *The New York Times* stated the Chávez's social welfare programs "made the poor feel included in a society that long ignored them" (Romero, 2013, para 8). A consistent picture is painted in all the newspapers: Chávez won his support from the poor, and they rewarded him with unfailing political loyalty.

### ***Consistent Manipulation***

Several newspapers described Chávez as a master manipulator. The "cult of personality" was a common element throughout (James & Bajak, 2013, para. 14). In many cases, these specific words were not used but were implied. A powerful opening statement in a *Washington Post* article read, "To lead and to seduce have a single root in the Latin language. They are intimately tied in Venezuela as well." Later, the article called Chávez an "illusionist" (Arana, 2013, para. 4). An Associated Press article stated, "Chávez masterfully exploits the disenchantment of people who feel excluded . . . and feeds on controversy whenever he can" (James & Bajak, 2013, para 24).

*The Washington Post* discussed a system of "electoral patronage known as Bolivarianism" in Venezuela (Forero & Diaz, 2013a, para. 5). An Associated Press article described Chávez supporters as "the mostly lower classes who followed him almost blindly"—implying that loyalty to Chávez was an irrational emotional response (Castillo, 2013). These elements imply that Chávez seduced the poor and manipulated them in some manner. Like many authoritarian dictators, Chávez often "played the anti-American card" (Armario, 2013, para. 19).

*RQ 3: How do the media judge Chávez's legacy?*

### ***A Polarized Society and Failed Experiment***

At Chávez's death, the U.S. mainstream newspapers agreed that he left behind a polarized Venezuela and a failed social experiment. He was a failure as a leader despite his popularity and efforts to

reduce poverty. *The Wall Street Journal* stated that, even before his death, Chávez's model "has lost much of its appeal, mostly hobbled by corruption, inefficiency and almost entirely dependent on high oil prices" (Sara & Johnson, 2013, para. 14). Specifically, he was a failure because he was a divisive, polarizing leader who abused the law. The newspapers suggested that none of Chávez's accomplishments were sustainable and that Venezuela is an economic disaster. *The New York Times* called him "polarizing" (Romero, 2013, para. 1). *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "Even in death, Mr. Chávez was a polarizing figure for his nation" (Minaya, 2013, para. 14).

One Associated Press story carried a headline "Wealthy Venezuelans Shedding No Tears for Chávez." It stated that Chávez "polarized Venezuela" between the lower classes, who "followed him almost blindly," and an opposition "that despised what they said was his autocratic bearing, intolerance for dissent and mismanagement of the economy" (Castillo, 2013, para 3). *The Wall Street Journal* exemplifies this point: "Food shortages, unemployment and poverty are all worsening, and a recent devaluation has sent the bolívar to new lows in the black market" (O'Grady, 2013, para. 15). The newspaper criticized Chávez for allowing Venezuela to have "the highest murder rate in the world" (Roth, 2013, para. 10). The country is now facing "huge debts, souring inflation and chronicle shortages" (Forero & Diaz, 2013a, para. 9).

### ***Death Had Little Impact on Global Markets***

Two newspapers used entire stories to point out that Chávez's death had little influence on the oil market. *The New York Times* reported that "Mr. Chávez's death on Tuesday has had surprisingly little impact on global oil markets." The newspaper attributed this to Chávez's policy to reduce Venezuela's oil production and exports, which eventually undercut its global power (Krauss, 2013, para. 2). The Associated Press, in a story titled "Little Reaction in Oil Market to Chávez Death," stated that "Oil markets are taking the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in their stride with the price of crude little changed Wednesday" (Gordondi, 2013, para. 1).

### ***The Irreplaceable Man***

The media agreed that Hugo Chávez was an irreplaceable personality for Venezuela. The *Los Angeles Times* cites a source as saying, "Chavismo is very much going to continue without Chávez, but it will never be the same" (Williams, 2013, para. 6). The *Washington Post* also cited two sources saying that Chávez's legacy would continue in Venezuela: "Chávez's legacy is his legacy, and there will likely be continuity" (Forero & Diaz, 2013a, para. 16).

*RQ 4: How do the media portray the aftermath of Chávez's death and the future of Venezuela?*

### ***A Not-So-Bright Future If Not Following U.S. Model***

Chávez was said to have burdened his successor with a "monumental task" of repairing the country (Sequera & Rueda, 2013, para. 26). His supporters are portrayed as being clearly determined to carry on his socialist legacy. According to the newspapers, Chávez's social welfare programs cannot be

undone. *The Wall Street Journal* quoted a source as saying, "You can't take away his social programs . . . the political cost would be too high." The newspaper predicted that Chávez's successor would be another dictator: "It [the election] will be merely a formality designed to legitimize the next dictator" (O'Grady, 2013, para. 3).

Meanwhile, the Associated Press questioned "whether the former paratrooper's socialist agenda would survive him and for how long" (Haven, 2013, para. 15). Other Latin American countries show signs that Chávez's style "is being edged out by a moderate, market friendly version." The newspaper pointed out that countries that had "free-trade deals with the U.S. and Europe," such as Mexico, Peru, and Colombia, "are largely growing faster and are more stable than Venezuela and Argentina" (Sara & Johnson, 2013, para. 1). Further, "Cuba, Venezuela's closest ally, is struggling economically. Argentina is beset by inflation. Ecuador and Bolivia are more absorbed by internal politics than ideological struggles. And nations with close U.S. ties, like Mexico, are making economic gains by comparison" (ibid.).

### ***An Incapable Heir***

The media portrayed Chávez's successor, Nicholas Maduro, as being incapable of filling Chávez's shoes (Sara & Johnson, 2013, para. 29). He was portrayed as having all of Chávez's faults with none of his strengths. *The New York Times* wrote that Maduro was "Taking a page out of Mr. Chávez's time-tested playbook" by expelling two U.S. military attachés (Neuman, 2013a, para. 14). *The Wall Street Journal* quoted a Venezuelan, "Chávez had an aggressive policy but I think Maduro could be even more radical" (Minaya, 2013, para. 11). An Associated Press article sums up this sentiment with "Chávez was a showman. Maduro is not" (Sanchez & Bajak, 2013c, para. 14). His "Jekyll-and-Hyde-like behavior" "stoked worries about a future government" (Haven, 2013, para. 29).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Combining constructionist framing analysis and thematic analysis, this research reveals some interesting themes and framing devices in major U.S. newspaper and wire service coverage of Hugo Chávez's death. These themes, along with the Cold War and War on Terror framing devices, indicated that the Cold War frame of antisocialism continued in U.S. mainstream media's coverage of Venezuela's social revolution. The media cast Chávez as a Marxist opposed to the liberal paradigm in general and the United States in particular. He was depicted in references to Fidel Castro of Cuba and Carlos Fonseca of Nicaragua during the Cold War. However, unlike the Soviet Union, Chávez's Venezuela posed no security threat to the United States or to the dominance of the liberal paradigm. In addition, what Chávez practiced was not draconic Soviet-style communism. Thus, instead of using explicit anticommunism rhetoric, the media focused on discrediting Chávez's socialist programs and his policies to help the poor, which were portrayed as part of his manipulation and power play. *The Wall Street Journal* repeatedly stressed that other Latin American countries that adopted pro-U.S. policies were better off than Venezuela, while ironically neglecting the fact that the U.S. and European economies had been in a quagmire at the same time.

Additionally, the War on Terror frame is used by the newspapers. Chávez may be friendly with leaders of many nations, but his association with Syria and Iran was frequently mentioned. This, on the one hand, highlighted his anti-American stance. On the other hand, it appeared to be consistent with one of the key themes of the Bush administration's War on Terror policy: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (The White House, 2013, para. 29). Since Chávez did not stand with the United States, his relations with Syria and Iran naturally appeared suspicious to the U.S. mainstream media.

Furthermore, Hugo Chávez was framed as a South American populist caudillo with a unique talent for theatrics, in a long line from Juan Perón to Fidel Castro. Chávez cared for his nation's poor. This distinguished him from a regular dictator, who rules with an iron fist and does not raise the standard of living. Despite his efforts to relieve poverty, Chávez was generally framed as ultimately a failure. He failed in two major regards. First, he left behind an economic disaster through his "mismanagement." Second, Chávez was an authoritarian ruler who frequently subverted democracy and flagrantly violated the civil rights of anyone who opposed him.

These two points suggest the emergence of, or return to, the ideological and cultural framing package of free market economy and liberal democracy. In the years immediately after the end of the Cold War, the liberal democracy frame became momentarily dominant in media discourse. This was represented by Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the "End of History," but it was soon replaced by the War on Terror frame (Fukuyama, 1992).

Our findings corroborate the observation of continuity between the Cold War and the War on Terror frames, which were sponsored by U.S. political and corporate elites. Both frames hold that the United States must provide leadership for a chaotic world and lead it toward the adoption of democracy and free market economic systems. They both have an open-ended nature with no immediately clear end state short of vanquishing all serious competition to the liberal paradigm. These frames therefore justify a potentially never-ending series of U.S.-led conflicts across the globe (Carragee, 2003). In addition, we found little variation in the mainstream media's portrayal of Hugo Chávez. This reflected the homogeneity tendency of the U.S. media in their coverage of international affairs, or the "media consonance" termed by Noella-Neumann (1973). That is, they tend to cover the same issue in the same way, and there is a notable absence of diverse perspectives that would be expected in a culturally diverse country such as the United States. These frames may also serve as evidence to corroborate the argument by the propaganda model that the mainstream media as elite institutions commonly frame news and allow debate only within the parameters of elite interests (Herman, 1996). Interestingly, some Spanish language studies about Hugo Chávez highlight the contrast between Latin American and U.S. media. For example, Fumero (2013) studied 700 Tweets about Chávez's illness for the thread #elmundoestaconchavez ("the world stands with Chávez"). He found that most of the tweets (85.6%) favorably concerned his health, compared to 14.4% of negative comments. Vazquez (2012a) examined framing of left-wing Latin American leaders on Twitter. Among the 59 tweets about Chávez, most praised his actions as moral.

Previous studies have identified that the media employ economic consequence frames (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). We found that one of the themes in the newspaper coverage is that Chávez's death had little impact on global oil markets. But such frames are mainly the reasoning devices (themes) rather

than the overall ideological framing packages. In the post-War on Terror era, however, the market economy and liberal democracy frame has the potential to become the dominant cultural and ideological framework for media discourse. News media may primarily use this framework in their reporting of international affairs. This research has tentatively revealed some of the dimensions in the framework, including impact on global markets, free trade deals with the United States, and respect for civil rights. Future research may further explore this proposition.

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