

## **“A Foot in Both Worlds<sup>1</sup>”: Transnationalism and Media Use Among Venezuelan Immigrants in South Florida**

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The Venezuelan population in the United States has grown over 90% in the past decade. Many of these arrivals have settled in South Florida, already home to a number of Venezuelan enclaves and a center for Spanish-language media. The context of departure and arrival of these immigrants presents an opportunity to investigate the role of the media in the ability of immigrants to live transnational lives. This study employs a series of semi-structured interviews with members of this community; the results are analyzed in order to draw out, describe, and explore the themes that emerge. The goal is a better understanding of the role of the media as these immigrants adjust to life in their new country while remaining attached to that which was left behind.

### **Introduction**

Since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, the number of Venezuelan immigrants in the United States has grown 94%, making them the fastest growing Latino sub-population in the United States (Semple, 2008). A majority of them have settled in South Florida, particularly in the Miami metropolitan area, where there is a heavy concentration of Spanish-language media. Among these are a growing number of weekly newspapers, radio stations, Web sites, blogs, and Internet networking groups aimed at the Venezuelan community. Combined with the uncertain political, social, and economic context in which many of these recent arrivals left their home country, this population provides a unique opportunity to investigate the role of the media in the formation of a 21<sup>st</sup> century immigrant community, and to uncover how these factors are related to the multiple theoretical facets of research on transnationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> (See Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Szanston-Blanc, 1994, p. 23.)

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Many claims have been made about the influences of media use and connectivity on the immigration process and experience, as well as about the growing ability of immigrants to live transnational lives with "a foot in both worlds" (Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Szanston-Blanc, 1994). However, the terms "transnational" and "transnationalism" often suffer from overuse and ambiguity. Some critics have sought to dismantle claims about the relative newness of the phenomenon (Morawska, 2001), while others have questioned whether or not this is a field that bears further interpretation, arguing that transnational ties are still highly particularistic and delimited by political constraints and traditional boundaries (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Furthermore, very little research has focused solely on media use and connectivity among transnational communities. Using a series of in-depth interviews with members of the Venezuelan community, this research helps to further advance and define the study of transnationalism by exploring the role of media use in the development of immigrant communities, as well as how and to what extent this use spans borders and creates transnational connections and identities.

At the heart of this investigation lie the following questions: What role do media play in a community of transnational immigrants from a country undergoing a period of intense political, economic, and social transformation? Additionally, the research being conducted seeks to shed light on how media is related to adaptation and assimilation in the host country. Finally, due to the considerable number of Venezuelan community media outlets in South Florida, it is important to ask what role these particular media, information outlets that focus heavily on events in Venezuela while providing a platform for local voices, play within the formation of the identity of the community.

Media use among transnational immigrant communities lies at the nexus of complex historical and social forces. The study of media and migration has been closely tied to theories of nationality, modernity, and globalization, as researchers from a variety of disciplines have tried to make sense of the mass movement of diverse populations across borders (Appadurai, 1996; Morley, 2007). As "diasporic public spheres" are created outside of politically defined borders (Appadurai, 1996, p. 22), the new social realities created through relocation present an alternative to the "imagined communities" that define geographically bounded nations as outlined by Anderson (1983, p. 6). This has forced researchers to reconsider how the nation-state is being impacted by the forces of globalization and increasing deterritorialization of populations (Basch et al., 1994; Ong, 1999), as well as what it will mean for immigrant communities as they learn to adapt to their host countries while remaining connected to their homeland. Through increasingly available communication technologies, connectivity, and perceived simultaneity, as well as the ubiquity of globalized media, a situation has been created where immigrants create identities that span borders and break down traditional barriers of time and space (Albrow et al., 1997; Levitt, 2001; Portes, 1999; Robins & Aksoy, 2005).

Transnationalism is certainly not a new phenomenon; indeed, an article from 1916 in *The Atlantic* on the growth of immigrant enclaves that resisted the social forces of the nation's "melting pot" was titled "Trans-National America" (Bourne, 1916). Around the same time, the initial volumes of Thomas and Znaniecki's seminal work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1920), were being published, providing the first in-depth, empirical investigation into the forces and processes behind modern migration by exploring the transnational connections among the nearly two million Polish immigrants that arrived in

the United States between 1880 and 1910. These Polish immigrants were only one facet of the huge migrations that took place during and after the Industrial Revolution, the first great migrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries whose transnational characteristics are often overlooked by current research (Morawska, 2001). However, researchers only began to formally conceptualize transnationalism as a field of study in the early 1990s (see Glick-Schiller et al., 1992) as a way to understand the "fluidity with which ideas, objects, capital, and people now move across borders and boundaries" (Basch et al., 1994, p. 27). It has since been further defined as "multiple ties linking people or institutions across the borders of nation states" (Vertovec, 1999), particularly those delimited by activities that "take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants" (Portes, 1999, p. 464).

It is important to point out that the term "transnational" should not be used to describe "a multitude of disparate phenomena, many of which are already known and studied under more familiar names" (Portes, 2001, p. 181), such as acculturation, adaptation, and pluralism. However, it is an especially useful concept when applied to understanding the fact that "increasing numbers of immigrants continue to participate in the political and economic lives of their homelands, even as they are incorporated into their host societies" (Levitt, 2001, p. 3). Furthermore, some of the most strident criticisms of the transnational research agenda warn that it would be folly to signal the fading importance of political borders patrolled and enforced by sovereign states. This is especially true in a post-9/11 landscape, in which fears of international terrorism and illegal immigration have led to many instances of increasing militarization of borders. The nature of relations between states can also play a significant role in how immigrant communities are formed within their host countries (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004).

Regardless of the extent to which the phenomenon of transnationalism has been fully explained or explored, it is clear that "complex connectivity" (Tomlinson, 1999) as a facet of modern life increased exponentially at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The role of the media within the formation, adaptation, and identity of transnational communities formed in part by this connectivity is important, and this relationship has been noted repeatedly throughout the literature on the subject (see Georgiou, 2006, 2007; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003; Wood & King, 2001). The connections between media and migration, as well as the "instability in the production of modern subjectivities" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4) they provoke, are at the heart of this investigation.

The city of Miami as a location also provides an important context for conducting this research. According to the most recent census data, Miami-Dade County is now more than 60% Hispanic, with 70% of the population speaking a language other than English in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Sinclair's discussion of media in Latin America as a "geolinguistic global space" (2004) sets up language as a space for transnational media distribution, an area not defined by geography, but "in a more virtual sense," (p. 130) by language and culture. The fact that this can play out on local, regional, national, and even global scales across a vast area of the world (North, Central, and South America, as well as Portugal and Spain), creates a unique situation in terms of global media production and consumption. Miami can be seen as an extension of this phenomenon, having become a center for Spanish-language media production, referred to by some as the "Hollywood of Latin America" (Sinclair, 2003), all of which makes it

an intriguing and suitable location for the study of media consumption among Hispanic immigrant audiences.

### *Hybridity, Glocalization, and Ethnographic Research*

The motivation for choosing ethnography as the methodology for this project draws on previous research investigating the ways in which media interacts with theories of globalization and the increasing movement of populations around the globe. The complex connections between host and home societies created by immigrants have produced strong arguments about the importance of studying media use among immigrants on the "local level" through the use of ethnographic methods (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). Ideas and theories about the hybridizing effect of global media consumed in a local setting (Kraidy, 1999, 2005), in a process often referred to as "glocalization" (Eade, 1997), seek to explain the complex forces of globalization without dichotomizing "here" and "there." By focusing on the production of media that grapples with global issues within a local context, community media ethnography among immigrants does not place itself in opposition to globalization, but instead, examines the impact and influence of globalizing forces as they play out on a daily basis. This formulation follows along the lines of *geo-ethnic storytelling* as hypothesized by Lin and Song (2006), in which the authors recognize that "ethnic media are crucial both in connecting immigrants to their countries of origin and getting them involved with the happenings of their neighborhoods" (p. 364). However, whereas Lin and Song are primarily interested in the coverage of local events and issues for particular ethnic groups, this study draws on theories positing communication as an integral component to transnational immigration in order to explore how these media cover and interpret events abroad in a local context.

There is a well-recognized need for immigration ethnographers to take into account the fundamental shift in conceptualization of the "local" in the face of globalizing forces that have disconnected location from historic notions of identity, culture, and social connections (Fitzgerald, 2006; Gille & Ó Riain, 2002). The phenomenon of immigrants consuming media from and about their homeland on a regular basis, while a clear outcome of globalizing forces, remains situated "in local environments" and is "embedded in local cultures" (McQuail, 1997, p. 7). The study of media use in small-scale settings fully engages cultural theories of audience reception. These ethnographic methods, which have been referred to as the "third generation" of audience studies (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 6), offer insight into the subjectivities inherent in media consumption, and thereby avoid the pitfalls of applying broad generalizations to the multi-faceted processes of "everyday life."

Media outlets serving Venezuelans in South Florida have expanded rapidly in the past decade, with multiple weekly newspapers focused on this immigrant community, as well as a growing radio and television presence in the local market. These outlets include *El Venezolano*, a weekly that began publishing in 1992. According to its founder, it has a weekly readership of between 80,000–100,000 (nationwide), 90% of whom the paper's director and editor estimates are Venezuelans (personal communication, 2009). Also of note are *Venezuela al Día*, which has been published for over a decade, and *Doral News* and *Ciudad Doral Newspaper*, bilingual weeklies serving the city of Doral, now known informally as "*Doralzuela*" due to the recent influx of Venezuelans. There are also numerous social

networking and political activist groups that use the Internet to promote their causes and attempt to raise awareness of various issues pertaining to both the immigrant community and the situation at home. The growing influence and importance of these media outlets was one of the strongest outcomes of this research and will be discussed in the findings section.

## Methodology

### *Sampling Method and Sample Characteristics*

This investigation is built on a series of 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Venezuelans living in the Miami-Dade metropolitan area of South Florida who arrived after the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998<sup>2</sup> (with the exception of one interviewee, who arrived in 1992<sup>3</sup>). The recruitment of participants relied on a non-random, snowball sample initiated through personal connections, as well as accessibility (e.g., a review of publicly available emails, blogs, and media producers with Web sites). Applying this sampling method, interviewees were also asked to provide names of other potential interviewees (see Table 1 for a description of all 10 participants).

South Florida is an ideal location for accessing the Venezuelan immigrant community in the United States, given their historic connections to the region and concentration of population. According to the results from the 2006–2008 American Community Survey (ACS) data for Venezuelans, there were an estimated 188,000 Venezuelans in the United States, nationally. Of this population, 93,000 were in Florida, with 65,000 Venezuelans living in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Unofficial estimates place the numbers even higher, possibly more than double those reported in the survey (Morales & Navarro, 2008).

According to the ACS, Venezuelans in South Florida are split approximately evenly between genders; more than half arrived to the region after the year 2000; they have heavy concentration in the 18 to 54 age category (62%); and they are well-educated: 32% have a bachelor's degree, and 17% have obtained a graduate or professional degree. The participants in this study closely match these population demographics, with six men and four women, all between the ages of 18 to 60. They have all lived in the United States for less than 10 years, with the exception of Oswaldo, who arrived in 1992. Nearly all of the interviewees in this study have some level of higher education, making them a more highly educated group than the Venezuelan population in South Florida overall.

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<sup>2</sup> Venezuelan immigration to the United States began to increase following the election of Chávez and the transformative and often controversial political, economic, and social reforms that he began to institute almost immediately upon election (Semple, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> This exception was made because the interviewee is the editor and publisher of the oldest Venezuelan weekly in South Florida and thus in a unique position to contribute valuable insights.

*Table 1. Characteristics of Participants.*

<i>Name*</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years in Miami</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Marta	40	Female	2	Advertising executive/Blogger
Raimundo	44	Male	7	Petroleum engineer
Angela	36	Female	10	Sociologist
Oswaldo	60	Male	17	Editor/publisher
Casto	35	Male	9	Journalist
Edgard	55	Male	11	Real estate agent
Jorge	48	Male	7	Aerospace engineer
Ariadna	18	Female	2	University student
María	18	Female	8	University student
Tomás	39	Male	11	Television producer

\*Some names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants. All of the interviews, with the exception of Ariadna and María, were conducted in Spanish and translated by the author.

#### *Data Gathering and Analytical Process*

Each interview lasted between one to one and a half hours, with the exception of a single shorter interview, which lasted approximately 15 minutes but followed the same interview protocol. The interviews were semi-structured, or "semi-standardized," as defined by Berg (2007, p. 95), meaning they were built around certain themes but were not tied firmly to an ordered questionnaire with a predetermined number of questions. This study relies on the principles of a grounded theory, constructivist approach which, rather than trying to fit the findings into a pre-existing model, attempts to build an explanation for the processes at work from the results of the interviews.

The interviews resulted in over 100 pages of transcripts, which were then read and re-read in order to identify the major themes as they related to the central research questions. Nvivo qualitative

software was employed to aid in the process. This allowed for the grouping of text from interviews into categories, or "nodes," which could then be easily accessed and organized for deeper analysis.

An interpretive analytic model, in which researchers do not approach their data in order to test hypotheses, but try to "organize or reduce data in order to uncover patterns of human activity, action, and meaning" (Berg, 2007, p. 303) was applied to the interview results. In this instance, this reduction involved sorting through the transcripts seeking out patterns and relationships, a process that resulted in a series of coding frames or themes. The findings emerged through an inductive process. Through the constant comparison of responses, themes that arose across the interviews were identified. When the author was able to determine that certain themes were being repeated throughout the transcripts, not just uttered by a single participant, these were incorporated into the final results of the study.

### Findings

The three central goals of the project — understanding the role of media and information in an immigrant community undergoing rapid transformation; how the use of these media is related to adaptation and assimilation; and how community media contribute to the formation of a transnational, exile identity — were used to guide the analysis of the interview transcripts. These three themes emerged, each of which will be explored in further detail, with examples and deeper analysis, below. They are as follows:

*Media Use and Connectivity:* This theme provides an overall context for the findings of the interviews, focusing on how this community stays informed about the events taking place in Venezuela, on their levels of media awareness and literacy, and on how they use media to build and maintain virtual social networks and remain in contact with friends and family who were left behind.

*Feelings of Attachment to Venezuela/Living in Exile:* This theme offers an idea of how this community views itself within the context of its new country, often with feelings of rupture and displacement.

*The Immigration Experience:* Here, the idea of how well this community is adapting to its new country and the emerging characteristics of this new community is uncovered.

As will be seen in the following sections, these three themes overlap and interact with one another, each contributing to the other to create a more nuanced picture of how media and communication intersect with transnational migration in the formation of exile identity.

### ***Media Use and Connectivity***

"The media brought Chávez to power. Now they oppose him." This simple statement, made by Marta, is a comment on both the political power of Venezuelan media and the complete polarization that exists within the media landscape in Venezuela today. The idea that Chávez is a mediated president who capably manages the media to craft his image, promote his brand of "21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism," (Forero, 2005) and, at times, silence his opponents, surfaced repeatedly during every interview. This awareness of the power of media to influence politics and provide a source for the dissemination of propaganda is a key element in the media use of the participants, as indicated by this quotation from Jorge: "He is mediated because he governs through the media. He gives orders on the television. Yes, he is mediated. As a result, Chávez is a myth, like a lie."

In 2007, Chávez refused to renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), one of the nation's oldest broadcasters, due to their perceived role in supporting an attempted coup in 2002 (Romero, May 27, 2007). It was an act that further polarized the country, resulting in huge protests on both sides, and brought condemnation from international press freedoms and human rights groups. The removal of RCTV from the airwaves<sup>4</sup> has had a lasting impact on Venezuelan society, and it was mentioned by nearly every participant. As Marta put it: "I knew at that moment that for me, and for Venezuela, a way of viewing the world changed, the day that they closed a television channel that was a part of our history."

A statement made by Casto, a journalist for a major Spanish-language newspaper in South Florida who covers Venezuela, illustrates the nature of mediated information in Venezuela today: "Basically, I try to offer a reality of Venezuela that isn't reflected in the news agencies or the Venezuelan press. The Venezuelan press has had a lot of difficulties. It has had a lot of problems with the government." Angela reinforced this view, expressing her frustration at trying to get verifiable, accurate information from and about Venezuela: "Now that he (Chávez) has put so many restrictions on communication, one tries to hear what one can, but it is not easy to stay connected. Information is totally biased, filtered." As Marta sees it, the tactics of Chávez have created a situation of complete polarization: "The discourse of Chávez came on the wings of radicalism. For Chávez, there is no middle ground. Either you're a Chavista or you're not. Either you're with me or you're against me."

Participants all viewed information from the media in Venezuela, especially television, as completely politicized. Following the closure of RCTV, several of the opposition broadcasters decided that it was easier to go along than risk losing their licenses and backed off their criticism of the government (Romero, July 5, 2007). The remaining opposition station, Globovisión, remains outspoken, but has been banned from all government events, press conferences, gatherings, etc. Rumors are constantly surfacing that they will be the next to lose their license, although these threats never seem to materialize. Casto explained that the opposition media, "although they are more open, they are extremely critical, and so it

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<sup>4</sup> Since this research was conducted, Chávez has further restricted RCTV, banning them from cable networks throughout Venezuela for refusing to carry state-sponsored programming (Orozco, 2010).



is an environment that is very politicized, polarized, and this is a reflection of society, which is also very divided. The media are no exception." As Ariadna related, "Globovisión is totally partial."

The manipulation of the media by Chávez and his government coupled with the complete polarization of the media was reflected in comments made by the participants, who were all very critical in their consumption of mediated information. Nothing is accepted at face value; multiple sources are consulted in order to try and see through the information distortion on both sides. Raimundo related how he uses a television streaming Web site to contrast and compare different newscasts coming out of Venezuela. Through this act of media analysis, he is able to clearly see the "enormous amount of partiality that exists there." However, he sees a vital role for all forms of mediated communication that represent an alternate view to the one promoted by Chávez: "It's important that there be a record so that the whole world knows what was happening in Venezuela."

There are clear connections revealed in these interviews between information that is created and dispersed within a globalized context — that is, flowing freely and quickly across borders — and the way it is consumed and analyzed by immigrants in dispersed and diverse settings. This outcome is reminiscent of Appadurai's conception of "diasporic public spheres" (1996, p. 22), in which he envisions traditional notions of the public sphere moving beyond national boundaries and contributing a key component of what he considers to be "a postnational political order." In this case, Venezuelans living abroad closely follow events in their country, drawing on any and all information sources available to them, contributing to an ongoing conversation, and monitoring the situation from afar, all while simultaneously maintaining a critical-analytical stance toward the media they consume. These findings speak directly to one of the key questions underlying this inquiry — that of what constitutes the role of media within a community of immigrants in a state of uncertainty and transition.

### *The Immigration Experience*

For nearly all the participants, the act of leaving Venezuela was an integral part of their experience thus far in the United States. It represented a moment of change and remained a key point of reference when discussing their lives in their new country, and it also appears to contribute heavily to their resulting media use as they work to build a new life and identity in their new home. In some cases, as with Marta, the departure from Venezuela was fraught with danger:

It was a gang, and if you are selling your things . . . they gather all of this information. Later, they called and they knew who we were, where we lived, and they demanded money. It was a rupture. For my daughters, it was terrible. So — arriving here, after that experience, was like being reborn.

It is important to point out that Marta, despite the danger in her departure, was able to marshal the financial resources to immigrate through legal means, moving both her and her husband's family and establishing an advertising and marketing firm in Doral. It is an endeavor that she says has cost her and her family nearly \$300,000 thus far. It is also a recurring theme on her blog, as she recounts for her

readers the experiences that surrounded her departure and the struggles involved in getting settled in a new country. For Raimundo, a professional in Venezuela who overstayed a tourist visa and lived illegally for three years before marrying a U.S. citizen, having to take on menial labor upon arrival was particularly difficult. He highlights these struggles when discussing a construction job he was working on with a fellow Venezuelan immigrant:

He told me, "This job was hard." And I said, "Yeah, I know." Then he tells me, "Yeah, but you know, in Venezuela, I was an engineer." So, I told him, with these same words, "Shit, what do you think I was, someone who cleaned boots? I'm an engineer, too, but here you have to put your balls into whatever comes along, man. We're not in Venezuela."

This was one of the most consistently recurrent themes that came up when discussing the identity of the Venezuelan community and adapting to life in South Florida: From the participants' point of view, there exists a great deal of disunity, and even mistrust, among the community's members, usually centered around perceived dedication, or lack thereof, to sustained opposition to Chávez. The fact that immigrants within certain communities often try to exploit each other, especially where economic decisions influenced by social expectations are concerned, is not a new concept (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Additionally, these divisions hold important implications for a newly arrived immigrant's adaptation and comfort level in the host country; acceptance by members of an established community for immigrants "provides an important context for expressing statuses and identities" (Goldring, 1998, p. 174). Despite the mythologizing by participants of Venezuelan society prior to Chávez — as Ariadna put it, "You can't really imagine what was Venezuela 10 years ago and what is Venezuela right now. You can actually see the difference in a big way" — it is possible that the high levels of polarization and social stratification that exist there may have carried over into the immigrant community.

These feelings of division within the community are integral to the discussion of media use among Venezuelan immigrants, particularly when discussing the social networking and new media efforts to create solidarity among Venezuelans living abroad. This finding fits well within previous discussions of the role of ethnic/minority media in contributing to community identity among immigrant groups, since gaining some sense of unity is often a key component, as well as intended outcome, of the production of this kind of media. As Husband points out, "minority ethnic media may be shaped by forces that are specific to the demographic formation of minority ethnic communities and their location within the socio-political fabric of the large society" (2002, p. 463). In this case, the Venezuelans in this study come from an intensely polarized society, and they have landed in a community in which divisions over ideology are at the forefront of any discussions of community. The media produced and consumed by this community is going to both reflect and contribute to this evolving immigrant discourse as Venezuelans seek out the social connections vital to creating a viable life for themselves in a new country.

***Feelings of Attachment to Venezuela/Living in Exile***

When discussing the role of media use among Venezuelan immigrants, it is important to take into account the tremendous impact that the election and 11-year presidency of Hugo Chávez has had on this community. Strong, personal feelings toward the Venezuelan leader, all of them negative, were constantly repeated in every interview that was conducted for this project. As Raimundo put it, "It is absolutely no secret to anyone. In Venezuela, since this man arrived, every kind of political crime has been committed — that is to say, he has literally kidnapped all of the power." Jorge echoed this idea of a state captured by an authoritarian elite: "If you kidnap the electoral system, it's as if you're in a plane and it is hijacked, and now suddenly it's been flown to a different destination. That's how it is in Venezuela: a hijacked plane with 26 million passengers that are headed to some other destination." That both interviewees use the word kidnapped (*secuestrado* in Spanish) is an indication of the high degree to which many Venezuelan exiles see the Chávez presidency as illegitimate and even illegal.

The context of departure for many of the interviewees, feelings toward the Venezuelan leader, and the uncertainty about whether they will ever return, contributed to a repeated use of the term "exile" throughout the interviews:

Jorge: . . . to say that we are exiles says a lot. If we are exiles, look, it's because we were being persecuted over there. Something is happening.

MS: That word has an impact?

Jorge: Exile. Yes, that has an impact.

It was clear that the participants are struggling with the idea that the country in which they grew up may never be the same. María, who moved with her mother to the United States almost immediately following the election of Chávez, described the feeling of dislocation that struck her during a visit to Venezuela:

The first time we went back, for I think three weeks, we were so done with it, that we were like, "We need to go back, seriously we need to get out of here," and when we came here and we got to the airport we were like, "Oh my God, Miami, thank you."

For Marta, who has been in Miami for less than two years, the reasons for leaving were more concrete: "I came to the United States because I began to miss my country while living in my country. The country I was living in was not the country I had believed I was living in."

This sense of displacement and disorientation among exile communities has been documented elsewhere; these feelings are often further exacerbated and reinforced through the media produced and consumed by these communities. The discussion by Naficy of the uncertain existence that is experienced by exile communities, where exile is "a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent," (1993, p. 9) has clear

implications for the discussion of exile by the Venezuelan immigrants. Similarly, and perhaps most relevant to this discussion, the formation of the Cuban exile community in South Florida has also been the subject of numerous studies (Croucher, 1997; Portes & Stepick, 1993; Pérez, 1992) that describe the community of Cuban immigrants consolidating around a clear sense of exile ideology and identity, particularly when they perceived rejection or stigmatization by their host country (Stepick, 1992). This consolidation rested on sustained opposition to the political regime in Cuba, just as opposition to Chávez was echoed in all of the interviews.

There are two outcomes that can be seen emerging from the themes discussed thus far. The first is the increasing importance of community media as a means for both connecting the members of this community and contributing to a growing sense of exile identity; the second is the dependence that this group has on remaining connected to Venezuela.

At the same time that the Venezuelan community in South Florida has been rapidly expanding, there has been a concurrent growth in the number of community media outlets that focus on the Venezuelan community. These outlets have become integral elements in the growth of this community. As Marta points out, in describing a bilingual weekly published in Doral:

*Ciudad Doral*, this is community media ... it's the only newspaper, created for and by Venezuelans, that is bilingual. So, it's very much of the community but with Venezuelan customs. This is very interesting to me because here is a newspaper totally of the Venezuelan community, and gaining strength within the community. At the same time, one is here and has to keep living.

Oswaldo Muñoz, the director and editor of *El Venezolano*, the oldest Venezuelan weekly in South Florida, describes his readers as "very demanding; each week they evaluate our work, offering up criticisms, suggestions and observations that oblige us to improve with every issue." He goes on to explain the close connections he sees between a publication like his and the information needs of the communities he serves: "Community media is growing stronger every day because with the globalization of information, the news contained within the 'local,' but affected by globalization, is valuable." This statement speaks directly to ideas of "glocalization" discussed earlier, in which a clear connection can be made to the ideas that all media, however global in nature, are consumed on a local level.

The important role of these community outlets surfaced repeatedly in the interviews. As sources of information, they are playing a role in helping this expanding population to create an exile identity, as well as simultaneously giving them a place to express their frustrations, offer up voices of opposition, and begin to build the local community connections essential to adapting to a new home.

This oppositional stance can be a delicate balancing act, however, as a self-financed publisher learned all too clearly. Edgard launched a political weekly, *Venezuela Sin Mordaza (Venezuela Without a Gag)*, in 2007, but it folded after less than a year, partly due to the fact that his advertisers, many of whom still had business interests in Venezuela, were wary of a stance that was too overtly political. It was a clear example of the fact that this is a community that still has important connections to home.

This close relationship between Venezuelan community media and their audience fits within similar research that has found that community media often blur the line between sender and receiver that has traditionally been envisioned when trying to understand the phenomenon of mass communication (Hollander, Stappers, & Jankowski, 2002). Within a community setting, particular one made of up immigrants, the concerns, issues, and day-to-day experiences of media practitioners, who are nearly always members of the community they serve, and those of their audience are more closely in line. This situation creates back and forth dialogue that is circular (Deuze, 2006), and that contributes to the emerging discourse of exile taking shape among Venezuelans in South Florida.

Given the attachment to what is taking place in Venezuela, antipathy towards Chávez, and efforts to create as wide a picture as possible of the media landscape, the consumption of media and the use of communication technologies in order to stay connected to Venezuela play an integral role in the daily lives of the interviewees. Whether it is chatting online with a father who stayed behind when his family left ten years ago (María); checking the Web site of a hometown newspaper (Tomás); creating, browsing, and contributing to blogs (Marta); joining Facebook groups for Venezuelans abroad (Jorge); listening to a radio interview broadcast from Caracas while driving in Miami (Raimundo); or watching the Venezuelan television channels available through a local cable television carrier (Ariadna), the use of these media and information technologies for this group of participants — who, it should be noted, have high levels of connectivity and access to technology overall — appears to be constant and sustained.

"I would die without Facebook," Marta said, pointing out that she now has friends and relatives scattered across the globe. She is also an avid blogger, and she feels an obligation to the other Venezuelans who follow closely her musings about her new life in the United States and the situation in Venezuela. Others offered up similar feelings of reliance on media technologies. "I'm totally connected," Raimundo said. "Whatever you need to know, you can find it and then other Venezuelans will say, 'Hey, did you know about...,' and you can go and see for yourself."

These findings follow, to some extent, the model developed by Caspi et al. (2002) in their work on Russian immigrant media in Israel. These authors posit two different roles for ethnic media: one, helping new immigrant groups to adjust to their new home and address the problems inherent to displacement, acculturation, and adaptation; and two, maintaining connections to the country of origin (p. 552). It is the assertion of this author, however, that the results of this study address an additional characteristic of certain forms of ethnic media, one that has not been studied thoroughly and yet may hold the most profound implications for the study of transnationalism and diasporic cultures: The media consumed by Venezuelans in South Florida is nearly uniformly dedicated to forming and maintaining an oppositional stance to the current political regime ruling Venezuela. In doing so, it contributes to a sense of exile among the new immigrants. It is within this context that the research conducted by Naficy (1993) among Iranians in Los Angeles and the role of television in forming exilic identities is particularly relevant:

On the one hand, they (exiles) refuse to become totally assimilated into the host society; on the other hand, they do not return to their homeland — while they continue

to keep aflame a burning desire to return. In the meantime they construct an imaginary nation both of the homeland and of their presence in exile. (p. 16)

It is this state of *liminality*, of being neither here nor there, that Naficy explores at some length, and that holds important implications for the future of this community. How can Venezuelans assimilate, create community networks essential to social identity, or build the hybrid identities envisioned elsewhere (Kraidy, 1999, 2005) if they remain so closely connected to events at home? In this sense, conceptualizations of the global cultural crossroads where migration and media meet must be constantly reevaluated and reconsidered, as they continue to remain in flux and have yet to be empirically theorized.

### Conclusions

It should be made clear that this research is exploratory in nature, a fact reflected in the small size and non-random nature of the sample and the qualitative research methods. Thus, inferences about the overall population of Venezuelans in South Florida or the rest of the United States cannot be made with any degree of statistical certainty. However, the primary goal of this study was to initiate an investigation into an under-studied and rapidly changing community with the hopes of uncovering connections between transnational immigration and media use. It is the hope of the author that the initial findings will help generate research questions for further empirical studies.

The themes outlined and explored above should not be seen as working independently of one another. Instead, they must be viewed as overlapping and working together in different ways to create more nuanced and multifaceted explanations of the interactions that take place when immigration and media intersect. For instance, if an immigrant has created an exile identity for himself, it stands to reason that his media use will be impacted, since he will be constantly monitoring the situation at home and waiting for the moment of "return." Alternatively, an immigrant that leaves Venezuela in a more "voluntary" context and has a strong social structure already in place upon arrival may focus her media use more on the local community and efforts at establishing a new life in the host country.

There is a circularity to these processes that is worth noting. A media literate, critical-analytic understanding of the complex media landscape that exists in Venezuela, as well as globally, influences how and in what ways the interviewees access and consume information about their country. At the same time, the experience of immigrating, whether one of easy transition or rocky adaptation, combined with the intergroup relations found upon arrival, will affect how comfortable recent arrivals may be in their new home. It will also play a role in how they use media in order to build new identities and stay connected to a life they left behind.

The themes and initial outcomes built up through analysis of the interviews present a situation in which communication and information span borders, ignore geopolitical boundaries, and are carried out on a sustained and continuous basis — all hallmarks of a transnational experience. Of particular note are the findings about community media. These information outlets, while serving to build a local identity, also help sustain interest in the events in Venezuela for a population starved for information and eager to

express their discontent as exiles. These media provide another avenue for the continued creation of transnational identities that are neither here nor there, but seem to straddle two nations, existing somewhere in between. This finding contributes new insights to other explorations of community media that serve diasporic audiences (Husband, 2002; Karim, 1998; Payne, 2008; Tsagarousianou, 2002).

The picture of the Venezuelan immigrant community that emerges from this initial investigation is that of a population that feels itself to be in exile, whether stated directly or implied through feelings of attachment to their home country, concern for the events taking place there, and the sense that they may never return. This exile identity combines with the image of a group of immigrants that is still in the early stages of adapting to their new country; coming to terms with their identity as a permanently settled population, rather than one that is only waiting to return; and struggling to identify with one another and overcome divisions, distrust, and polarization. Both of these aspects shape and affect the amount and kind of media use and levels of connectivity among Venezuelans in South Florida. This is a group of what could be termed "media literate" immigrants, who not only use media and new media technologies to the greatest extent possible in order to stay connected and informed, but do so with a critical eye toward the realities of politicized, mediated communication, thus constantly seeking out alternative information and questioning the source and veracity of what they read, see, and hear.

In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai writes about the power of electronic media in forming communities who share a collective imagination, and the implications that this phenomenon has for the concepts of globalization, immigration, and the nation-state (p. 6). He posits that new "diasporic public spheres" (p. 10) are an outcome of these changes. An argument could be made that this is precisely the situation among Venezuelan immigrants in South Florida. Here is a community that finds itself forced to confront a new identity while, at the same time, relying constantly on mediated realities in order to understand and grapple with their current situation. Through their use of media, this group of transnational immigrants appears to be constructing the kind of collective imagination envisioned by Appadurai. If so, they present an ideal case study for understanding the way that migration and media will shape social realities in the 21st century.

*Appendix. Questionnaire for Interviewees*

*When did you come to the United States and why?*

Probe: Did you feel comfortable in your new country? Did it take you very long to adjust?

Probe: Did you have a social network already in place (friends, family, colleagues)?

*Do you use media to follow the events (whether news, culture, or entertainment) taking place in Venezuela? Why?*

Probe: What information/entertainment is available to you? Which formats? How often do you use them?

Probe: How would you feel if you didn't have those connections?

*What media outlets do you use here in Miami?*

Probe: What is your view of the media in Miami that is created for the Venezuelan community?

*How do you stay in touch with friends and family?*

Probe: Which technologies are most important? What about social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook?

*How connected do you feel to Venezuela? How important to you is this connection?*

Probe: How would you feel if you lost that ability to be connected?

Probe: Has there ever been a time when you couldn't connect?

*Does U.S. media (news and entertainment) interest you?*

Probe: Why or why not?

*How would you describe the Venezuelan community in Miami?*

Probe: What is the situation for the Venezuelan community in general in Miami?



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