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In times of increasingly authoritarian neo-populism, journalistic practices adapt and evolve: The case of the Chavismo in Venezuela.

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ABSTRACT

The rise of left-wing populism (Chavismo) in Venezuela brought an open confrontation between the State and private media. In order to achieve a communicational hegemony, the government implemented reforms through legislation, economic power, and the strengthening of community media: all to the detriment of press freedom. This situation challenged journalists to find alternative ways to accomplish their roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, gatekeepers, and providers of information. In this paper, I argue that in times of increasingly authoritarian populism, Venezuelan journalists have reinvented their practices in order to live up to their professional roles.

Keywords:

Neo-Populism, Chavismo, mediatization, hegemony, polarization.

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CHAPTER # 1

INTRODUCTION

Latin American neo-populism has influenced the news media in a different way than the American or European contemporary populist movements and should therefore be studied as a specific case (Roberts, 2007; Waisbord, 2003). Predominantly situated on the left, this political logic has transformed the communication landscape in the region (Cañizales, 2009; Waisbord, 2012). Chavismo in Venezuela has been the most representative example of left-wing populism in Latin America. After an attempted coup against his government in 2002, Chavez encountered a forceful opposition from the mainstream privately owned media. The increasing subversive behaviour of corporate media outlets clashed with an authoritarian administration, resulting in a broader political polarization (Cañizales, 2012; Capetillo, 2007). As a result, Chavez and his successor Nicolás Maduro embarked the country on strategic shift through a media legal framework with the aim of implementing a communicational hegemony. While Chavismo presented these media reforms as democratic (Dineen, 2012; Izarra, 2007) some authors (Cañizales, 2012; Garcia and Lugo-Ocando, 2015; Waisbord, 2011, 2012) argue that enforcement of these policies has put independent journalism in jeopardy. Thus, the debate has been whether left-wing populist governments in Latin America are improving the public sphere through the democratization of news media or seeking mechanisms to control national media systems.

The academic discussion has been on the relationship between neo-populist politics and the media. Most of the studies have critically analyzed the role performed by the media in populism's successes. However, to date, research is yet to determine to what extent contemporary populism has influenced journalists' routines. The main objective of this study was to deepen the understanding of Venezuela's ongoing political conflict by focusing on the

struggle for control over one of the key agents of politicization in the country: the media.

Polarization and hegemony are the most suitable interpretative frameworks for understanding the specific case of Venezuela.

The literature about populism and media has largely overlooked journalistic practices. Overall, research has focused on three topics: populism as a communication style (Aalberg, et. al, 2012; Block and Negrine, 2017; Ost, 2014), the effects of media coverage on populist actors (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016), and the impact of these news on the public perception (Bos et al., 2017). Nonetheless, existing research has failed to come up with conclusive results as there is no scholarly agreement if media coverage is positive or negative for the success of populist actors. Furthermore, these areas of research have mainly been taken up by those examining populism's discursive and ideological approach. Perhaps the most pertinent studies for this research are the ones carried out by Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Manucci, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014; who have explained the relation between neo-populism and journalistic content production through the theory of mediatization.

While acknowledging the relevance of these strands of research, this paper took a different approach. Instead of asking what is the role of the news organizations while covering populist actors or events, the aim was to better understand the implication of left-wing populism on journalists' daily routines. It is important to note that the distinctive relationship between populist politicians and the media challenged journalists to defend their professional roles. Hence, this study explored how reporters have adapted their practices in times of increasingly authoritarian populism in Venezuela, based on their perceptions and experiences.

From July to August 2018, I interviewed eight influential and experienced journalists, asking about their daily routines in the context of Chavismo. In times of increasingly authoritarian populism, Venezuelan reporters have adapted their practices to this political

context in order to achieve high-quality journalism. The study demonstrated that journalists have transformed their practices not just by finding new ways to fulfil their professional roles as watchdog, gatekeepers, agenda setters, and providers of information. They have also changed their practices to re-construct their credibility as professionals in an environment of political polarization and censorship.

This research has been divided in seven chapters. The first section introduces the broad discussion around the concept of populism since there is no scholarly agreement on its meaning, and a general context of Chavismo in Venezuela. Building on this literature review, the second section outlines the theoretical underpinnings that contribute to understanding the influence of left-wing neo-populism on journalistic practices. The third chapter explains the research case study and explains the methodological approach applied. The paper then turns to the presentation and discussion of the research findings. Finally, it summarizes the investigation done and suggests new directions for future research.

CHAPTER # 2

BACKGROUND

2.1 Conceptual Framework

In order to assess the phenomenon of populism, it is essential to first establish the theoretical foundations that will contribute to explain, predict and construct an argument. Laclau's (1977, 2005a, 2005b) definition, which states that populism is a political logic, is the most influential to address this question from a communicational perspective. This theoretical project started off as a way to evidence Latin America's experience; however, it can be stated that its validity is not limited to a specific historical or geographical background.

2.1.1 Populism: A Contested Concept

An increasing number of scholars have focused on the concept of populism and what drives modern democracies to this type of mobilizations. Although it is a recurrent notion in contemporary political analysis, few scholars have defined it with precision (Arditi, 2007; Canovan, 1981; Hawkins, 2010; Laclau, 1977; 2005a; Panizza, 2005).

For instance, Canovan (1981) classified populism in seven different categories, trying to find a common denominator. This exercise in political taxonomy, made the author more conscious of the complexity of the term, with no clear indication of which are the main distinctions among her typifications. This led Canovan to make advances to her definition, and in 1999 she underlined the importance of "people" in populist discourse. A more comprehensive approach is the one of Mény and Surel's (2002, p. 20), who assured that "the confusion of populism derives, fairly, from a restrictive definition which relies just in listing common features that accounts for its likely prominence." These two authors expanded the latter definition, explaining it as the expression of the people within democratic institutions,

particularly when the political systems do not function properly, tensions with the political elite are acute, and citizens cannot express their discontent. Equally important, Panizza's (2005) analysis centered in the idea that populism appeals to people that are against the established structures of power and the dominant ideas of society. This Latin-American scholar made special emphasis in the antagonic relation "because it is through antagonism that political identities are constituted" (p. 28). Hawkins (2010, p.8) proposes that populism should be considered a "distinct set of beliefs or ideas about the nature of the political world."

Together, these studies demonstrate that there is not a consensus nor a universally accepted definition of populism; on the contrary, a debate surrounding their defining points and differences still exists. The need of a theoretical project that clarifies this notion is evident. Laclau's work has been the most ambitious attempt (Canovan, 1982; Panniza, 2005; Waisbord, 2012) to expose the diverse nuances of this "epiphenomenon", as he labelled it (Laclau, 2005a, p. 17). The author argues that populism is a political logic, applied either by left or right parties, rather than a specific ideology linked to a class, society or nationality (Laclau, 2005a). The comprehensiveness of his theoretical framework is centred primarily in the hegemonic and antagonist forms of political logics (Higgins, 2017; Howarth, 2000; Torfing, 1999).

2.1.2 Populism: A Political Logic

Laclau's work (1979-2005) appears to be the appropriate starting point to discuss populism in Latin America. First, he asserts that populist ideologies differ radically one from another because (Laclau, 2005a). This is to say that populism is insufficient as a concept to define the concrete specificity of a political movement (communism, liberalism, fascism, etc.) (Laclau 1979, 2005a, 2005b). For him, populism emerges when political institutions cannot fully absorb people's demands (Laclau, 2005b; Panniza, 2005). He (2005a) argues that the

failure of the established structures of power is the precondition that motivates the masses to mobilize and take part of the populist action in the discursive field (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005a). This involves a constant process of de-construction and re-construction of collective identities as part of a political and social struggle (Laclau, 1979; Jorgensen and Philips, 2002)..

2.2 Historical Framework El Chavismo

Chavismo is defined as a left-wing political ideology associated with former Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez. Populist, nationalist, and socialist components have characterized this political movement since its beginnings in 1997 (Hawkins, 2016). On the one hand, as part of their domestic policies, the Chavistas have firmly opposed to neoliberalist policies such as economic liberalization and privatizations. On the other hand, the Chavistas have focused on social programmes to improve access to health, education, social security, etc. (Valencia, 2005). Hawkins (2016) is one of the authors who recently cast a doubt whether Chavismo has really boosted participatory democracy or has it meant a setback for democratic liberties. This ideological confrontation, indeed, has distinguished Venezuela's politics over the last twenty years (Valencia, 2005).

In 1998, Hugo Chavez was elected president amid a disenchanted electorate. The same year he rose to power and launched the Bolivarian Revolution, a process which implied radical changes at the economic, political and communicational level (Valencia, 2005). This process brought a new constitution, policies funded by high oil prices, increasingly anti-US foreign policies, and a legal framework to redistribute the land and wealth. As a result, it led to deep polarization, creating historic social divisions and political turmoil (Salazar, 2013). In 2002, an attempt of a coup was initiated in which the media played a central role (Cañizales and Lugo Ocando, 2008). However, Chavez managed to survive these threats with the

support of popular manifestations and remain in power for eleven more years (Hawkins, 2010). Nicolás Maduro, inherited the Bolivarian Revolution of Chavez when he died of cancer in 2013. Henceforward, Chavismo has been present in Venezuela for almost twenty years.

CHAPTER # 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the phenomena of contemporary politics in many established democracies of Latin American is the emergence of neo-populism. Predominantly situated on the left, this logic has transformed the region's political, social, and communication landscape (Cañizales, 2009; Waisbord, 2012). Given its salience in the political arena, extensive research on left-wing populism has been done. However, it is still not clear to what extent populism has directly influenced journalistic practices, even when the media has been one of the key agents of politicization (Garcia and Lugo-Ocando, 2015). This offers an interesting opportunity to continue problematizing this topic.

The aim of this literature's review is to evaluate the influence of neo-populism in the journalistic practice, considering the specific case of Venezuela and Chavismo. Over the last two decades, Chavismo has brought into discussion the democratizing role of the media outlets, which have undergone profound changes through legislation, economic power, and the strengthening of public and community media (Bisbal, 2006; Waisbord, 2012). In doing so, the use of hegemony and polarization theoretical frameworks are essential to discuss how journalists in Venezuela have adapted their work-routines to these varying political conditions.

This chapter is also intended to review previous studies in the field in order to understand, through different theoretical frameworks and methodologies, the implications of populism in news production. For this purpose, keeping track of the relationship between populism and the media will determine the impact of this political strategy within the newsrooms (Higgins, 2017). Although some of these studies are not related directly to Venezuela's political and media context, which is our focus of study, they will broaden the discussion to alternative realities.

3.1 Neo-Populism and Media Relations

As Waisbord (pag. 197, 2003) claims, “populism refuses to go away as a major force in Latin Americas’ political scene.” This is to say that populism is not a new phenomenon in the region as it has been part of its political history since the late 19th century (Conniff, 1999; Di Tella, et al., 1973). From 1900 onwards, this ideology played a central role in the region’s military dictatorships and the democratization process, as it became a political strategy to convince the masses (Conniff, 1982,1999).

After Latin America overcame the democratic and market liberalization transition in the late 80’s, a new populist movement returned to the centre of the political stage (Roberts, 2007). Scholars such as Conniff (1999), Roberts (2007) and Waisbord (2003) describe the re-emergence of populism as “neo-populism”; although, some of them oppose (Arditi, 2008; Laclau, 2005a, Panizza, 2005) to this name, arguing that contemporary populist movements have proven to be extremely too complex to be classified under the same category. Nonetheless, this vaguely-defined term has been applied to characterize the rise of Latin American left-wing governments¹ such as the ones of Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela (2013-present). Regardless of the discussion that surrounds neo-populism², this notion is essential to analyse Venezuela’s media landscape. For this purpose, populism is understood —based on Laclau’s definition (2005a)— as a political strategy that acquires new characteristics allowing it to adapt to the current historical-political situation, but without abandoning its conceptual attributes sustained by appealing to the poor, and opposing the elites.

¹ Other examples are the governments of Lula da Silva (2003-2011) in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández Kirchner (2007–2015) in Argentina, Evo Morales (2006–present) in Bolivia, Rafael Correa (2007–2017) in Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega (2007–present) in Nicaragua.

² See the *Background Section* for an in-depth discussion about the conceptual debate around populism.

A comprehensive understanding of the emergence of neo-populism cannot be achieved without studying the media scenario (Moffit, 2016). Traditionally, the news organizations have been one of the actors in determining the success of populism (Mazzoleni, 2003, 2014). However, the relation between neo-populists and the media has been distinctive since the traditional model of mediation has been disrupted. As part of their political strategy, populist developed a dichotomic relation (“friend” and a “foe”) with the media (Akkerman, 2012). This is to say ratings-driven news outlets benefit themselves from populist message and style (e.g. polarization, simplification, personalization, emotionalization, negativism, etc.) to capture attention and increase their revenues (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). At the same time, populist actors enjoy from the extensive media coverage while they discredit news organizations as a "tool of the elite" (Moffit, 2016, pag. 81).

This new phenomenon has been studied by several scholars (Esser and Stromback, 2014; Higgins, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014; Shulz, 2004) through the concept of mediatization of politics. As mediatization it can be understood the process by which modern societies are changed as consequence of the growth of the media influence, including politics (Esser and Stromback, 2014). Even if it has been difficult to prove the close relation between populism and media, authors like Moffit (2016) and Mazzoleni (2014) claim that the mediatization of politics has encouraged the rise of contemporary populism. One of those changes in shaping traditional populism is the result of the communication technologies. Populist actors now can bypass journalists, contacting their followers via social networks like Twitter or Facebook (Cow, 2018). These digital platforms allow populist to distribute their message easily, but also immediately and closely (Moffit, 2016). Thereby, the role of the journalist as witnesses of the reality is completely invalidated. Neo-populism has been also different from traditional populism because political actors found themselves with a sceptical audience. Distrust towards media institutions turned into fertile ground for the populist message (Manucci, 2017).

These pieces of evidence suggest, that "neo-populism is the media-political form par excellence in the contemporary world" (Moffit, 2016, pag. 77).

From this perspective, the emergence of a neo-populist wave in Venezuela becomes a relevant case of study since Chavismo embarked on a strategic shift to consolidate his power through media regulations focused on democratizing media ownership, but challenging traditional media business (Bisbal, 2006; Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Cañizales 2012; Stoneman, 2008). This research re-opens the debate of how Latin-American elites have controlled the media, using it as an economic and political instrument. Undoubtedly, media ownership concentration has endangered the democratic representation of Venezuelans' values and aspirations. But it is also important remarking that policies developed by the Chavistas discredited corporate media whilst they massively expanded official media (Waisbord, 2012).

Based on the views of Cañizales and Lugo Ocando (2008), Cañizales (2012), and Mayobre (2012), the relationship between the media and the State; on one hand, has been conflictive because continuous attacks have been launched against the Chavistas and his supporters by private media outlets; on the other hand, it has been co-dependent since the public media have shown unquestioning support to the government by disseminating their political message. This demonstrates how populist leaders have used the media as a strategic tool to reach their political objectives, benefiting themselves by spreading their ideology to a broader audience. Private news, similarly, used their influence in structuring and amplifying opposition to overthrow Chávez from the power; while they continuously received pressures from the government (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008).

This relationship has been a subject of high discussion among scholars and political actors given that the media is a fundamental institution for democracy. According to Waisbord (2003, p. 203), the media in neo-populist governments, like Chavismo in Venezuela, have

functioned as “propaganda agencies” in the promotion of government policies. In contrast, populists have justified the media control on the basis that they serve on behalf of popular interests. Andrés Izarra (2007, p.17), Chávez’s Minister of Information, for instance, explains that the decision to regulate the media was sustained to “provide the opportunity of spreading citizens’ values, reveal their images, and debate their ideas within a forum dedicated to freedom and equality.”

Overall, this evidence demonstrates that the interaction between the media and left-wing populist governments has been distinctive. This background leads us to examine an area of study that has remained largely unexamined: how journalists’ daily practices have been adapted within an environment of political polarization in order to reach media hegemony.

3.2 Through the Lenses of Media Hegemony and Political Polarization

As previously mentioned, populist governments in Latin America have attempted to transform media systems with the aim of transferring communication hegemony (see Figure 1) to the State by embracing polarization as a cohesion strategy (Cañizales, 2014). These changes were enforced, specifically in Venezuela, with the aim of controlling the press through legislation, economic power, and bolstering public and community media (Waisbord, 2012). In order to understand this media confrontation, Laclau’s definition (1977, 2005a, 2005b) appears to be the most appropriate starting point to discuss neo-populism in Latin America. Even if his work can be highly theoretical and lacks empirical evidence, he asserts (2005a, xi) that populist ideologies differ radically from one another because “it is ascribed not to a delimit a phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena.” Given the relevance of his work in the region's contemporary politics, it is worthwhile to apply his conceptual framework, which contemplates two dimension: hegemony and antagonism/polarization. Exploring Chavismo and its influence on journalistic practices

through the lenses of these two dimensions will provide a more nuanced and complete understanding of this phenomenon.

3.2.1 Fight Over Media Hegemony

Before tracing back to Laclau's conceptual framework, it is necessary to revisit Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which has been the major source of inspiration to Laclau. This Italian theoretician (1971) explains hegemony as a form of ideological leadership that continually must be renegotiated among social classes to reach consensus and satisfy the demands of the people. The hegemonic process, consequently, takes place when the established power is confronted (Gramsci, 1971; Olsaretti, 2016; Simon, 1991).

The media is essential to create hegemony because it has direct influences on the public opinion (Cañizales, 2014). For Gramsci (1971), the power of hegemony lies in penetrating different areas of life, including the communicational, as a mediation tool between the different social actors. In the same fashion, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) establish that only through the discourse it is possible to stabilise hegemonic power relations (Howarth, 2000; Jorgensen and Philips, 2002; Torfing, 1999). It is often affirmed that Chavistas presented the idea of hegemony based on Gramsci's school of thought (Cañizales, 2014). However, this comparison lacks consistency because they used this term to validate their controlling actions over the media. In a completely different way, Gramsci applied this notion to explain the indispensable process of persuasion and consent among the State and people, promoting pluralism and tolerance.

Chavismo, in an ideological battle between their supporters and foes, implemented an ambitious media model that challenged the established order. Izarra reinforces this idea in 2007 by saying (cited in Bisbal 2009, pag. 43): "Our socialism needs communicational hegemony then all the media must depend on the State as a public commodity." This plan

had two lines of action: limit the public criticism and spread the government propaganda machinery. In this sense, the media became an essential part of creating hegemony as it is the ideal medium through powerholders may reach the masses. Chávez, therefore, challenged the hegemony of commercial media by breaking their economic and political ties with different groups of power (Cañizales, 2014).

3.2.2 Social and Political Polarization

The populist character of left-wing governments in Latin America lies at the centre of a struggle for communicational hegemony. Amidst this conflict, the Chavistas designed media regulations in the name of the people, legitimating its validity through an antagonist discourse. It is argued that populism simplifies the political space by creating antagonism between the powerful and the powerless. However, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 125) “this condition occurs when people are unable to constitute their identities, and they construct an enemy deemed of this failure.” By symbolically dividing society into the formulation “us” versus “them”, oppositional poles —such as “the oligarchy”, “the politicians”, “foreign interests” or “neoliberal economics”— become evident in Latin American populist figures’ discourses (Howarth, 2000; Laclau 1979, 2005a, 2005b; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this way, communication power generates forms of collective identification that may raise passions (Mouffe, 2000).

Clearly, this strategy —applied by the Chavistas— has reinforced (in a negative way) polarization at different levels, including in the communication field. According Garcia and Lugo Ocando (2015, pag. 269), "a populist view of the media has forced media organizations and journalists, from both sides of the political spectrum, to embrace extreme positions." Polarization, thereby, has become an essential trait in the relationship between Chavismo and the media.

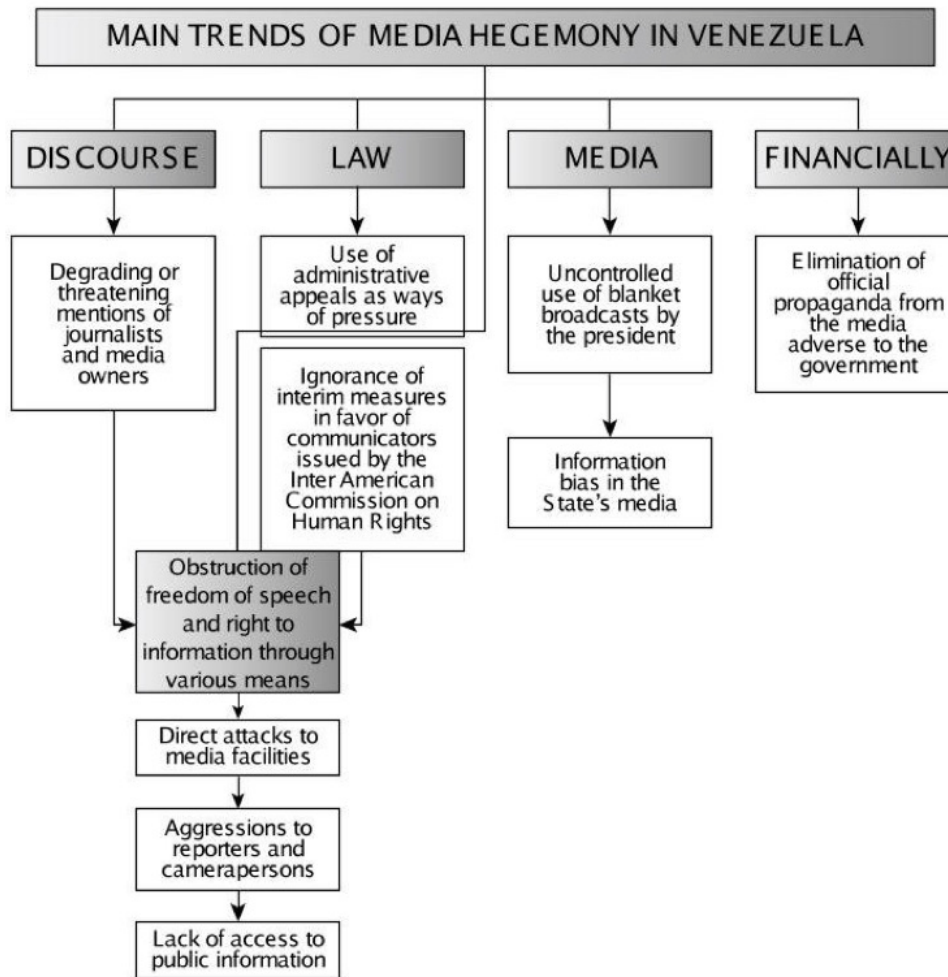


Figure 1: Media Hegemony Map (Cañizales, 2014, pag. 172)

3.3 Journalistic Practices in Times of Chavismo

Having established the relationship between the media and populism through the theoretical frameworks of hegemony and polarization, this research will provide different answers to determine to what extent populism has directly influenced journalists' practices. In doing so, studying journalism³ is essential to recognize those skills and practices that

³ Among different theories, journalism has been conceptualized as a culture composed of "particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others" (Hanitzsch, 2007, pag. 369).

distinguish journalists from other professionals and guarantee their autonomy. These professional roles involve being watchdogs or guardians over the powerful; setting the news agenda by taking into account relevant political issues; becoming gatekeepers of a diverse and balanced range of political perspectives; and accessing different sources of information (Norris and Odugbemi, 2009; Vos, 2005). It is important to keep in mind that although journalists' practices are determined by normative criteria, they are considered empirical constructs since their performance is situational, as different theories of research have shown (Turner 2006; Vos, 2005).

3.3.1 Checks and Balances: Powerful versus the Rich

As watchdogs, it is argued that journalists provide checks and balances on powerful sectors of society, including leaders within the public and private domains (Coronel, 2001; Norris and Odugbemi, 2009). Despite the fact that journalists and reporters play multiple roles in different contexts, in Venezuela they have often served as spokespersons of the commercial media owners or the State, rather than challenging the rich or the powerful (Cañizales, 2009; Waisbord, 2003).

Private media corporations have dominated the country's media landscape for decades. Historically, these companies have had an implied pact with the political parties and their leaders. However, when Hugo Chávez came to power, the dialogue between the two suddenly ended, and was replaced with permanent confrontation (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Mayobre, 2012). In a research study carried out by Capetillo (2007, pag.10), in which he studied Venezuela's media conflict, he manifests that all through history "journalism has gradually fallen into the hands of businesspeople, who have not fulfilled its critical watchdog function and protected the freedom of expression."

After the coup that took place in 2002, Venezuelan's private media that had long

defended its economic interests, strongly rejected Hugo Chávez and his idea of socialism of the 21st century⁴. As a result, the media owners promoted an anti-Chávez media campaign. Chávez, on response to these real threats, decisively pushed for media hegemony through various methods to put an end to these attacks (Bisbal, 2006, 2009). Subsequent to these events, is when Venezuela's media system underwent profound changes through various laws. The confrontational relations between private media and populist actors, and the absence of a willingness to negotiate has been described by several scholars (Bisbal, 2006; Cañizales 2009) as a “media war”.

Chavismo and other Latin American left leaning populists have opposed the Anglo-American liberal press (Amado and Waisbord, 2017; Waisbord 2012). Instead, they proposed an alternative model, known as Bolivarian Revolution⁵, in which they assigned to the State a central role within the media system “as a necessary instrument to redress imbalances in the provision of information” (Waisbord, 2012, pag. 504). Thus, the Chavistas have argued that only through a radical transformation of the media apparatus will they correct past imbalances such as the elitist press and the concentration ownership (Garcia and Lugo Ocando, 2015).

Following this strategy, Chávez classified journalism into two rival groups: “popular-national” and “foreign-oligarchic” media (Waisbord, 2012, pag. 506). In this context, those media outlets that opposed the designs of the government have been subjects of persecution.

⁴ Political term used to describe socialists' principles advocated by Latin American leaders such as Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador or Evo Morales of Bolivia, among others. Socialism of the 21st century argues that capitalism and 20th century socialism has failed in solving urgent problems. Conversely, Chavismo “transformed Venezuela's economy by opposing to free-market, founding state companies, and establishing cooperatives and worker-run businesses” (Forrero, 2005).

⁵ Chávez views himself as the modern emissary and disciple of Venezuela's independence hero Simón Bolívar, and sees parallels between Bolívar's efforts to free South America from Spanish rule and his own strive to challenge U.S. influence in the region (Council of Hemispheric Affairs, 2011).

This wave of populist anger has been described as authoritarian⁶ (De la Torre et. al, 2013; Hawkins, 2010), after Chávez expropriated private broadcast networks, expelled international broadcasters, and revoked licenses to those organizations that represent a threat to their media hegemony (Bisbal, 2006). Moreover, the government has persecuted those journalists that became the president's fiercest critics (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). This means, according Waisbord (2012), that Chavistas have focused on delegitimizing private media journalists' work, arguing that they constantly underestimate subaltern classes and the underdog.

All these decisions were taken through a long series of regulating measures. However, these laws contradict Venezuela's 1999 constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression as the right to hold opinions without interference (Freedom House, 2017; Reporters Without Borders, 2016). Freedom House (2017) points out that these rights have not been respected in practice, especially after the 2005 reform to the penal code, which instituted defamation as a criminal offense with a penalty of up to 30 months in prison; and the 2010 law that sanctions journalists that question the legitimately constituted authority. This law criminalizes reporters that "insult" a government member, intimidating them into failing to report on matters of public interest, and violating their freedom of speech (Capetillo, 2007).

In the opinion of Freedom House (2017), this clearly demonstrates the absence of a supporting and appropriate legal system, as authorities have used the ambiguity of the laws' definitions to silence journalists, lead arbitrary arrests of reporters and expel foreign correspondents. Espacio Público (2016), a domestic watchdog, identified that in the last year acts of violence, physical aggression, and intimidation against reporters has increased

⁶ Populism has been considered a democratic path of popular representation; however, it can also lead to a democratic backsliding or even to authoritarianism. One of the greatest paradoxes of Chavismo is their ability to use democratic ideals to question fundamental democratic practices (De la Torre et. al, 2013; Hawkins, 2010).

dramatically. Gomez (2014), expresses that the media's legislation frameworks should not be viewed as mechanisms to hinder the ability of the press to report and do investigative journalism. On the contrary, it is necessary to review and reformulate these mechanisms of regulation to remove obstacles to the full exercise of these freedoms.

In this longstanding conflict, private media outlets have made efforts to ensure their own survival. Political and opinion television shows were suspended from the broadcast programming. Television broadcasters decided to either reach a "modus vivendi" with Chavismo or sell their companies to governmental supporters (Hernández, 2005). In addition, media owners fired the most outspoken anti-Chávez journalists to avoid future retaliations (Capetillo, 2007).

Under these circumstances, the media stances, either against or in favour of Chávez, have created a negative public perception. Broadcast and press media, in general, have lost its credibility and legitimacy since they appeared more interested in defending their political position rather than informing. Journalists, specifically, have taken the role of political actors, distancing themselves from counterbalancing the power. In this way, their duty to serve to the society as watchdogs has not been fully accomplished. However, it is also important to note that the political situation and the legal environment became an obstacle to independent journalists.

In a fundamentally different way, authors such as Dineen (2012) considers the government's enactment of regulatory legislation and its extensive expansion of state-controlled media are understandable. According to him these measures have aided in the democratization of information in Venezuela. Similarly, Capetillo (2007), through different interviews with media experts, argues that the media has been not able to bring together coherent alternatives beyond demanding Chávez's removal from the presidency.

3.3.2 Setting Populist Agenda

In selecting and presenting news, journalists also play an important role in shaping the political reality. Generally, the audience gives importance to a specific news event not just because it is displayed on the media, but also based on how much importance is attached to that event depending on the amount of information published and the frequency with which details are revealed (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). As part of their professional role, journalists determine what is relevant by setting the agenda and influencing public opinion (Norris and Odugbemi, 2009). In this sense, they are supposed to raise awareness about current problems. Nonetheless, as McCombs' and Shaw's evidence suggest, while building the political agenda, several factors potentially influence media content, such as commercial interests.

This leads us to study the role of journalists as facilitators in disseminating the populist message. Higgins (2017, p. 2) insists that the current communication industry is distinctive because of its "compulsion" towards media spectacles. A first strand of literature (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Manucci, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014), agrees that commercial interests have been one of the causes that has driven newspapers and television channels to privilege a populist message that is based on conflict and confrontation. With the main aim of attracting advertisers, corporate outlets have adjusted their content to the interests of people, focusing more on political personalities and their charisma rather than policies (Aalberg et al., 2012; Mazzoleni, 2014). This type of content, described by Bisbal (2005, pag. 48) as "show-business politics", "political marketing", and "personalization of programs" has granted a revenue opportunity to ratings-driven news outlets.

A second strand of literature (Ost, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) states that journalists recognize political discontent, proper of populism, relevant in the news production. Praising the demands of the people while opposing the economic and political elites is, according to

Manucci (2017), an effective way to reach the audience. Strategically, the construction of an "us" against the "them" environment is an effective way create strong bonds with the audience⁷ (Ost, 2004). To sum up, different authors support the idea that populist messaging fits perfectly into media logic because it provides controversial content, characterized by the presence of elements such as dramatization, spectacularization, personalization, and a black and white political reality (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2014; Manucci, 2017).

This is perfectly illustrated in Zellizer's (2018) study. Specifically, Zellizer seeks to study the media coverage during the Brexit Referendum and Donald Trump's campaign (2016 - 2017), in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. In her study (pag. 40) she determines how journalists, in middle of these populist environments, have been unable to engage meaningfully in current events. Along with Zellizer, Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) takes a closer look at the role of anger in Trump's inauguration media coverage through a qualitative textual analysis. This scholar traces the major transformations in the modern journalistic agenda, pointing out a shift toward the prominence of anger in news stories.

Both researchers established that relatively little professional autonomy was found in contexts with rather strong commercial and populist influences; even when reporters are cognizant of making editorial decisions in newsrooms, and highlight the importance of relevant issues for the public. These studies have contributed to an understanding of the effects of populism on the media in an empirical way, although there is still an academic gap in comprehending more deeply how journalists' practices have been affected.

3.3.3 Representing the People

Journalists, as gatekeepers, bring together diverse interests, views, actors, political members and social sectors for debate (Norris and Odugbemi, 2009). To expand the latter,

⁷ The influence of populism on the discursive field is likely to become evident in journalists' practices too. However, this influence lies outside of the scope of this study.

Artz (2013, pag. 339) emphasizes that “media hegemony occurs when a leader successfully represents the interests and needs of the people by producing and distributing commonly accepted programming.”

Prior the arrival of Chávez, the elites relied on the private media to reflect "the expensive tastes of rich, white, fashionable Venezuelans" (Capetillo, 2007, p. 1). This worldview has been constantly reflected, particularly, in the soap operas and reality programs produced and distributed by these media outlets (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Matos, 2012). Moreover, newspapers have continuously highlighted the elites' viewpoints and personalities (Capetillo, 2007).

Commercial corporations have propagated a capitalistic mind-set with the purpose of growing economically and reaching a broader audience (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Waisbord, 2011). Accordingly, the media has not fully represented the cultural and racial diversity of Venezuelan society (Sinclair, 1999). As such, the media has abandoned their fundamental responsibility to provide precise portrayals and diverse opinions.

A public antipathy towards the mainstream media, reflected in a generalized political cynicism (Aalberg et al., 2012; Mayobre, 2012), was the scenario that preceded Chavismo. Within this context, the government significantly increased the number of state-owned and community media outlets⁸. Aiming to give a more active role to the national-mass media, the State has directly subsidized 244 radio stations, 37 television stations and over 200 newspapers run by communities; and has spent massive amounts on advertising (Waisbord, 2012). For example, in 2007, the Venezuelan government created its own channel *TVes* and

⁸ Latin America has a decades-long history of community media. Since 1950's, they alternative broadcasting stations and newspapers became symbols of resistance during dictatorships, rejecting the market-based media that operated in a regulatory environment in which the State provides them a high level of freedom and protection (Waisbord, 2012).

TeleSur news network to undercut the international dominance of global channels like *BBC* or *CNN* (Bisbal, 2006). These reforms have long been justified as a democratic process of defending people's communicational rights from the "anti-popular" interests (Waisbord, 2011, 2012).

Contrary to what one might think, Waisbord (2011, 2012) explains that Chavismo have not been interested in bolstering a community media. The logic behind it is that they were transformed into merely disseminators of government propaganda. Instead of being autonomous spaces for citizens to come together and discuss common interests, they turned into political supporters of Chavismo (Waisbord, 2011).

Such practices have undermined the efforts to create a society which embraces all points of view, regardless of political stance. In fact, the consolidation of a public sphere has not been based on tolerance and equal dialogue, but rather on the division of "us" versus "them". The media, instead of urging private outlets to forsake the conflict, should act as mediators, bringing together a plurality of diverse voices, interests, political parties, and social sectors to debate issues of public concern. Both private and public journalists have been pushed to serve as spokespersons of their political or commercial media servers, rather than reporting. This has restricted them to adopt a neutral function, distancing from objectivity at the root of true journalism.

3.3.4 The Talk Show Presidency and Twitter as Main Sources of Information

Mainstream media and social media have become the dominant sites for populist actors (Frajman, 2014). Chávez and Maduro, who have governed from the media dimension, devoted ten percent of their time to this activity. He used the national radio stations and television to broadcast their "cadenas" for long and public addresses to the nation. Likewise, they presented on a Sunday a TV show called 'Aló, Presidente' ('Hello, Mr. President').

During these mandatory media interventions, the presidents not only informed the citizens, but also make political decisions (Cañizales, 2012).

'Aló Presidente' is the perfect example to illustrate how the Chávez had effectively used this weekly program to deliver his political message in a moralistic and rather friendly way. By invoking the Bible, the writings of Simon Bolivar, popular sayings and songs; and at the same time, criticizing the corrupt elites, the American imperialism, and capitalism, this TV show became, in the eyes of the people, a legitimate way of communication (Bisbal, 2006, 2007; Cañizales, 2012). Chávez did not utilize this communication model only to channel the lower-classes' anger against the upper classes, but to weaken the opposition media by denouncing specific news articles and condemning journalists that work for private media outlets (Bisbal, 2006). The success of 'Aló Presidente' relied on adapting the program into a talk-show format, transforming it into a forum where members of the audience were able to participate (Cañizales, 2012, 2013; Frajman, 2014).

To put it differently, this television show has taken over the function of reporters. Journalists, as professionals, have been long considered the intermediaries between the State and the society (Coronel, 2001). However, in Venezuela, this intermediation, according to Bisbal and Quiñonez (2007), occurs through a television screen. Roberts (2003, pag. 53) explains this more in detail:

Chávez quickly replaced party-based mediation between the State and society with a media-based direct, personality relationship between the masses and a charismatic, though highly divisive, caudillo.

All the evidences suggest that the talk-show and other recurrent presidential broadcasts have replaced journalists' main role in accessing, selecting, and distributing information. In their place, Chávez adopted this role, directly addressing the Venezuelans and exposing a partial political reality. Cañizales (2012, p.13) is right when he says that "Aló

Presidente has been more a monologue than a dialogue.” This is to say, that Chávez, as a successful populist leader, used the media to become the protagonist, minimizing the role of journalists to mere spectators. In the same fashion, the public debate depended completely on presidential positions since journalists were not permitted to intervene and question the authorities to contrast the information of public interest. New forms of discrimination were created, preventing anti-regime journalists’ access to official sources of information.

Twitter has been also incorporated into the Chavista media apparatus as a platform to shape public conversation. A debate persists as to whether this strategy has really overturned into a model of communication in favour of a more participatory communication or not. It is certain that Twitter makes possible a more open and democratic communication, which is generally praised by populists, as people can easily have access to information and interact. A research study carried by Amado and Waisbord (2017) shows that this platform has not been used to promote straightforward dialogue among the people and other leaders. On the contrary, Amado and Waisbord establish that this strategy has represented the continuity of a top-down communication approach. Thus, Twitter has been used to reach the media without filters or questions.

3.5 Critical Overview

At this point, it is not surprising that the incidence of populism on the media is a prime concern. Growing attention has been devoted to this phenomenon from a multitude of analytical perspectives, although the convergence between populism and media has not been proven, and further empirical research is needed (Manucci, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008, 2014). Nonetheless, several scholars have studied (Akkerman, 2012; Cañizales, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen, K. 2018; Zellizer, 2008) —through predominantly qualitative textual analysis and content analysis— the influence of populist discourse as a communication style. These

investigations ascertain that in times of populism, narratives demonstrate a turn to emotionality (e.g. anger, indignation, frustration) with a focus on antagonist or dualist expressions. However, the populist discourse lies outside the scope of this study. It is also important to note that the majority of these studies reviewed have concentrated on political right movements, and their alignment with discourses around anti-immigration and anti-liberalism. Therefore, they do not provide a clear answer to the present research question.

One cannot assume away research focused on Venezuelan media. Salojärvi's (2016) research analysed the role of the media in the political conflict during Chávez administration (1999-2013). Among the core findings presented, he concludes the media scenario is represented by two groups —the Chavistas and the opposition— who were fighting for hegemonic power. Three methodologies were applied to reach this conclusion: content and frame analysis, visual rhetoric analysis, and interviews. It is worth mentioning that, although the findings were the result of carefully reviewing the content of journalistic pieces and presidential television interventions, the routines in which they were produced were not examined, nor related to journalists' daily practices. Hence, the specific case of Venezuela determines that there remains room for an additional, and possibly valuable contribution. Similarly, Wagner's (2017) research sought answers to explain how right-wing populist politics influence journalists' roles. For this purpose, nine journalists from three countries were interviewed about their day-to-day journalistic work. The interviews revealed that journalists perceived a strong responsibility to challenge right-wing populist messages by checking facts, contextualizing information and exposing populists' agendas. Additionally, he identifies cross-national differences with respect to objectiveness. However, with regards to the findings, the comparison between countries is of little significance.

In short, none of these works have aimed to study journalists' practices in populist environments as their main object of study. Consequently, there is a significant academic

opportunity for the present study as this research will focus on understanding how journalists' routines adapted and evolved in times of Chavismo.

CHAPTER # 4

METHODOLGY

This chapter is intended to review the methodological approach used to answer the present research question. The purpose of the methodology is to obtain a reliable and valid information to contribute to journalism field in an area that has not yet been explored.

4.1 Research Design

This research paper uses semi-structured interviews as the data-gathering approach to understand, in an empirical way, how journalists' practices have adapted and evolved in times of Chavismo. Interviews remain the most common method when it comes to qualitative research (King, 2004) because as Kvale (1983, cited in King, 2004, pag. 11) explains, "they gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewees with respect to the interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena." In other words, this is a technique, widespread in many social scientific disciplines —such as communications— for discovering a range of opinions related to a specific issue.

This specific method is the most effective way to map and understand, from journalists' professional life, how Chavismo influenced the journalists' daily routines. This involves analyzing their personal experiences and anecdotes as journalists. Interviewing is also a method that facilitates the explanatory description and critical discussion. Hence, qualitative interviews provide the data for understanding —by comparing and contrasting— the relation between social actors and a specific context (Gaskell, 2000).

4.2 Selecting the Interviewees

The interviewees were three male and five female Venezuelan investigative journalists between the ages of thirty and sixty. They were chosen to ensure diversity and were asked about their professional work in the context of left-wing populism. In this way, it was maximized the opportunity to understand different positions of members of a same professional milieu (Gaskell, 2000). Investigative journalists aim to uncover a specific topic of public interest, drawing attention to social, economic, political or even cultural trends. In this type of work, the reporters may spend weeks or months researching specific topics such as corruption or human rights abuses (Global Investigative Journalism Network). Therefore, it becomes one of the most difficult jobs to accomplish in authoritarian governments since freedom of the press is restricted.

The eight professionals currently perform roles as reporters or editors; and are members of different news organizations' investigative sections. While it would have been interesting to also interview journalist from Chavista media outlets, they are not allowed to participate in the research due to governmental policies.

All the interviewees have at least eight years of experience in journalism; and in the past, they all worked for important legacy newspapers in Venezuela such as *El Nacional*, *El Universal* and *Últimas Noticias*. This means they have witnessed the main transformations within Venezuela's media system promoted by the Chavistas through political, legislative and economic power. With the aim to have a specific sample, I only contacted print journalists originally from Venezuela; and were selected mainly through personal connections and subsequent referrals.

4.3 Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were conducted by video call (Skype) between July and August of 2018. Out of the eight journalists, four live in Venezuela, one in the United States, two in

Colombia, and one in Ecuador, under the status of visitant professionals due to Venezuela's government pressures. The journalists who live abroad have less than a year living in the foreign country and continue working as correspondents for a determined Venezuelan media outlet, so they are not disconnected to their country's reality.

Likewise, the participants' responses were recorded via audio, with the interviewees' permission in order to capture the full essence of their responses and as an aide-memoire for later analysis. Each interview lasted between forty and sixty minutes and was held in Spanish. The most important parts of the text have been translated to English⁹.

The conversation with the participants was carried out in an interview format, in which the interviewer determined the structure and decided the topics and the questions to be asked in advanced, while leaving the details to be worked out during the interview. Semi-structured interviews are a flexible method since the interviewees have a fair degree of freedom in deciding what to talk about and how to express themselves. It is also suitable for studies, such as this, that involve a small group of people. One of the key features of this research method is the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, since the participant becomes subject of research (King, 2009). Direct and face to face communication is essential to bring a relaxed and natural atmosphere, and establish a relationship of confidence.

4.4 Questions

Semi-structured interviews are conversations with a clear focus, in which the "aim is to understand the beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behavior of a person in a particular context" (Gaskell, 2000, pag. 39). In this methodological work, the

⁹ See *Appendix Section* for reviewing the translations.

questions are pre-determined with open-ended answers, encouraging the respondent to talk at length under his or her own terms, and expanding on aspects of their life.

Similarly, the structure of an interview —like in surveys— is substantive because order helps to gain a good rapport with the person (Leech, 2002). A good topic guide, which covers the key research problems, facilitates the discussion and provide a logical progression through the issue in focus (Gaskell, 2000). Authors like Leech (2002, pag. 665) recommend moving from the easiest and more general questions to the complex ones, using easy language and common terms. Unlike other methodologies, this one is designed to encourage conversations in which the direction can vary depending on the case. In other words, these questions allow an open discussion avoiding yes-no answers.

An effective method to process the data is constructing a matrix with the questions as the columns and the answers of each interviewee as the rows (Gaskell, 2000). This is an easy way of organizing the information before carefully examining the sections of text. Based on journalists' responses, the data (text) was first linked to a phenomenon (patterns, connections, contradictions, details), to be later classified into themes of analysis (Gibbs, 2011). Finally, interpreting the themes allows to give meaning to the interviewees' responses and critically analyze them to answer the main research question.

4.5 Limitations

One of the limitations in this research was obtaining a clear understanding of the interviewees' personal opinions and interpretations based on their system of beliefs and social context. Clearly, one of the methodological weaknesses of semi-structured interviews is having assumptions, biases, or inclinations that might inhibit impartial judgement. Likewise, some interviewees, for different reasons, may omit important information or take some details for granted. For others, it can be difficult to put some ideas into words, thereby producing a

misleading account (Gaskell, 2000). Beyond doubt, these limitations might lead to misunderstandings.

However, according to Becker and Geer (1957), these potential limitations do not have an impact in the validity of the study. By building a natural dialogue, it is possible to obtain clarifications about ideas that were not explicit. In this way, one can acquire detailed descriptions from this particular group of professionals. It is important to note that as an experienced journalist, I can conduct interviews confidently. Nonetheless, unlike the journalistic style, in this type of interviews I pretended to know very little about the interviewees, and tried to enter the world of the respondents. This encouraged them to confidently give me detailed answers.

Another limitation was Venezuela's Internet situation. Even though it was not difficult to contact the eight journalists from the United Kingdom, the technological conditions in Venezuela are precarious since they have the worst digital ecosystem in Latin America in terms of the quality of Internet access, according to the data of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Cepal, 2016). The quality of navigation of this essential service has recently deteriorated significantly. This situation complicated the communication while the interviews were taking place; thereby, we had to re-arrange some interview sessions.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of this method, the eight journalists were informed about the purpose of this research. The participants signed a confidentiality consent sheet¹⁰, which notified them that their answers would be used as data for analysis.

¹⁰ See the *Appendix Section* for reviewing the consent letters signed by the eight interviewees.

Furthermore, in this study there is no conflict of interest since these interviews do not create any professional or academic risk to the concerned parties. Nonetheless, interview responses were anonymized to allow a more self-critical and open reflection, and protect the interviewees' personal information.

CHAPTER # 5

FINDINGS

The results obtained from interviewing eight Venezuelan reporters who specialize in investigative journalism, will be presented throughout this chapter. I found that as that as authoritarian populism tries to censor and repress the media, journalists transform their journalistic practices: the where, what, how, and who of journalism.

- Where: Journalists migrate to digital platforms that offer new freedoms and new challenges.
- What: Journalists change their approach to content, focusing on new topics and presenting them in human-centered ways.
- How: Journalists follow strict journalistic guidelines, up to international standards in order to preserve their credibility.
- Who: Journalists find new sources of information, creatively building networks of sources where no official sources exist.

In short, it is argued that in times of increasingly authoritarian populism, journalists reinvent their practices in order to live up to their roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, gatekeepers, and providers of information.

5.1 Turning Difficulties into Opportunities

The first way Chavismo has shaped journalistic practices is by forcing many prominent journalists to become digital entrepreneurs. Journalists, hoping to effectively fulfill their role as watchdogs, now increasingly turn to digital platforms and social media to circumvent censorship and repression.

All the journalists interviewed started their careers in legacy media outlets —*El Correo del Orinoco*, *El Mundo*, *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *Últimas Noticias*— and continued to work there during a great part of Chavista administration (1998-2014). They were editorial staffers, either of the political, economic, city life, or cultural units. Each interviewee has at least eight years of experience. Half of them worked, at some point of their careers, as correspondents for international news companies like *CNN* (USA), *El País* (Spain), *New York Times* (USA), *Rapporteurs sans frontières* (France), *Univisión* (USA), among others. Almost all of them have won important journalistic awards throughout their professional careers.

The eight journalists are in agreement that private media companies were “good schools” to develop journalistic skills and accomplish their work in a professional way. For example, Mariana remembers that in 2009 she carried on research about the disappearance of a piece of art in Caracas’ most important museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art. Although she felt motivated to cover interesting journalistic cases in *El Nacional*, government pressure on the press and harassment to reporters started to be constant since 2013:

We have to consider that *El Nacional* had moments of political positioning that affected the editorial line of the newspaper. Yes, as the head of the culture unit, I was confronted with tremendous pressures to favour some political actors who worked in the museum.

Lucía, who worked in the city life section of *El Mundo* for almost seven years (2007-2014), experienced the same problems. She describes situations like when the Minister of Communication called the director of the paper to say: “You should pay attention to what journalists publish.” Lucía explains that, before receiving these direct threats from the government, if her work was well substantiated, she could stand up for it and get it published.

The turning point was when the Chavista government centralized the importation of newsprint, and controlled the distribution of advertisement. Venezuela’s oldest and most prestigious newspapers, unable to generate income, were sold amid the increasing

government pressures. Rodrigo, who worked in the economic unit of *El Universal* for seven years (2007-2014), recalls this moment:

In a matter of days, a group of Spanish investors linked to Chavismo bought the broadsheet from the family that had run the paper since 1909. No one gave us any explanation... It is truly shameful.

Mariana asserts that, indeed, from 2013 to 2015 the most important newspapers were purchased. According to Rodrigo, at least one hundred newspapers stopped circulating, and the rest were sold to “companies of suspicious origin, who immediately softened the papers’ editorial lines and dismissed several talented journalists.”

While facing an environment of censorship and repression, Venezuela’s political situation forced these influential journalists to reinvent themselves. “I think that Chavismo brings out the best of us”, claims Lola who worked at the *Últimas Noticias* daily. “I am convinced that this crisis help us to understand the importance of our work”, states Rodrigo. Venezuelan journalism seeks to give some answers: “We regroup, and reconfigure our work and ourselves in order to continue reporting”, adds Mariana.

Attempting to look for journalistic independence, and preserve the quality of their investigative reporting, all interviewees consider digital platforms are a safe place to fulfil this duty. *Armando.Info*, *Efecto Cucuyo*, *El Pitazo*, and *Runrun.es* are some of the native digital start-ups they have launched in the last eight years. Eduardo and Oswaldo, for instance, became entrepreneurial journalists after realizing they can bring together their long journalistic experiences and deep understanding of the profession. The other six journalists are part of the editorial staff. Mariana explains why she made this decision:

In our desire to continue working, we saw there was an opportunity to come work together. We all identified the need to have independent, investigative, and high-quality journalism; and this ended up being better than what we used to do a few years ago. Crises also turn into opportunities.

How, then, do journalists fulfil their roles as watchdogs? The undefined borders of the Internet make it harder for the government to control journalistic content by legal means. Online media become a place where journalists have more freedom and are able to reveal cases of corruption, crime, and law-breaking. "The circumstances motivated us to migrate to digital media", says Lucía, who now is a member of *Runrun.es* editorial staff.

This is not to say that journalists are not facing new challenges. Most of the reporters assert that overcoming cyber-attacks is now part of their daily routines. "There is a series of attacks that produce more and more damage to servers so that the media cannot transmit live information of what is happening in the country", explains Oswaldo, who now works in the investigative unit of *El Pitazo*. "We permanently play cat and mouse", says Eduardo when he refers to the constant attacks to the servers of *Armando.Info*, where he works. "It is something that could be considered funny, but at the same time it is exhausting."

For the interviewees, social media become an essential tool. Lucía, who now works in the investigative unit of *Runrun.es*, tells that, when the website is hacked, journalists resort to publishing their content on Facebook or Twitter. Another strategy is to bypass the attacks by creating agreements with other digital media outlets that allow them to reproduce their work and amplify the impact on the public. "In such manner, we join efforts and protect ourselves from persecutions", she claims.

Contrary to what we might think, Venezuela's populist and authoritarian government turn into an opportunity for journalists. The data reveals that digital natives emerge as a result of the political events in Venezuela. Assuming a new role as entrepreneurs, journalists create research-based centres for investigative journalism. These editorial projects, based on digital platforms, are less restricted than traditional media and independence is not compromised to fulfil effectively their role as watchdogs. Their work is characterized for being critical with a government whose institutions are weak and influenced by political pressures. While

journalists still highly value the classic practices of good journalism such as research, reporting, interviewing, and writing, this digital scenario push them to also develop along with a versatile set of multimedia practices that allow them to adapt to a digital ecosystem.

5.2 Fertile Ground for Investigative Journalism

How do these journalists set their news agendas to raise awareness? Digital natives are breaking important stories in Venezuela. Most journalists agree that in times of Chavismo the juncture is permanent and the number of topics they have to cover are unlimited. “Venezuela is kind of a minefield full of scandal to investigate”, says Lola, who now works in Runrun.es. “There are many topics to choose from, which are normally life or death. Unfortunately, we must prioritize what to cover”, notes Andrea who worked in a digital start-up and then decided to migrate to the United States because the economic situation in Venezuela was getting worse and worse.

This is not the case of Rodrigo and Eduardo, which were forced to escape to Colombia. After having been sued by two businessmen close to the Chavista regime, and realizing that it was going to be difficult to defend themselves by legal means, they abandoned Venezuela. Both journalists work together in *Armando.Info* uncovering and revealing the corruption behind the Local Supply and Production Committee (CLAP by its acronym in Spanish), a Chavista state-run program. Rodrigo explains it in detail:

From the end of 2016, we committed ourselves to discover what was behind this which, on the one hand, seemed like a beneficial public program. There were sources and signs that made us believe that we had to investigate. In the end, we discovered that the milk distributed to people, as part of the CLAP program, was low in protein and calcium far below of what nutritional norm demands.

Eduardo says that the stories published in *Armando.Info* have a transnational focus:

We publish stories that cross borders, such as crime and corruption. It is important to realize Chavismo has been a continental project, which resulted in the circulation of money all through the region.

Oswaldo adds that “the reporters’ effort to find what the government does not want to reveal and is of public interest, immediately becomes investigative journalism.”

Besides giving a special emphasis to stories of corruption, security, and human rights; investigative journalists have focused on social issues like health and food crisis. Oswaldo believes that "*El Pitazo* reveals what others are not telling through personal experiences.” “Personally, I always try to look for human side stories that people feel identified with”, says Andrea. A story that marked her career was when she interviewed mothers who did not celebrate Mother’s Day because their sons went to prison or died due to protesting against the regime. Jonás, another Venezuelan reporter who now lives in Ecuador after receiving direct threats from the government, remembers how he used to dress up as a doctor with a white coat to pass through the security checkpoints of different hospitals: “I think a local story can transform into global one”, mentions. With this he tries to say: “I prefer talking with a renal patient than with the president of the medical federation; I prefer talking with a patient that has HIV than with the president of some NGO.”

In general, these stories tend to consume more time (days, weeks or even months) than daily reporting. Many interviewees complain they feel overworked because there are too many things to research and write about. “We are against the wall. It is a fairly small team that covers an endless variety of topics”, asserts Lola. “The good thing is that we will never get bored”, she adds (laughs). When journalists compare their past work experiences in legacy media, where the media outlet relied upon at least one hundred journalists, they realize their current workload and intensity of their routines. In these small organizations, they usually work with a teamwork of five to ten people, at different beats depending on their long-term or short-term agendas, explains Lucía. Eduardo and Mariana say, based on their past

experiences, legacy newspapers publish “poor” news stories when it came to generate public debate by inquiring public issues.

In short, these start-ups are considered economically and ideologically independent since they do not depend on powerful groups which exert control over them. While setting the agenda, the selection of news stories is the result of a deliberate decision between editors and journalists, based on the relevance and the impact they might have. The biggest stories are those related to corruption and human rights abuses. Another interest is to find a direct connection with the reader through human stories. Overall, their work is characterized by producing exclusive content to create a new editorial experience and avoid trends. This gives digital media start-ups, According to the eight journalists, a strategic position among other media organizations. However, this does not mean that they are facing other type of difficulties. Investigative journalism involves in-depth and well-researched analysis, which is translated into time and resource limitations in a country where the juncture is constant.

5.3 Pursuing International Journalistic Standards

An increase in misinformation and a decrease in media trust were the motivation for the eight journalists to find new ways of doing journalism. Mariana explains that the effects of a “well-thought-out way” strategy, reflected in a wave of censorship, resulted in an not well informed society. Eduardo agrees, saying that corporate media, like *El Nacional*, publish “non-verified facts only to harm the government.” The public and community media have been “partisan, propaganda-based and against interviewing anyone who is not from the government”, claims Mariana. All interviewees say that this misinformation has had a negative impact on journalists’ credibility.

So, how do journalists provide reliable, balanced and verified information? The interviewees think “by improving their journalistic practices” it is possible to do journalism “with international standards”. Eduardo explains it in his own words:

Chavismo has made Venezuelans consider aspects that we did not value, as the importance of contrasting information, and the access to statements or documentary elements... Some of the practices that we did not take into account are seen from a different perspective... It has allowed us to understand what the role of the journalist is in comparison to what it means to work in a commercial environment. These years have shown us that what is in crisis is corporate journalism, not journalism itself.

Having editorial independence permits reporters to work with freedom and follow their professional values, which includes acting on behalf of special interests whether commercial or political. Rodrigo comments that his readers have called him “Chavista”, in several occasions, because in 2013 he uncovered a case in which Odebrecht (the biggest engineering and contracting company in Latin America) financed Henrique Capriles’ (the opposition candidate’s) campaign. “People must understand we do not do public relations. When we see that there is a mysterious story, documented, and of public interest, we publish it”, says the journalist.

When it comes to self-regulation, *El Pitazo* is the only digital native which has a code of practices, named *The Yellow Stripe*, for the 83 employees’ who are part of this project. The editorial line of this start-up is summarized:

Our purpose is to do rigorous journalism, attached to the duty to inform and the challenge of overcoming any type of limitations or censorship, without neglecting our main ethical rules. Our goal is to get closer to the truth and tell stories other media are silent to favour power or economic interests.

Lola thinks that a code of practices “is an important aspect that is missing” in *Runrun.es*, even if it is a small organization. However, digital journalists follow a strict workflow to accomplish their work ethically. For example, Lola says she balances her investigations by always showing “the two sides, the two versions of a story”, even when they do not have access to official sources. After writing, “my reports pass through the hands of two or three editors and a legal

counsellor, who review the accuracy and fairness of information”, she adds. Rodrigo, highlights that in the case of *Armando.Info* “if there is an assertion that cannot be backed with data or a document, it is not published.” In terms of fact-checking, Jonás explains that in times of Chavismo, journalists do not only have to verify that the information is true:

We also have to take care of our backs so that we do not end up in jail. When I interview someone, I call the person before publishing and ask him: ‘Are you sure you told me this?’ In Venezuela, the fact-checking works with double or even triple verification.

While neutral reporting in Venezuela is hard to come by because of the social and political polarization, the eight journalists consider that digital natives have stuck closer than most to the ideal of fact-based investigative reporting. For them, their most important strength is the quality of their work based on balanced and verified information, and an independent editorial line. However, overcoming the “black and white” representation of the political, caused by a polarized environment, is still challenging.

5.4 New Network of Sources of Information

These influential journalists emphasize that the greatest difficulty, while they do investigative journalism, is to obtain official information. Lucía tells more about this situation:

Since the first day of the Bolivarian government, but especially after the coup d'état in 2002, the government reviewed its policy in order to create a communication hegemony. They want to control all communications, information and media. Since then, they began to limit the access to sources of information.

Mariana explains that “corporate media” opted by “remaining shallow and reproducing what the official spokesmen said through the State channel.” In a different way, Oswaldo thinks that “having difficulties to obtain information widens the range of investigative journalism.”

Similarly, Eduardo believes that “this problem is compensated by more and more stories to tell.” Then, what methods do they apply to have access to official information?

The deep political crisis and division that are plaguing Venezuela have driven some supporters of Chavismo to leak information. Discontent among the population is expanding among cabinet members, turning them into important sources of information. "People that form part of the government, end up being our allies", says Rodrigo. Leakers are considered key journalistic sources to uncover hidden information. Dealing with anonymous sources also raises daily challenges. Oswaldo points out that in these cases, they quote the sources as "non-identified" to remark that they are respecting the confidentiality of the person.

Venezuela's 1999 constitution establishes free access to information, but there is no law that guarantees this right. Since last year, journalists do not have access to public information such as the list of national contractors, crime figures, inflation rate, economic figures, etc. Oswaldo explains that "Chavismo determined that the media would use it (the data) politically." This brings complex difficulties while doing investigative journalism. In response to this situation, every digital native has developed innovative strategies to generate reliable data. Lola, for instance, works for a project called Monitor of Victims in Runrun.es

We go every week to the morgue to collect data , through family members and community leaders, and we count how many homicides occur daily. In Caracas we have at least five or six homicides a day. It is an arduous task that must be done.

Lola is also coordinating Hunger Statistics, which offers monthly statistics related to hunger in Venezuela. Mariana is in charge of a project that monitors cases of freedom of expression:

I keep a record of the attacks against journalists, report cases of freedom of expression, restrictions to public information and the violation of human rights contemplated in the Constitution of Venezuela.

In this way, journalists are creating their own databases. "Probably we don't have the exact figures, but it give us a trend that allows us to be more critical based on the weight of statistical evidence", highlights Lola.

According to Jonás, in the last three years, the Venezuelan government ceased publishing the annual epidemiological bulletin, an essential instrument for journalists to obtain information on communicable diseases including infections and outbreaks. Jonás explains “doctors themselves are generating statistics because they are the only ones who can access hospitals.” This network is formed by different professionals, organizations, and labour unions who are interested in raising awareness. They are permanently sharing information, through messenger apps like WhatsApp, to those journalists who cover news related to precarious health services in the country. International organizations like the World Health Organization and the Pan-American Health Organization benefit from this data. “Obviously, the government argues that those statistics are erroneous”, adds Jason.

Another example of a collaborative working model is alliances with international organizations such as Criminal Forum and the National Observatory of Violence. “There are many NGOs, which are collecting and recording what is happening, but it remains information that cannot be contrasted”, clarifies Mariana. Eduardo tells new technologies also give them access to international sources or databases. “Often international bank accounts, for example, are important clues”, says this journalist.

Finally, social networks have gained popularity amid the censorship and shut down of media outlets. Eduard asserts “Twitter became the main source of information, considering that this can be a platform for rumors and fake news.” “We must follow Twitter if we want to know what the governmental position is... It remains as the only source where official information can be accessed”, points out Oswaldo.

To sum up, the eight journalists agree they have limited official sources to obtain reliable information. In order to fulfil their role as providers of information, they have developed new methods to collect data and access to official statements. A close relationship with leakers, alliances with NGO’s, creation of databases, associations with different unions,

and access to social networks are some the practices they are implementing. However, they face difficulties like the dilemma between disclosing the information and protecting their confidential sources. In times of Chavismo, it has been indispensable to deal effectively with these types of sources to safeguard them from future reprisals.

These findings reveal that journalists did not only adapt their professional practices over the last twenty years, but reinvented them. They consider that a populist and authoritarian regime such as Chavismo turned into “an opportunity” to rectify their role as journalists. Pursuing “international norms and practices”, they have committed to informing in a reliable, accurate, and independent way in order to enrich the public debate. In other words, journalists have reacted to challenges in a way that allows them to reflect upon their professional work.

In their process of reinvention, journalists realized that online media is less restricted; thus, it became an important outlet for journalists. Nowadays, entrepreneurial journalists have launched several digital start-ups, transforming Venezuela into one of the digital media leaders in Latin America. Media disruption, however, has created both opportunities and challenges. In the chapter that follows, this debate will be discussed through the theoretical frameworks of media hegemony and political polarization.

CHAPTER # 6

DISCUSSION

I found that journalists have adapted their journalistic practices in times of increasingly authoritarian populism by reconsidering their roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, gatekeepers, and providers of information. This section brings together the literature review and the findings, formulating a profound understanding of the influence of a political movement—authoritarian populism—on the journalistic field. The purpose is to interpret and describe the significance of these results in the light of hegemony and polarization theories. These findings, I argue, add to our understanding of theory, of journalistic practices more broadly, and of the importance of journalistic credibility.

6.1 Journalists as Counter-hegemonic Actors

As outlined in the literature review, mediatization, defined as the dependence of politics on the media (Mazzoleni, 2014; Moffit, 2016) is a useful starting point to explain the rise of Hugo Chávez and the direct bonds he created with the people. Mass media and new technologies changed Chavismo political action into something different from what traditionally had been accepted as mediation (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 2010). The co-dependent relationship between contemporary populist actors and the media, translated into a mutual benefit, evidently has had an impact on journalists' routines. On one hand, the government wants to control the media to spread their populist message and present their own version of reality; on the other hand, commercial media organizations privilege and benefit from populist content to increase their profits (Manucci, 2017). Indeed, all the interviewees mentioned that the government's political action, since the first day Chávez came to power, was directed to the communication area. In parallel, private media ceased to

be a space of debate to become a platform of political interests. Accordingly, this co-dependency has been also conflictive. The results, then, should be analyzed in the broader context of hegemony and polarization theories.

Prior studies (Amado and Waisbord, 2017; Cañizales, 2013; Capetillo, 2007; Dineen, 2012; Frajman, 2014; Hawkins; 2010; Waisbord; 2011, 2002) have examined the different strategies enforced by Chávez (1999-2013) to control the media, especially against those media organizations and journalist who were highly critical of the government; and its implications on the media. Chavismo defined these public communication policies for one purpose: to build a state media hegemony (Cañizales, 2014). According to the interviewed journalists, the consolidation of this state media apparatus has precluded them to work freely, and follow professional norms and practices. Consequently, the media —both private and official— remain hidden in the shadow of Chavismo. Surprisingly, the results of this research reveal something unexpected. Despite the fact that several authors (Artz, 2013; Bisbal, 2007, 2009; Cañizales, 2012, 2014; Waisbord, 2011, 2012) assert Chávez implemented a communicational hegemony, the findings show that a counter-hegemonic movement is undermining this process. This counter-hegemonic force is represented by long-experienced journalists who founded their own digital media start-ups to provide high-quality journalism. Laclau's and Mouffe's (2000, 2005a, 2005b, 1985) conceptual framework of populism and Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony have been appropriate to interpret this phenomenon. Both authors argue hegemony consists of the articulation of collective identities, but often these identities are marked by a "void" that seeks to be filled. This new collectivity is reflected, following Laclau's line of thought, in a group of entrepreneurial journalists that joined forces to create research-based centres for investigative journalism. Their common identity is grounded in reconstructing journalists' credibility by reinventing their professional practices. This evidence suggests, therefore, that a counter-hegemonic force is confronting (without using

violence) the established communicational hegemony. The presence of outsider actors in a hegemonic scenario (media) (Gramsci, 1971), and their increasingly influence on society makes an interesting case to keep researching.

Laclau's approach of antagonism has been also valuable to illustrate media's polarization in Venezuela. The comprehensiveness of his definition of populism is centred primarily in the antagonism (Higgins, 2007; Howarth, 2000; Torfing, 1999) "as a condition that occurs when people are unable to constitute their identities" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 125). The present findings, contrary to previous studies which have shown that news organizations in Venezuela have benefited themselves from political antagonism, demonstrate journalists are trying to construct unity (feeling of "us") amid a "hegemonic battle." This means they identify themselves not as foes of the government, but as accountable for creating cohesion between diverse identities in a highly polarized and divided country. Journalists as consensus and peace builders contradict, to some extent, Laclau's and Mouffe's (1985) view of antagonism as essential in democratic process.

6.2 Adapting and Evolving Journalistic Practices

Aside from a theoretical perspective, the presented findings can also be linked to journalistic practice. The results of this study indicate that journalistic routines have been challenged and redefined as consequence of the Chavista new communication order. Journalists' experiences demonstrate different ways they re-adapted their professional practices, even when they live in an authoritarian state, to accomplish their roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, gatekeepers and providers of information.

With regards to their professional role as watchdogs, the findings reveal reporters have reinvented themselves in the last twenty years. An interesting result is to see journalists becoming media entrepreneurs to gain editorial independence from legacy news

organizations. In reviewing the literature, no studies were found on the association with this new phenomenon.

The rise of entrepreneurial journalism is interpreted as a response to the pressures, censorship, and repression journalists experienced all over the Chavista regime (Waisbord 2011, 2012). Online media transformed into an effective alternative for undertaking investigative reporting considering the government do not exercise total control over digital platforms. This is how a group of journalists turned difficulties into opportunities. However, one of the questions that arise is whether these ventures will be sustainable and profitable over time to do investigative reporting and promoting editorial independence when the media is facing an economic global crisis. To spend months investigating a specific case is a privilege within newsrooms. For this reason, a significant number of news organizations around the world have lowered the costs to investigative sections. However, the interviewees considered investigative journalism is essential to accomplish their duty to prevent abuses of power and raise awareness of wrongdoings. Carefully researched reports have a high impact on reconstructing the media's credibility and support in Venezuela. Technology, according to these prominent journalists, is an accessible and inexpensive tool to obtain data that allows reporters more readily to spot potential stories of corruption. An illustrative example has been the financial records in Panama Papers, which made it possible to spot offshore companies.

With respect to the second research question, it was found that the journalists build their news agendas focusing on revealing government corruption. All of them say they develop their stories to raise awareness of injustices, which usually has a great impact on the audience and leads to collective action. In general, reporters describe Chavista era as “fertile ground for investigative journalism.” Additionally, they are covering information no other media outlet does after legacy news organizations opted for a quieter position and abandoned their critical stance. They expect that their investigations will generate a broader public

debate in the long run, since nowadays their information reaches a limited number of people, because the majority have limited or no means of Internet access.

Then it can be argued that the results do not match the literature review which sustains that the media has benefited from populist content based on confrontation and negativity (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2014; Manucci, 2017). However, these results need to be interpreted with caution considering entrepreneurial journalism has given more importance to cases related to Chavismo's administration corruption and abuses. This means investigative reporters have not inquired, in the same way, into other powerful sectors of society like corporate houses, even if it is of national interest. Thus, the doubt of how journalists lead and influence this complex news agenda remains. A possible explanation for why they go in-depth when reviewing government actions might be its public impact. While the interviews were conducted, all the journalists asserted that one of their professional commitments is to record all the irregularities that are being committed, with the objective that justice will be served concerning the cases they report and reveal. They are convinced their work as journalists can bring an immediate political change in Venezuela.

Another important finding is journalists' responses towards the use of information. They recognize that they pursue international journalistic standards, in terms of counterbalancing and verifying the information. Aside from their intuition as an essential component of their journalistic practice, they follow a strict process of objectivity and fact-checking even if most of these media ventures do not have a formal code of practices. For instance, their investigations are published as long as they have enough elements to confirm the facts and have the reliability that their information is truthful. Overall, these results differ from the studies carried out in the early stages of Chavismo (Cañizales and Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Cañizales, 2009, Capetillo, 2007, Dineen, 2012) in which journalists preferred to back up the

government's communicational strategy. Frequently, they presented one version of the reality supporting political interests and freely criticizing the opposition. Nonetheless, it is also important to bear in mind the conditions in which journalists accomplish their work as gatekeepers, representing different political viewpoints and substantiated facts (Coronel, 2001), is in an environment of censorship, persecution and threat. To strive for journalistic independence, it is necessary to possess some legal protection, which in Venezuela is increasingly limited. While analyzing these results it is important to take into account that media restrictions in this country have grown worse in the last years with Nicolás Maduro in power (Freedom House, 2017). Then, to what extent will it be possible to do investigative journalism and promote a diverse political discussion in Venezuela? This is a situation that is provoking debate among different media actors in the country since freedom of press is in jeopardy (García and Lugo-Ocando, 2015).

In relation to the final research question, the findings reveal journalists have developed creative ways to access official sources of information. Although they have a high dependency on technology to accomplish this work, they opt for more official methods to obtain reliable data in order to write their reports. Alliances with NGO's, international databases, WhatsApp groups with different professional unions, and social media are some of the methods they are using to balance their information. One of their biggest strengths is the compilation of databases, as part of their daily routines, to present updated figures. Leakers have been another important source of information since they provide revelations that would otherwise be hidden. Consistent with the literature (Amado and Waisbord 2017; Cañizalez, 2012; Frajman, 2014), the findings also established journalists depend on state media and social media to obtain official statements of the government. This means that journalists have maintained this journalistic practice all through these years. One interesting

observation is that usually sources are cross-checked against other sources to validate the information that will be published.

A group of influential journalists in Venezuela –identified as counter-hegemonic actors– are modifying the way that journalism is produced by reinventing their professional practices. Driven by a broad professional consciousness and sense of public responsibility, they have adapted their daily routines to a digital environment where they can perform their journalistic roles in an independent way. Such practices, according to them, foster the credibility of their work. This confirms what Coronel (2001, pag. 12) states:

The press as an institution is strengthened if journalists have demonstrated that they serve the public interest by uncovering malfeasance and abuse. A credible press is assured popular backing if it is muzzled or otherwise constrained.

CHAPTER # 7

CONCLUSION

Grounded in the theoretical approach of hegemony and polarization, the aim of this paper was to understand how journalists adapted their professional practices in an authoritarian populist country such as Venezuela. More precisely, the research sought to explain how journalists are fulfilling their professional roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, gatekeepers, and providers of information. For that purpose, eight prominent Venezuelan journalists were interviewed about their day-to-day journalistic work in the context of left-wing populism.

It is argued that as authoritarian populism tries to censor and repress the media, journalists transform their journalistic practices: the where, what, how, and who of journalism. Where? The first major finding of this study is that journalists assume a new role as entrepreneurs after feeling dissatisfied with traditional media and pressured by the government. Driven by a mission of public service, they have developed research-based centres for investigative journalism. Online media become a safe place to do critical high-quality journalism and ensure editorial independence. What? This study also identifies that digital news ventures are breaking important stories. In-depth investigations focused on uncovering cases of corruption, human rights violations, and power abuses are part of their daily news agenda. How? Journalists follow strict journalistic guidelines, up to international standards, in order to preserve their credibility. Who? Finally, this study finds that reporters have developed creative ways of accessing official information. They have created an alternative network of sources of information, which include close relationships with leakers, alliances with NGO's, associations with different unions, and subscriptions to international databases, social networks, and the compilation of their own databases.

It is also argued that journalists represent a counter-hegemonic force while they are changing the established Venezuela's communication order. The interviews reveal that journalists have perceived a responsibility to challenge the Chavista communication project. For that purpose, they have redefined their journalistic practices to reconstruct their professional credibility. Hence, media hegemony in Venezuela will not necessarily be dominated by media organizations in the future, but rather by alternative practices that will become predominant through their implementation and acceptance.

One potential limitation of this research is: How can we be sure that journalists' responses were not for the benefit of the researcher? Even if journalists' perspectives regarding their work routines are invariably positive, it can be argued there is a significant shift. This study cannot show if journalism in Venezuela has evolved in recent years, but it shows that a group of prominent journalists are reconsidering their routines to accomplish their roles in a highly politically polarized society.

While this paper offers a valuable insight of journalistic practices, a bigger sample of journalists would allow understanding how the situation has affected journalists working in traditional and official news organizations. In this sense, the scope of this study is too narrow to make inferences about the impact of this phenomenon from a local perspective. Nonetheless, this research is only an initial attempt to understand the relation of Latin American neo-populism and journalists' routines. Future studies will make further contributions to this research area.

At this point, it is also essential to ask how Venezuela left-wing populism has influenced political thinking in Latin America and regional media, considering Chávez has been known as the central character of this movement across the continent. The question raised in this study could also be analysed in other countries of Latin America to establish whether this is also a regional phenomenon. It may be interesting to look at other media

contexts like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina, which also have had neo-populist governments in the last five years. Such examples can give us a clearer idea of cross-national journalistic practices under a similar political context. The case of Venezuela could then be compared at regional or even global level.

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**SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “LOLA”
INTERVIEW # 1 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH**

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: How is your work routine?

LOLA: I am in the research unit of *Runrun.es*. I develop research reports, which take several months to prepare and other shorter reports that are written weekly or biweekly. Additionally, I am in two projects: one called Monitor of Victims, we collect information about the homicides that occur daily. We do this because there is no official data, so we go every week to the morgue to collect information through family members and community leaders to see how many homicides occur daily. In Caracas we have at least five or six homicides a day. It is an arduous task that has to be done. I am also coordinating a project called the *Hambreometro* that is published monthly, in some sites, which reports the figures that are related to hunger in Venezuela. We talk about inflation, the cost of the basic basket, the salary that workers receive, production. All these figures are in the same place so that they can be shared, commented on and analyzed at the national level.

I: How is the process of your investigative work?

LOLA: My research work has a lot to do with what we find on the web, through the files we obtain. It also has to do with databases that we create based on the information we can get. We also have field research.

I: According to Venezuelan laws and regulations, have journalistic practices changed with Chavismo?

LOLA: On the one hand, whenever we do a research report, we go to the official source and 98% of the time we do not get an answer. We try to contact them by phone, letter or a request for information, but the answer is null. In the end we stay with the official statements on that issue or statements that came out on the official television. In the reports we say we tried to contact x person, but did not get a reply. For example, I am currently working on an investigation and I was out of Caracas for a while. I coincided in a city with a Mayor and a Governor, who participated in an event. I was able to interview them because I was infiltrated and able to obtain official statements. On the other hand, in Venezuela there is no Access to Information Law and that has made it difficult to have public databases that can be consulted, especially because the National Institute of Statistics has statistics that have not been updated since 2012. Likewise, the economic indicators are not published since 2014. Regarding the issue of security, at the national level we are working on a database because there is no official information published at the moment. This case is so complex that when we go and ask to the police for information, they tell us they do not have any kind of information. They are always hiding something because there are many extrajudicial facts that prove they do know what is going on. Precisely for that reason we go to the relatives so that they can tell us their version.

I: What strategies have you adopted to be able to adequately inform citizens?

LOLA: In case of *Runrun.es* we have opted for databases. For example, for 2016 there was a significant amount of looting either to food businesses or trucks. There were more than 1,500 lootings in 2017. What we started to carry was a record of looting reports, it probably did not give us the exact figures, but it did give us a trend that allows us to analyze the number of assaults on trucks or looting of supermarkets. Likewise, with the *Hambreometro* what we are doing is to support NGOs that do have figures, or economic data.

I: Regarding state media, do they have direct access to these official sources?

LOLA: Yes, completely, they belong to an official media network in which their coverage adjusts to the official versions and they effectively have access to the president and ministers. If you evaluate what kind of questions they ask and the type of topics they cover, the topics always have a partisan interest, nothing of critical journalism. It should not even be called journalism.

I: When we talk about critical journalism, are you free to question the government as a journalist? Do you feel one hundred percent free to fulfill your work as a journalist in this media?

LOLA: In *Runrun.es* we have complete freedom not only in choosing the topic that is going to be treated, but also in pointing out the focus we want to portray. What has happened is that, of course, every time we are doing work that involves the interests of a person, or a government official, that work goes through the hands of the legal counselor. It is a way to protect us.

I: Do you have a code of journalistic practices on which you base your work?

LOLA: No, and we also do not have a style manual either. That is an important aspect that is always missing. But we are several journalists who edit the same work. There are times when a report goes through the hands of two or three people, especially in long reports that have elements of complaint.

I: When doing investigative journalism, have you had any type of persecution, sanction, threat from the Government?

LOLA: No, for my part I have not had a direct persecution. But as a means of communication we have had attacks that have affected us in investigations, so much so that we decided to redirect some investigations. This means we had to put them on another server so that people were able to read them. Even though this server is slower, we could no longer use the traditional one because it went through governmental attacks.

I: How do you select the most relevant topics?

LOLA: We have weekly editorial meetings, on Tuesdays we discuss what are the topics to be discussed during the week and we report the status of the issues that we have on the table. However, it is a fairly small team that covers the great number of topics that exist in Venezuela. I feel overworked, but it is precisely because there are too many things to write about.

I: On the basis of which elements do you decide which topics should be published?

LOLA: We see what issue has arisen and we chose the research areas that we are going to develop. We make a special emphasis on corruption, security issues, and human rights. There are some social issues we have had pending for a while. We are normally interested in health and hunger. We always cover the political issue.

I: Do you use Twitter or the Maduro networks as part of your journalistic sources?

LOLA: Yes, they are part, depending on the topic that is addressed. Maduro's word and discourse is always going to have its place because that is the official position on a given issue. We do take them into account because it is the maximum access we have to the Presidency.

I: How do you counterbalance the information?

LOLA: Depending on the work, there are at least four sources, the extension can vary between ten thousand or eleven thousand characters. We do not have a limit, as it is digital journalism, we always have more freedom. Depending on whether it is an analysis, we try to look for analysts on one side and on the other side of our story.

I: What is the journalistic load of a journalist in Venezuela that allows him to fulfill his role and be able to inform citizens every day?

LOLA: We are against the wall. In Venezuela we are running out of those great newsrooms that do exist in other media. For example, I worked in the newspaper *El Nacional* between 2007 and 2011, the number of people who were working on digital media there was double the number of what *Runrun.es* has today.

I: Tell me about your experience at *Cadena Capriles*? Was it a radical change in comparison with *Runrun.es*?

LOLA: Yes, of course. I used to be at *Cadena Capriles*, which was a media conglomerate. At the time of planning a trip within, they had a person who was responsible for getting the airfare and itinerary, and was also responsible for payments, hotel reservations. Not here, it is the same journalist who takes care of everything. This situation is repeated in Caracas, when going to an area we do not have transportation 24 hours. That, on the operational side. Also, most journalists in digital media are no longer dedicated to a single source, but to several things and that leaves us without specialized journalists in the country.

I: What was your motivation to move to this digital media?

LOLA: I left this chain because it was bought by Chavismo and a women's magazine because they edited certain phrases on topics that seemed harmless. For example, once I was working in Miss Venezuela backstage, contest that had fallen terribly because the crisis had destroyed it. Every testimony that I gathered from the interviewees was absolutely nostalgic. They talked about issues related to the crisis that we cannot publish nowadays. In that report they edited me drastically.

I: Tell me about some of your most important research?

LOLA: The last case we had was the report on the People's Liberation Operations (PLO). These were operations of different security forces with the intention of the government to eradicate

criminality and trap Colombian paramilitaries who were destabilizing the Maduro government. However, we were able to corroborate with the investigation that they were actually operations aimed at carrying out extrajudicial executions within the poorest areas of the country. They were taken throughout the country and murdered more than 500 people in those two years. In addition, they did so with the same pattern of human rights abuses.

I: Is traditional media also involved with investigative journalism?

LOLA: Venezuelan independent media is the one doing this type of research. They are small and digital media because they are cheaper to maintain, despite the fact that it is a giant challenge to research on all the topics. Luckily, they have not managed to silence Venezuelan journalism completely.

I: What has been the acceptance of this new independent journalistic work? How is the environment?

LOLA: There is a good reception from people, however we are smaller and the information does not reach everyone in the country. Venezuelans feel completely misinformed. Many say that media is silent and that it does not report a thing.

I: As a conclusion. How these regulations to the media has affected or contributed positively to journalistic practices?

LOLA: On the one hand, I think all this censorship is bringing out the best in us. Every time there is more courage to do good jobs and to bring to light truths that the government wants to hide. Another benefit is that we have a huge number of topics to deal with. Venezuela is a kind of minefield full of scandal to investigate. On that side, we will never get bored. On the other hand, there is a concern that we do see attacks against independent media. Those that conduct important research, have been greatly affected by the large number of digital attacks they receive. It is also important to note that Venezuela has a large number of journalists in the country, who managed to form a network of correspondents in each of the states of the country, something that had been lost in the traditional mass media. But while we can continue working, we will do it.

I: How would you describe your role as a journalist currently in Venezuela?

LOLA: Seeker of the truth, this is what all journalists should do.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “MARIANA”
INTERVIEW # 2 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: Tell me about your experience in investigative journalism?

MARIANA: I did research for the cultural section for a long time. In 2009 I made a journalistic research about a case that was very popular in Venezuela, about the disappearance of a work of art, by Henri Matisse, in the most important museum in Caracas, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Currently, I monitor cases of freedom of expression, in other words, I keep a record of the attacks against journalists. I also register other cases such as limitations on freedom of expression, the issue of the restricted access to public information and the vast violated rights contemplated in the Constitution of Venezuela.

I: What are the main limitations that journalists have had to carry out their work professionally and ethically?

MARIANA: During these twenty years, there have been different stages. I would say that something particular happened in Venezuela and that is the aggression against freedom of expression, and specifically against journalists and media. In a very well-thought-out way, there has been censorship and restriction to access public information. This has marked a turning point with clear effects, and has as a result an uninformed society, with many information gaps. Likewise, the Government developed a strategy to create a corporation, called the Alfredo Maneiro Corporation, that has centralized the importation and distribution of paper, and all the supplies for the written press. Together with the issue of advertising distribution, these were mechanisms to control and condition the editorial lines of the media. From 2013 to 2015 came a wave of purchases of the most important media outlets in Venezuela: *El Universal* newspaper, with more than 80 years; the *Últimas Noticias*, with greater penetration in the popular sectors; *Globovisión*, which was a television station and the greatest critic of the Government. Thus, there were more than 30 media outlets (print, television, radio) that were bought by related parties to the high Government. On top of that, the strategy also contemplated control of content. I hold that it has been a very well-designed strategy, always covered by legal mechanisms, and are somehow used as forms of pressure. The physical aggression has always been present. Through all of this, Venezuelan journalism has sought to give some answers; we have regrouped and reconfigured our work and ourselves to continue reporting.

I: How was your experience in *El Nacional*, where you lived the transition to Chavismo regime?

MARIANA: The big difference is that now, these pressures result in media closures, dismissals, arbitrary arrests, and even jail. Because one of the changes in journalism was the migration to digital platforms, we are also witnessing Internet portals blocked. I consider that access to public

information is what has affected us the most. One perfect example was the ban on reporters to enter the Government Palace. Until just 2015, journalists entered the Legislative Palace, the Government Palace, there were press rooms in the Ministries. This meant that there was direct coverage with the political world. Furthermore, the records of violent deaths were accessed at Legal Medicine and we relied on it. In the Central Bank of Venezuela, journalists consulted the inflation figures, but it's been over three years since we have official figures. We do not have the macroeconomic data, we do not have epidemiological bulletins. Furthermore, hospitals have security zones that journalists are banned from. There is no official public information beyond what the spokespersons broadcast via Twitter or some press conferences in which there is no right to cross-examine. In general, there is a clear and evident change in the management between the political power and journalists. However, there is always a constant: the restrictions are translated into regulations.

I: How do journalists access information?

MARIANA: Many remain on the shallow side and simply reproduce what the official spokesmen say through the State channel, but there is never a direct source. As I say, in press conferences of the Presidency, journalists are chosen, usually from public media to ask questions, and there is no right to cross-examine. Journalists, for example, have resorted to working hard through information that can come from outside the country. Although there is no official data here, when it is a matter of oil exports, one opts to consult foreign sources. We work in partnership or alliances with media in Ecuador, Colombia, or the United States. There are many NGOs, especially in the field of health-care, who are collecting and recording what is happening, but it remains information that cannot be contrasted. We have developed a platform called Vendata, where we are releasing public data in order to have some kind of public information which can be accessed by researchers, journalists, and officials. This is a government that will always object to accountability. Their policy lacks transparency, for them, they call this a policy of sovereignty.

I: What has been the role of state and community-based media in Venezuela?

MARIANA: In the first instance, this process was thought of as democratic and consolidator of local communication. Let's say that this experience, which was positive in its origin, was distorted and transgressed its nature as a community-based media to become pro-government media. There is no independent nature of the community-based media and that has misrepresented its original function. Then there are more than 230 community and television radios that are simply part of government information policies. There has been the case where a certain community-based media that has become critical in its editorial line and has had problems for the renewal of their concessions because they are conditioned politically and ideologically.

I: Has the government made this clear distinction between journalists who belong to state media and journalists from private media?

MARIANA: There has been a misguided attitude from private media in the history of Venezuela, especially after the 2002 coup. In parallel that also polarized the situation of journalism in

Venezuela and the two large groups of journalists were drawn. During the first stage, the more intolerant journalist ended up clinging as political actors against the government. On the governmental side, there are clearly identified journalists and self-appointed militant journalists. There has been a growth in a communicational hegemony given that they count with many public resources, although, it does not translate into a larger audience because the audience is not quite convinced. This type of journalism in Venezuela is partisan, pamphlet-base and against interviewing anyone who is not official. These pro-official journalists attend the government's press conferences and rely on interviews with the spokespersons. On the more independent side, journalism migrated from traditional media to digital platforms to become more argumentative and in line with the core principles of journalism. These journalists are being supported by international cooperation and private groups. In general, journalism in Venezuela is not balanced, nor stripped from ideological affiliations, especially from Chavismo.

I: Has Chavismo regime contributed in any way to Venezuelan journalism?

MARIANA: Crises also generate opportunities. The journalists, in our desire to continue working in our career, began to see that there was the opportunity to form groups of work. For example, journalists who came from research units in traditional media outlets, such as *El Nacional* or *Globovisión*, got together to form platforms such as *Armando.Info* or *El Estímulo*. We have all identified the need to have independent journalism, investigative journalism, and quality journalism, and this ends up being better than what we used to do a few years ago. We seek to sustain the complaints of what is happening here in terms of corruption, humanitarian crisis, security, basic services and other problems. Of course, we still have to overcome many barriers. Quality journalism remains among the elites, it needs to reach the great majority, the popular sector. However, media coverage does generate public opinion and social networks help enormously to the spread of these issues. Without a doubt, I believe that there were other opportunities that were taken advantage of and good initiatives have emerged from the crisis.

I: Who do you think leads the communicational hegemony in Venezuela?

MARIANA: A society aspires to have media that contribute to a public debate, to the discussions about issues nationwide. The urban centers are one reality and the rural ones another. There are areas in Venezuela totally taken by the media in line with the government and state media, because there is one only access to public television and since print media became digital. Then you have other realities in urban areas, where there is already more activity on digital platforms, especially, driven by social networks. It should also be noted that on the Internet there is also a lot of garbage and digital platforms are often restrictive since we must depend on connectivity. Network browsing is worse than in Haiti, the situation of the Internet here in Venezuela is serious. We have gotten used to working a lot on the Web, to amplify the effect of the research we conduct. If one publishes an article and this is taken by other media outlets, this has more diffusion, it can be branched out and distributed in a massive way.

I: What is the perception of journalists in the society?

MARIANA: During the first stage of Chavismo regime there was a very bad performance on behalf of some private media, which really impacted the credibility of the journalists. Society had labeled us as politically biased journalists and that we did not do real journalism. We had a hard time breaking that. I would say that perception has changed over the last five to six years. Venezuelan journalists have won awards, we are present in regional and local journalism forums. Internally, Venezuela had a stage in which President Chávez during all the national broadcast speeches spoke of the traitor journalists who were aligned with the destabilizers. That had an impact, no doubt. There were some high peaks of attacks against journalists, of verbal threats and even of death. Forces aligned with Chavismo, either official, community or local, assaulted journalists. In the last three or four years, journalism has been present and covering national issues. It seems to me that having had to cover very dramatic situations such as health, security, poverty and so on, has reconnected the journalists with the people. There is a general belief that official institutions do not reply to the claims and protests of the people, as regards to the crisis, hunger, malnutrition, and others. Those who continued to work on these issues are the social organizations, the media, and the church. Now there is a greater appreciation of the work of journalists, and I believe that journalists have also rectified their role and are careful not to be publicly affiliated to any ideological or political group. We learned that very tough lesson, at least, independent journalists did so. If Chavismo were to end here, we will start looking for common spaces and reestablish the fundamental principles of a journalism. More in terms of an independent monitor of power, away from political polarization and in line with public interest, the greater good, and democratic principles. In my opinion, it will be hard to reconstruct a healthy communication exchange after what the society has suffered in these years.

I: In *El Nacional*, did you feel any kind of pressure from the authorities?

MARIANA: We have to consider that *El Nacional* had considerable moments of political positioning that affected the editorial line of the newspaper. Therefore, yes, as the head of the Culture section, I was confronted with pressures to favor some political characters because of external factors. As a journalist, one knows that he/she will face those challenges.

I: The media began to give more weight to the personality and/or figure to both Chávez and Maduro than to their politics?

MARIANA: I would agree. I think that somehow this phenomenon occurred here to capture the public debate. Above all, they used a very populist strategy to establish a conflictive and violent relationship with the media. One must be aware that in the first stage, the Venezuelan society really was obsessed with Hugo Chávez. This strategy can be identified as a decoy mechanism. For example, all the strategy present on public media to position trending topics and hashtags are simply methods to hide other news.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “OSWALDO”
INTERVIEW # 3 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: Tell me, how does your site work, how many journalists do you have, the sections, how do you set the agenda to be able to conduct good investigative journalism?

OSWALDO: We have a total of 50 reporters and 9 news writers who help assemble the notes in the different the pages. We are 83 people who participate in this endeavour.

I: Tell me, how do you access the official information and / or how do you collect data? Where do you take the information to do investigative journalism from and how does this process take place?

OSWALDO: Precisely, due to the fact that we have difficulty in obtaining access to information, we are widening the range of investigative journalism. The journalist's effort to find what the government does not want to publish and reveal things that are of public interest, immediately becomes investigative journalism. In our case we have had access to information that is filtered from sources. Different people who are annoyed in some way with managers or companies decide to leak information that we convert into research reports. There are also some small and increasingly limited, spaces to obtain documented information. For example, until last year we had access to something that was fundamental for Venezuelan journalism that was the national register of contractors. Today we do not have access to that registry anymore.

I: When you say that there are people who filter information, usually to these sources, do they quote them as anonymous (to protect the source) or how does this type of leak work?

OSWALDO: Well, we do not quote it as anonymous. We identify the source as “not identified”.

I: Digitally, what limitations or obstacles have you encountered?

OSWALDO: What we have seen is that connection problems and the bandwidth here in Venezuela affect people connecting to digital media. But even more serious is that the government, together with private companies, are using the Internet's own tools to block sites. There is a series of attacks that produce more and more damage so that the media cannot transmit live information of what is happening in the country.

I: As a journalist, have you suffered any threat, persecution or sue from the government?

OSWALDO: For example, last week we were doing a crowd-founding to collect funds for *El Pitazo*, our means of communication, and that coincided with some protests. A deputy said that we were collecting money to finance the political protests. That led to a radio station not interviewing me, and I did not get more live time. At the same time our journalists suffered 27 aggressions in different parts of the country. From insults to detentions.

I: As a journalist, what has motivated you to keep fighting for a good journalistic work despite of all these risks?

OSWALDO: I consider it my social responsibility as a journalist and as a Venezuelan to be here trying to defend freedom of expression, to defend democratic values, to do the work that I am able to do and to create a greater benefit for a greater number of people. Of course, one is always in fear waiting or suspecting that something may happen, but in my specific case what I want to know is what happens at the end of this story.

I: Now that you are involved in the research unit, and considering that the situation in Venezuela is very complex and there are many topics to discuss, how do you decide which topic is relevant and how do you include these topics in investigative journalism?

OSWALDO: We aim to reveal what others are not telling, we aim to tell many stories where you can see personal experiences. In my specific case and because of the interest and expertise of the director, I point to many stories about PDVSA (national oil company) and the electricity sector. Also, what we try to portray is stories where we have a direct relationship with people. For example, displaced people treatment, failures in the distribution of food.

I: Unlike you, what is traditional media covering?

OSWALDO: It is a complex situation, but I can tell you that there are several elements. In the cases of printed media there has been purchases of media and financial drowning of media, controlled by the sale of newsprint that is a subsidized product in Venezuela. On the other hand, the fact of having such a deep economic difficulty makes it more difficult for advertisers to buy printed space. There is another media section that has been bought by the government where the editors favor governmental decisions.

I: In *El Pitazo*, how much freedom is there to question the government, how far can you go in this regard?

OSWALDO: To the extent where you are responsible, ethical, truthful and when you show information that can be verified and contrasted.

I: How do you verify your information since you do not have access to official sources?

OSWALDO: Through other sources that are not necessarily official sources. If we have a verified document, it is used as a backup to the complaint that is being made against the official sources.

I: As an alternative means, have you been able to develop a manual or code of practice?

OSWALDO: We are the only media in Venezuela that has a style manual, it is called the *Yellow Stripe (Raya Amarilla)* and it is on our website.

I: Twitter, along with presidential coverage and other types of official interventions has become the main source of information for journalists. How true is this?

OSWALDO: Given that official sources are very closed, Twitter remains an the only source where official information can be accessed. When something happens, for example a sanction, or something happens with a Venezuelan officer, we must follow official tweets. We must follow Twitter if we want to know what the governmental position is.

I: Is there a great distinction between journalists who belong to state media and journalists who belong to private or independent media?

OSWALDO: The government selects and defines those who go to press conferences. They make supposed raffles in the press conference and say who is going to ask first, leaving no space private media. If the journalist goes and asks an uncomfortable question, they make sure they call the media director and inform that his journalist is not asking suitable questions. There is a big difference between governmental journalists and private ones. Governmental journalists have no freedom of expression.

I: Do you consider that in spite of everything that is happening at the political level in Venezuela, real and balanced journalism is being done?

OSWALDO: I think that it is very difficult to find balanced journalism because it is impossible to find a counterpart due to the fact that media is a very closed sector. That is why we have decided that when the counterpart is not found, we will mention that we tried to find one but we had no response. In the future, people will understand the working environment where we were working during these years. Regarding the quality of Venezuelan journalism, I believe that we are conducting high quality and innovative journalism in Latin America. It is a journalism forced by the current conditions of Venezuela, we have made a leap to digital media, while in other countries they are still debating whether or not they should be involved in digital media. We have done this because of our love for Venezuela and also because of the inventiveness capacity that we have to support our work. We are journalists who are turning into entrepreneurs. Of course, we want to achieve permanency with this endeavor. I think we have made a very big difference in comparison to how printed media was conducted,

I: The State tried to transfer the media hegemony to official sources, do you consider that they were effective in that sense?

OSWALDO: What the government proposed was to build a communicational hegemony, a single truth. This was going to be achieved by controlling state media and acquiring most of public media. The reality was that digital media emerged and the rest of the printed media was delegitimized. Regarding media itself, the Venezuelan people is not as naive as the State thinks, they do see their reality and understand that what they read or hear in the official sources is not the truth. Only going to work is a full-time job in Venezuela because of the lack of transportation, etc. Thus, media cannot control and develop this institutional hegemony that portrays only one truth told by the State. Only under threat, extortion, impoverishment of means, the persecution of politicians and journalists, official sources could perhaps achieve a mechanism or an apparatus for that unique truth.

Maria: Another of the government's strategies was to denigrate the journalist and his work. What is the status/image of the journalist in front of society?

OSWALDO: I think that people respect or have come to respect journalists because they realize that through them, they can inform the world what they the real situation is. Normal people cannot say these things out loud because they are scared to lose food portions given by the government.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “LUCÍA”
INTERVIEW # 4 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: What motivated you to transfer to this digital medium?

LUCÍA: In general, journalists were forced by the circumstances. I was working for a long time in the *Capriles* media conglomerate, then in 2014 that there was a significant change in the media structure in Venezuela. Many media outlets were bought by groups linked to Chavismo. In the end, they are companies of suspicious origin, some of which are not even registered in the country. This meant a change in the editorial line, which motivated the migration of many journalists to digital media. The second year of the government of Nicolás Maduro, which unleashed a significant wave of riots and where nearly 50 people died, social networks gained a lot of popularity. In the face of censorship, the closure of media outlets and political pressures, digital media gained prominence.

I: How would you describe your work routine in terms of journalistic practices?

LUCÍA: I come from a large research unit, which is increasingly difficult to maintain in the digital age and in the Venezuelan context. We have a coordinator, a director, and several journalists who work at different rhythms: we have topics that we carry out in weeks, months or even a year. Now, we have had to adapt to digital media and work in small research teams. In general, the research work is assigned to two journalists or just one. Larger teams are formed depending on the degree of difficulty of the topics. There is a weekly editorial meeting that includes daily coverage, although we do not have permanent field reporters. The day-to-day news is taken from other media with which we have formed alliances, but we always have long or medium-length press reports to explain the different issues.

I: In Venezuela, the present juncture is diverse. How do you set the weekly breaking news agenda and determine which topics are relevant?

LUCÍA: We think that the topic of corruption is one of the most relevant causes of our country's problems, along with the infringement of human rights. These are our two main focuses to undertake a research work. There are undoubtedly many events, but we are a reduced number of journalists and we dispose of limited resources, in view of this, we do a preliminary evaluation of the topic's viability. We do not cover topics with which we can shipwreck shortly after having started, we try to have a formed structure, hypotheses, and possible sources.

I: As the director of the research unit, are you in charge of approving the research topics?

LUCÍA: There are journalists who are specialized or interested in certain topics, so they can pitch them. We are convinced that in order to make investigative journalism, passion is a must. One should become obsessed with a subject, so if you are not invested, the result is not the same. There is absolute freedom, nothing is imposed on our part; the journalist abilities and his/her interests are always considered.

I: Have you ever felt influenced or pressured at any time by external interests?

LUCÍA: As unusual as it sounds given that we live in a country where there are countless types of pressures, not once. We do not have any type of restriction neither from advertisers, nor publicity, nor power-groups, nor the government. Certainly, we take precautions. There are articles that, if they are not substantiated, we do not publish them. We must bear in mind that digital media outlets in Venezuela are really independent and managed by journalists. In terms of the financial structure, donations are made and there are investor groups who believe in and are committed to journalism. In contrast to big media outlets, which are subject to a greater range of pressures, online media is composed of smaller structures. Unfortunately, the influence that a digital media can have in Venezuela is still incipient. It is not the same as the *Capriles* media conglomerate, which used to represent a powerful institution. Back then, a heading of a press article on the front page on a Sunday could have a real impact on the government's image.

I: Unlike your experience working in the *Capriles* media conglomerate, what do you perceive as the biggest differences in terms of journalistic practices?

LUCÍA: There we were in a newsroom that consisted of 300 individuals. You had the resources to travel and had more professionals at your disposal. At the time when I was working in print media, we were venturing on digital media. Now I work in a digital media outlet, one hundred percent native. The change was not so brutal, but it did require some adjustments. Now we are a small group, without institutional transport with which we could have more freedom to go anywhere.

I: Has there been a time where you have been censored or edited without your consent?

LUCÍA: In the *Capriles* media conglomerate yes, especially with regards to the administration. There was constant pressure. Government personnel such as the Minister of Communications called the director to say that he should pay attention to what we publish regarding certain issues. It should be noted that until that moment, the *Capriles* media conglomerate belonged to an important economic group in the country and sometimes there were ulterior motives to certain published information. Before there was a lot of editorial discussion within the media, however, if your work was well substantiated, you could stand up for it and get it published. In my case, I never got a direct threat.

I: In your current job, *Runrun.es*, have you received pressures from the Government?

LUCÍA: Our main protection mechanism is doing good journalism, providing evidence and sources for everything we write and verifying the information what we publish. I believe that the threat system to intimidate freedom of speech is changing, the Venezuelan government is sophisticating itself in its ways. In other words, the censorship no longer comes with some political or military police, in which the computers were taken, or the media outlet closed, or the director was apprehended, or a bomb was released; now, they have refined their forms and they use cyber-attacks. We have had very difficult months with these recent attacks. It is difficult to detect who is doing them or who is responsible, although one does not have to be very insightful to know who is

behind. This is another way to censor our work and this is reflected in the number of views of the web portals because the servers are down.

I: What do they do when these cyber-attacks to the website occur?

LUCÍA: We choose to publish on social networks. An organization called Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (Institute of Press and Society) makes a record of these cyber-attacks on the web portals, they create alerts and try to address this. We resort to publishing in various media, through alliances for coverage, in such manner, we join efforts and protect ourselves. In doing so, we publish in different media at the same time to try to bypass these attacks. We have alliances with: *El Pitazo, Crónica Uno, El Estímulo, Efecto Cocuyo, El Correo del Caroní, Armando.Info.*

I: In the process of investigating a case, what is the difference between a written and a digital medium?

LUCÍA: It offers many advantages and narrative options such as being able to use different types of languages to tell a complex journalistic investigation. Not to mention the possibilities of researching in the digital age, all the databases that we can now access, that in previous circumstances was impossible. Plus, it is possible to establish alliances, not only with journalists from Venezuela but also abroad and do collaborative work with them.

I: How do you access official sources?

LUCÍA: Since day one of the Bolivarian government, but especially after the coup d'état in 2002, the government reviewed its policy to create a communication hegemony. They spoke about it openly, the Minister of Communications of 2004 said so. They want to achieve control of all information, communications, and media. Since then, they began to shut down the sources of information. They closed physical sources such as the office of the Scientific Police which maintains figures of homicides and violence as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Then they also proceeded to eliminate press conferences of the ministries and the Miraflores Palace. Progressively, the government agencies no longer gave information, all the information has been centralized. Before, they were obliged by law to publish online the information of the government agencies. With the arrival of Nicolás Maduro to power, this ceased to exist. As journalists, we did not sit back, we create our own databases through the daily recording of phenomena or events; in doing so, we can establish patterns. Another option is to access information through databases or files outside of Venezuela on issues in which our country is linked to a foreign country, such as foreign trade, imports, tax havens and more. Paradoxically, during these years, where there has been more corruption because of the fertile ground; there has also been more possibilities to research because the perpetrators of corruption host their capital goods outside the country.

I: Can you explain a case where the journalists have created a database?

LUCÍA: We have the case of *Monitor de Víctimas (Victims' Monitor)*, which is a project that was born in *Runrun.es* and keeps a daily record of the murders in Caracas. Very detailed data is entered such as location, number of children, occupation and more. The journalists enter the input, they collaborate and validate the data with NGOs that work on the issue of violence. The data is

entered and cleaned. Keeping this record up to date is what the government and its agencies such as the Public Ministry or other official institutions should be doing.

I: Maduro actively uses Twitter and national broadcast speeches. Do you use that type of platforms and channels to extract information?

LUCÍA: Sure, we are a medium that was born on Twitter as a response to censorship. Twitter has become an important tool for journalists since 2004. From there we can take information, data, detect issues that are being discussed, and identify trends to investigate. An example of this is some of the protagonists of corruption, the new rich, who in Venezuela are known as "boliburgueses" or "bolichicos". They like to show off so much on social networks, like Instagram, they publicly expose their flashy lifestyle.

I: How do you try to diversify your topics at the news coverage level?

LUCÍA: I come from the Culture section. I was the coordinator of the culture section of *El Mundo* daily and it is a topic that I am passionate about. Although it is a seemingly happy world that portrays the fine arts, creativity and the whole enlightened side of the human being, there is also another side filled with irregularities and corruption. I did a report on the construction of the *Mausoleo del Libertador (Mausoleum for the Libertador, Simón Bolívar)*. The construction was handled by the Minister of Culture, and after a few months investigating, it was concluded there had not been a public tender. It was an irregular handling of around 560 million dollars. Four days after the publication of that press article, Hugo Chávez separated the Minister from office.

I: How do you try and maintain impartiality?

LUCÍA: Our editorial line is not against nor along Chavismo regime. Our editorial line is not political; we advocate for democracy and human rights. Despite having a government that has clear authoritarian foundations and is permanently against freedom of expression, in my opinion, the polarization of institutions should be overcome.

I: How do you try to balance the sources of information?

LUCÍA: Yes, in all our works we try to consult the official source. We do it through emails, calls and always letters in which we have requested interviews with the official source. We have a collection of those request letters that were never answered. It is very difficult, but as a last resort, we take the last statement that the government spokesperson has made on the subject. It is a constant practice, but we must insist and always try to look for the other side of the facts.

I: Do you think there are positive aspects to Chavismo regime that has contributed to journalism?

LUCÍA: I think we must be vigilant because Venezuelan journalism has some downfalls that rose from the closed position from part of the official and public sources. Many journalists do not make the effort to look for other versions. There is much conformity, some journalists assume that they will not find anything on the other side, then, they account only for one version of reality. On the other hand, I think that there are other Venezuelan journalists who do research and want to make quality journalism. I believe that now there is much more rigor than before in verifying and

sustaining because of the lawsuits pressure. The important thing is to make a record of all the atrocities and irregularities that are being committed. We try to offer tools for the interpretation of what has happened during this time so that one day, justice will be made concerning the cases we reported and presented.

I: What do you think is your role as a journalist in Venezuela and what motivates you to move forward despite the obstacles?

LUCÍA: The clear majority of journalists who have left the profession is because they left the country, not because they wanted to stop exercising their profession. There is a lot of work and market for journalists, indeed, it is very complex, we are facing a power that manipulates reality as one of its way to maintain power. The government tries to impose a single version of reality, its truth. The role of the journalist is to contrast the official version, to register and offer tools for interpretation. This is the challenge, there is censorship and the reach of the Internet is limited, so it is not possible to reach the entire population.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “JONÁS”
INTERVIEW # 5 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: How did you decide the relevant themes to cover?

JONÁS: We reviewed a bit what was coming out on the newspapers and then we determined the topics that were important. It was a meeting of about 20 to 30 minutes, and when you have a reliable source, at least you are on track for the editorial topic.

I: What type of obstacles prevented your job to flow in an ordinary matter?

JONÁS: Chávez started attacking the press after the coup in 2002. After this, the press became enemy number one. The famous Resorte Law, under a legal framework, made the journalistic career harder.

I: Did you suffer any type of attack?

JONÁS: Every time we were on a press conference or in the field, we were attacked. For example, when we were making a report in a popular zone of Caracas about the lack of food on supermarkets, members of Círculos Bolivarianos (pro Chávez military groups) came to intimidate us. They told us we were enemies of the homeland, that we worked for the American empire. They also stole the camera from my photographer and tried to jail us. These are stories that any other journalist in Venezuela has gone through as well. Obviously, this puts pressure and difficulty on the job.

I: How did you manage to cover newsworthy events?

JONÁS: I covered health. I went to hospitals, talked to people that was not able to get medicine. Obviously, that turned out to be complicated. Public hospitals in Venezuela do not let the press in.

I: So, did you tried to pass undercover as a patient or as a sick man?

JONÁS: I could pass as a doctor. I had my contacts at the Venezuelan Medical Federation, medical student centres, and with interns that worked at the hospitals. They let me a white coat, a credential, and I went through the National Guard checkpoints. When I did this, I did not carry a tape recorder nor a journalist credential. I only carried a notebook and a pencil. With a white coat, I was another doctor, and I had access to every area. Venezuela is a country that has a 75% deficit on medicine. The press has not been officially able to get into the Concepcion Palacio maternity hospital for years, which is the oldest in the country. It was not until the nurses confronted the National Guard that they let the press in. When I went in to make questions, I made sure to talk directly to patients or contacts. I tried not to talk with everyone for security reasons.

I: What was the worst aggression you suffered? Any anecdote or experience in particular that you want to tell me?

JONÁS: When I was in Venezuela, I was contacted by two French journalists because they wanted to make a report about the situation in the country. On that documentary, we covered topics

everybody knows now: shortage of medicine and food, gas smuggling to Colombia, and the insecurity due to criminal gangs. All of them, sensible for the government. When we were done with the job, I found out the two French journalists were taken to jail by the SEBIN (Bolivarian National intelligence service) which is the secret police in Venezuela. After that, they came for me. That anguished my family. I had a SEBIN patrol for many days parked in front of my house. That was when, taking in consideration my wife's pregnancy, I decided to leave Venezuela and stop practicing journalism in the country.

I: In terms of number, how did you managed to get official information?

JONÁS: In the last three to four years, the government has not pull out any epidemiological newsletters. So, what is going on? For example, in health, Doctors have generated a national network. Generally, these are WhatsApp groups. Given their daily work they can create statistics that are transferred and shared with each other. These statistics are sent directly to international organisms such as the OMS or the Panamerican Health Organization. As a journalist, you should always trust official figures, but as Venezuela did not have them, a new system was created as a parallel way to recompile information, which is through the people on the field. Obviously, the government came afterwards saying that those numbers are false. Many NGOs such as the criminal forum or the observatory of violence that have access to the morgues, talk to the families of the deceased, and register each one of these cases.

I: Some experts argue that traditional media conforms with the official story from the government. Tell me about your experience at *Últimas Noticias*?

JONÁS: As I told you, before we had legal frameworks we had to be careful about. These were the Resorte Law and the CONATEL. Every time we used the figures proposed by these NGOs or professional in field networks, we published them with the necessary prove from these organizations and we stated that the government, from a certain year, stopped publishing official numbers. Today the owners of *Últimas Noticias* are Chavistas and all the information they publish comes from the government. There are few newspapers in Venezuela that dare to publish a comparison in data, and they are obviously victimized by the government. Currently in Venezuela, only digital media platforms contradict official government data. They are the only ones that risk confronting the government power. Traditional media such as radio, television and physical newspapers do not do this, as they are exposed to being sued.

I: Was the official information taken out from Twitter or the presidential addresses?

JONÁS: In the last years of the Chávez administration, you did not have access to the presidential palace, and if you did, was just a room with a television transmitting the presidential address. You watched everything through the state-run TV channel or you took the information from the ministries webpages. When Chávez or Maduro appear talking in their addresses, they reveal the official figures. Even though as a journalist you record this data, the good ones contrast them.

I: Do you think journalists from state run journals had more benefits?

JONÁS: Yes, their main benefit is that they have more Access to governmental characters. For example, a journalist from *Venezolana de Televisión* or from the *Venezuelan National Radio*, had more access to interviews with Chávez or at least they were more able to put him a microphone. Obviously, they did not do more than what the president or a minister told them to do.

I: Amid so much juncture, what kind of stories were you looking for? How did you consider what was relevant and what was not? With some many occurrences, what type of stories were you looking for? How did you consider what was relevant and what was not?

JONÁS: Venezuela is a mine of stories. My journalistic growth was based on going from what is was small to what was big. A local story can grow to be a global one. I divided them in two parts. First, what had to be said because it was public knowledge. This included ministry declarations, opposition representatives, government representatives, figures, and releases. But then, I focused on the small stories such as a lady that had her son killed and nobody said anything, a lady that has not eaten in four days, or another one that is not able to get cancer treatment for her mother. When talking about health, I preferred talking with a renal patient than with the president of the medical federation. I preferred talking with a patient that had HIV than with the president of some NGO. In Ecuador, I have been developing about Venezuelan refugees in the country for the Spanish version of *The New York Times*.

I: What is the real role of the community media?

That was a government strategy to “democratize the media”, when in reality they were just replicating official information, but within their locality and with examples of their locality. Nevertheless, we cannot generalize. For example, there is a region named Tucupita, where an indigenous community journal was created in opposition to the government. It was created to tell what was going on in that province. In there, the population is mostly indigenous, and they are one of the most affected ethic group by the crisis in Venezuela.

I: How unrestricted did you feel doing journalism at journals such as *Últimas Noticias*?

JONÁS: In *Últimas Noticias* I never felt unprotected precisely because in the journal we had a syndicate. No, they never censured me, they never told me, do not talk about this, do not publish this.

I: How is the fact-checking process in Venezuela?

JONÁS: Fact-checking has always been related to publishing information that is not false. But in this case, it also had to do with taking care of our backs so that we do not end up in jail. For example, when you made an interview, you called the interviewee before publishing and you asked him, are you sure you told me this? In Venezuela fact-checking works with double or even triple prove.

I: Do you think there is something positive in the Venezuelan crisis at a journalistic level?

JONÁS: The positive part is that the voices of communication have diversified. Before, Venezuela had only three big newspapers, two big TV channels and maybe one big radio station. Those were the only mediums you could trust and the only ones you could aspire to work in of publish

something. Nowadays there are many start-ups in digital media. Venezuela is probably one of the leaders in digital media in Latin America.

I: What do you think was your role as a journalist in Venezuela? And what do you think is the one you fulfil now?

JONÁS: I am not the type of Journalist that thinks of himself as a superhero, one that came to change the world, or pursues objectivity at 100%. But I do consider that one fulfils a social role to inform, as a teacher or a doctor.

I: What is going on in Venezuela in terms of the profession of being a journalist?

We were the main public enemy. We were agents of the empire (Americans). Now they see us as the voice that tells people what is really going on. So, yes, perception is changing.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “ANDREA”
INTERVIEW # 6 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: Tell me about your journalistic career?

ANDREA: I have been very involved in breaking news in Caracas and in recent years, between 2014 and 2016, with the protests of Leopoldo Lopez (student protests), I was very interested in this specific investigation. That is why I joined *Runrun.es* in 2014, because they were looking for talented journalists from traditional media. When I worked at *Runrun.es* I covered different protests, human rights issues, issues on the border with Colombia, the trial of Leopoldo Lopez, stories of students who were put into jail. Venezuela is not living a normal situation. There are many topics to choose from, and which are normally life or death. Politics, life and Human Rights take a lot of the issues that journalists have to cover. Unfortunately we have to prioritize what we cover. But there are thousands of topics and sometimes we stop covering many things. Also several journalists have left, so my admiration is huge for those who are still there.

I: Have you ever received pressures of any kind at *El Nacional*?

ANDREA: Yes. In fact, the newspaper today is practically bankrupted. The Government managed, with these pressures, to put an end to this media. The government stopped importing paper to prevent the printing of the newspaper and that was decisive in the case of *El Nacional*. The media they were not able to buy, they searched a way to sink them such as they did with *Últimas Noticias* and *Cadena Capriles*. A very famous case that took place in 2010, from a photo made by a photographer from *El Nacional* of the dead in the morgue, in very bad conditions was censored after being published. This photo was on the cover of *El Nacional* and the government fined this newspaper and prohibited the dissemination of this type of images.

I: Did you feel free doing journalism in traditional media like *El Nacional* and how critical could you be with the government?

ANDREA: I used to cover stories about water and education in Caracas. Then I was part of the research unit, where I had a delicate job covering Chávez's illness. The truth is that I was always free to publish what I was working on. The editors did not change my themes. I only had one episode that I censored a topic for the interests of the newspaper, but not the government.

I: What types of news topics did you cover at *El Nacional*?

ANDREA: Now, we only have content aggregators since many of the long-term journalists have left. I think it has declined due to lack of resources; although the new independent web portals do not have many resources but they are still fighting.

I: How did you access the official information sources?

ANDREA: The most I ever achieved was an interview with Tarek William Saab who, at that moment, was an ombudsman. But he was identified as an opponent because he worked in an

environment that was always criticizing the government. You never receive answers from official sources. I have letters from the prosecutor's office signed as received. This happens without discrimination. The interviews are only for state media. It was as if we did not exist. It is very difficult to do journalism there because you have to debate between what they teach you in journalism school and how to counterbalance different sources. But, in the end, the journalistic notes always have texts like: "We tried to contact the Minister of Education ten times, but he did not answer us". In terms of figures and data, they are always outdated. We take official figures from NGOs, who are also doing a good job in Venezuela. These institutions are trying to collect data in hospitals. There are organizations such as the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, which have dedicated themselves to extracting those figures and trying to fight against that obscurantism. That is one of the goals of dictatorial governments, that there is no information.

I: Do you have any anecdotes of attacks or direct persecutions?

ANDREA: In *El Nacional* I had to hide my card to be safe and unnoticed. But then I had two serious episodes of attacks, One in a market. I was attacked by some Chavistas for trying to record the lines where people waited for food. That was recorded, in cameras, I can send you the videos. Another attack happened when I went to Caracas for the march of April 19, one of the largest ones that took place. I was live, through Periscope. I approached a group of Chavistas who were trying to block the way to the march and came against me with sticks, knives. They attacked me, put pepper spray in my eyes, and I ended up on the ground. They stuck a knife into my assistant's chest. The helmet saved me. The greatest impotence was to see the hatred of these people simply against my work. This is part of the government's hate speech towards the press.

I: What is the role of alternative community media in Venezuela?

ANDREA: I believe that the communicational part has been vital for the Chavistas to build their project of control over the Venezuelans. They did not skimp on that, they had it very clear from the beginning. They invested what had to be invested, they spent what they had to spend buying the biggest media. With this practice, what they have achieved is to have more control and that their hypnotizing message reaches the whole world. They have been very skillful and strategic in their message. The abuse of the State apparatus for democratic campaigns has been an important factor. But I think people are already tired. Nevertheless, the traditional media has the country against it, it is a reality, all the polls say that. But they continue to use these means to reinforce that hatred message.

I: How has your experience in USA been, in terms of journalistic practices, compared to Venezuela?

ANDREA: The opening of the sources is impressive to me. It is a good experience to work in a place where there is not as much political polarization as in Venezuela. I do not believe in the absolute objectivity of journalism, but I believe that journalists have the duty to take positions, either to denounce or use their voice to confront power, to denounce what is wrong. In this sense, there is more opportunity for the notes and reports to be more balanced.

I: How is the fact checking in the USA. How is it different from Venezuela?

ANDREA: Most of the different sources, are public and accessible. For example, I cover Miami and in the state of Florida there is an open data law. Almost all records are public.

I: When you were working on *Runrun.es*, what was the research process like?

ANDREA: We were a small group at that time, of six journalists. We tried to keep a long-term agenda with investigative reports. I cannot tell you that I worked six months on a subject because that is a luxury that few media can give their journalists and it is more expensive. We were not in those conditions. But we had a daily rhythm with short news, not so much from breaking news. We were not in those conditions.

I: How did you approach your sources, normally?

ANDREA: In *Runrun.es* we started making alliances with other media because we realized that there was no longer any competitiveness in the business. We realized that journalism in Venezuela has to go much further. Our goal was to reach people. The more united we were, the better. We were quite small portals and we knew that the only way to get better information and to achieve stronger impact was by joining each other. Then we made alliances with *Crónica Uno*, *El Pitazo* and others. In the trial of Leopoldo Lopez, to enter (because despite being a public trial, they determined that you could not enter), I remember that I dressed up as an attorney, I looked for a card and entered the Palace of Justice. I hid in a bathroom to go up to the floor where Leopoldo's audience was taking place, and I managed to be there, infiltrated. You have to invent practices that, perhaps under normal conditions, you would not think of doing.

I: What kind of stories did you try to find and inform within that environment?

ANDREA: As a journalist, I think you always look for the human side. I remember some stories that marked me. For example, I remember a story I made on the occasion of Mother's Day in 2014, of mothers who did not celebrate that day that year because their children were killed in the protests or because they had to see their children in prison, etc. I remember that this subject struck me a lot. Living in Venezuela at the news rate is exhausting. People are exhausted because all the time they are going through terrible things. There is not a day when you can disconnect from the situation. So, to get people to read to you, I always try to look for humanly stories that people feel identified with.

I: How do you think Chavismo has contributed to Venezuelan journalism?

ANDREA: I do not think there has been something positive from the Government. But in terms of journalism, in general, something positive in these 20 years, is that the value we give to democracy and freedom. That, on the one hand, in terms of journalism, I think it has been positive that these portals have come to life and that we have been able to publish stories that are no longer tied to a business group, with a very marked editorial line. Journalists work with freedom, and without pressure. That is something positive, which has allowed us to see who belong to which side, without disguise. That movement of digital media is admirable and will leave good things. And if the country changes, we will have a generation of journalists who tried to innovate, to do quality

things in the midst of the crisis and that at a better time they will have done much better than journalists in other countries.

I: How do you think journalist are perceived in Venezuela?

ANDREA: I have noticed in the digital environment and also by the messages that I receive on Twitter, that people appreciate the journalistic work. People now value more the work of journalists. But there was a part of the population, like the very radical people of Chavismo, who followed the official speech of discrediting the media.

I: How would you describe your role as a journalist?

ANDREA: For me, being a journalist means having a voice to denounce injustices and, almost always, to be an antonym of power. Most of the time it means to give voice to people who do not have it and to support society. If you have some credibility, if you have worked on that, you have a great opportunity to report injustices and use journalism as a public service. It makes me laugh, sometimes to hear from people who criticize us and say: "You journalists always with bad news and always with horrible things". I tell them: "I am not a journalist who tells beautiful and cool stories, I choose to denounce things to change something". And when you achieve a minimum change, it gives you a lot of satisfaction. I am trying to create an impact.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “RODRIGO”
INTERVIEW # 7 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: Tell me about your long-experience career in the journalism field?

RODRIGO: I am working with *Armando.Info* since 2016. In there, we do investigative journalism. Members of *Armando.Info* coordinated the case of the Panama Papers. In each country, they designated an allied team or partner. Afterwards, the editors of *Armando.Info*, called me. From there on, I have been working with them because I am familiar with that type journalism. At a time like this in Venezuela, they dared to launch a portal dedicated to investigation.

I: Why did you quit from *El Universal*?

RODRIGO: Something terrible happened which was that the *El Universal*'s workers did not know who was the owner of the company. One day they just said: “An Spanish company bought it, and when we inquired about the purchase, it was registered with 3000 Euros, when the real cost was between 80 to 90 million. In the same way, you can call to journalists from *El Nacional* to ask who are the owners of the company and they would not know. The same is happening with *Últimas Noticias*. We have seemed these things happen during Maduro's term. These media companies were bought and in a matter of days you could see how the editorial line was changed. It is truly shameful. During Maduro's administration, at least one hundred newspapers had to stop circulating. This made them migrate to digital media or move to weeklies.

I: Where there political or commercial pressure in *El Universal*?

RODRIGO: In the big media producers, there is always pressure. But in my experience, in *El Universal* up to 2014, I worked with a lot of liberty and with a great team of professionals. Obviously, there was tremendous pressures from the government up to the point that the newspaper had to reduce personnel and publications.

I: Why did decide to leave Venezuela, Rodrigo?

RODRIGO: That happened recently. We left on January 31, 2018. We were working on a journalistic work, which consisted on a series of reports published on *Armando.Info* that had to do with the Venezuelan state run program called the CLAP. This referred to the local supply and production committee (by its acronym in Spanish). The Venezuelan government imports products through allied businessmen in different countries. Then, they distribute boxes containing those products and they sell them at a subsidised price, very cheap, to poor people. But this was also used in a political way. From the end of 2016, we committed to discover what was behind this which, at first hand, seemed like a beneficial public program. There were sources and signs that made us believe that we had to investigate. We had our suspicions that, behind this plan, there was a business where people close to the government were profiting. At the end, we discovered that two Colombian businessmen were the ones taking advantage of CLAP. When we published the first part of the investigation on

September, we received threats on social networks. These were things like: “Rodrigo, keep writing, the more you write the more we know you”. Weeks later a demand came from the businessmen themselves, and for me the notification came through two police officers that came to my house. To shorten the story, unfortunately, with the passing of the days and weeks, we realized that it was going to be very difficult for us to defend ourselves. At the end of January, we decided that it was best for us to leave, mainly for our safety. Yet, since we left, we have published six additional reports in which we mention these individuals directly and show new information about the people that sued us.

I: Are you still doing investigative journalism from Colombia?

RODRIGO: *Armando.Info* is betting for a subscription model as a way of getting revenue. We are hoping that people realize the importance of independent journalism and support us. Here in Colombia, the *Semana Magazine*, has helped us so that we can continue doing our work.

I: Have you ever been cyberattacked?

RODRIGO: They have tried to saturate the IP address. They do this up to a point where the webpage goes down.

I: How do you contact, normally, to your sources?

RODRIGO: In my case, it has helped working with economic sources. Venezuela has suffered from corruption with the Chávez regime, but this corruption is not the typical of any other Latin-American country. It is a corruption that can be measured in the GDP indicators, figures that reach billions of dollars. In a country such as Venezuela that has exchange controls, it is evident that the import business is going to derive in corruption. Businessmen have preferential dollars, but others do not. Official sources are practically inaccessible because the media is despised or they have fear of speaking out. There are cases such as with the Central Bank of Venezuela, where inflation indicators are not published. Neither the National Registry of Contractors does it. Information is minimal, and does not let you inquire enough.

I: How do you balance your editorial investigations?

RODRIGO: If there is an affirmation that cannot be backed with data or a document, then it is not published. I publish everything that I write, if and when the source is not hurt. Very rarely, involved individuals speak and give their version, which for us, is essential. In the case of an official source, we identify what they say publicly. That works to balance our stories.

I: How do you, usually, find cases of corruption?

RODRIGO: In my case, what works is asking and asking again to my sources. Sometimes I have topics that some businessman I know can guide me. Aside from traditional reportage, it is very useful to call, consult and have a proper agenda. These topics are like puzzles, you have to connect data and documents. There are also people from the government that leak information from the inside. Because of the crisis in Venezuela, people that even form part of the government, end up being our ally.

I: How long it takes to do each investigation?

RODRIGO: When we do our meetings for the editorial guidelines, which is once a week, we always talk about how each reporter has two types of work that require different speeds: investigation work, in my case for example, the one related to CLAP; and then others that are faster. It is ideal that, after three to four weeks of reports, the reporter has a clear understanding of whether he is going to be able to write story, and whether he is going to have information to back it. Another thing that we do and brings great value is that we do a file of businessmen and people with power. For example, in the data base of the Panama Papers, we have found a lot of relations. These are like snowballs that keep growing. In one occasion a businessman told me, Rodrigo, keep an eye on the milk powder from the CLAP. And yes, results are terrible because we proved that the milk was not entirely powder. The milk was low on protein and calcium and far below of what Mexican and Venezuelan nutritional norm demands. They were also high on carbohydrates and sodium.

I: Do you have the freedom in *Armando.Info* to select your editorial topics and be critic of the government?

RODRIGO: I had absolute liberty and independence. They even told us Chavistas at some point, for example. This was because in 2013 we discovered that Oderbrecht gave money to fund Capriles' campaign (opposition candidate). We do not do public relations nor damage control. When we see that there is a mysterious story, documented, and of public interest, we publish it.

I: If you had to consider any positive aspect from Chavismo regime, do you think it has contributed in any way to journalism?

RODRIGO: I am convinced that this crisis has pressured journalists to reinvent themselves and understand the importance of their work. As there are colleagues that, unfortunately, have been attacked and censured, many others decided to gamble, some even up to the point of creating new media companies in order to expose what traditional Venezuelan media does not show. There is very good investigative journalism being made. Years ago, this was not the case. They were not made with the same quality and independence. We have understood that we have to work in co-operation, because we are small media companies and we do not have the scope the big ones have.

I: What were the main challenges of working in digital media?

RODRIGO: Determine the ways to make people read our content. From there, the alliances between digital media companies was born, to help us with traffic. This also created a challenge at an editorial level in which we asked ourselves how are you going to tell the stories.

I: How would you define your journalistic role in Venezuela?

RODRIGO: I think that journalism is just something that you must do. You need to do it without waiting recognition from society nor believing that one is a hero or a celebrity. If you do it well, with ethics and responsibility, it is a job that serves society. It shows the corruption that the government has tried to hide. I think that in circumstances like this one, we have become better journalists. I always say that journalists are like doctors. What I mean is that when a patient arrives to emergencies, he has to attend him and try to save him. Journalism is similar: It is an urgent work for society in order to give a favourable impact.

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION “EDUARDO”
INTERVIEW # 8 VIA SKYPE
VERBATIM TRANSLATION FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH

(I= INTERVIEWER)

I: Did you have to escape from Venezuela?

EDUARDO: Yes, I am exiled in Colombia since February together with two colleagues, because we were sued last year. Nevertheless, the writing of *Armando.Info* continues in Caracas. We were sued because we discovered that two Colombian entrepreneurs began to feign exports from Ecuador to Venezuela, obviously with the complicity of Chavismo. Therefore, these false exports are paid in dollars. In Venezuela, the dollar became very coveted. If you had links with the government you could do big business because you got preferential rates. Then we found that a Colombian company won a tender in PDVSA (Venezuelan state company dedicated to the exploitation, production and transportation of oil) without any kind of competition, in addition we found out that they had an offshore structure in Hong Kong. Well, in Venezuela defamation is a criminal offense sentenced to six years in jail. We decided that the best thing was, preventively, to leave the country before we were forbidden to do so. In my case I have a partner, but her parents are very old and you know that the situation of shortage in Venezuela is very dramatic, so my wife had to stay to support her parents.

I: How did you access official sources?

EDUARDO: Even though the 1999 constitution establishes public information access, there is no law of access to public information in Venezuela. The crime figures or the epidemiological bulletin became mysteries because Chavismo decided that the media would use it politically and could not share it. In effect, that has become a great difficulty for journalism in general. This has been compensated by the fact that there are more and more stories to tell. Corruption and the oil boom that took place between 2002 and 2012 is one of the great topics for journalism. Thanks to new technologies, we have gained access to international databases, and that became very important because no corrupt person earns money to keep it under the mattress. The corrupt person earns money because he wants to buy a plane or wants to deposit some money in Hong Kong. Often, these clues and bank accounts allow us to have information. For example, the two big research I worked on are the Local Supply and Production Committee and the Odebrecht cases, which we have followed through international sources. Also, each time, there are more sources that are increasingly willing to talk. Then it is the combination of access to international sources and the loosening of certain loyalties within Chavismo.

I: How credible are the media and journalists in Venezuela?

EDUARDO: Until 2002, when a coup attempt happened, the private press was very opposed to Chávez. The published information was very poor, in the sense of counterbalancing sources of information. Many gossips were published and the newspaper’s cover could be information that had never been verified, used only to harm the government. The damage was done. Then, regarding the

public media there was the perception that they did not cover the different topics and that it was only developing an enemy against Chávez. In Venezuela, people do not consume the news to inform themselves but to ratify their prejudices. Thus, I would say that all this had a negative impact on the credibility of the media companies and journalists. From 2002 to 2010, physical aggressions against reporters on the streets were common. As you know in 2007, the main Venezuelan television channel was closed, *RCTV* and other large private channels were sold, eliminating all the spaces of opinion and persecuting conflicting journalists. In 2013, Chavismo buys *Globovisión*, which was a 24-hour news channel. Then, the measures against the printed media came. It first began with administrative sanctions, taking away advertising and, finally, by controlling the newsprint supply. Thus, the opposition media began to disappear, up to the point where there was only one left: *El Nacional* (which is not an example of good journalism). All this coincided with the global crisis of the press business model. That caused two phenomena to be generated: Twitter became the main source of information, understanding that this can be a fertile ground for rumors and false news. The other opportunity that was generated, and in which we participate, is that in the face of the wave of censorship, the disappearance of the media and the possibilities of new technologies, we decided to open our own media. These have become opportunities for people seeking alternative information and to practice journalistic practices with international standards. The truth is that the nefarious role played by the press, especially in the early years of Chavismo, was related to shortcomings that existed before Chávez.

I: How was your experience working in a traditional environment, like *El Nacional*?

EDUARDO: It is not what is called journalism with international standards. There were people with talent, but who did not counterbalance the information, nobody asked for this practice. When Chávez arrives, that breach of Venezuelan journalism becomes very serious. One begins to understand why it was important to contrast the information, because it was important to investigate and not simply collect statements.

I: How do you select the topics for your research?

EDUARDO: The collective relevance of the topic, the impact it may have, etc. But apart from that, we must also consider the fact that there are only a few and limited topics, but we often prefer a topic that is relevant. We look, above all, at issues that set the agenda. So, if there is a topic that has already been published in the media, we prefer to discard it and not follow the existent tendency, but create a new editorial sense. We must produce exclusive content to generate a new experience.

I: What obstacles have you faced when handling digital media?

EDUARDO: This week that is ending (July 30 to August 5), we were off the air because of an attack that saturated the server. We were out of the air for 48 hours, but several times we have suffered this. We play cat and mouse permanently. It is something that could be funny if it was not at the same time exhausting, but good is the way that it allows us to continue publishing relevant information. Nobody can stop us from continuing to make news stories and we will for sure continue to do so.

I: What kind of stories are you trying to find?

EDUARDO: We emphasize stories that we like to call transnational stories. Like CLAP, we publish and develop them with colleagues from Mexico. We publish topics that cross borders such as organized crime or corruption. Chavismo is a continental project, which resulted in the circulation of a lot of money in the oil boom throughout the region, supporting movements in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia. We are sure that if tomorrow the regime in Venezuela ends, we will need at least a decade to investigate what happened to the Venezuelan funds. Well, obviously we try to verify information that gives us the conviction that the news we publish is true, and we must take into account that we are journalists, who are not part of a court that determines legitimacy. What I mean is that, honestly, we counterbalance information until we discuss it collectively inside the newsroom. If we have enough elements of conviction to confirm this piece of information, we reach the conclusion that it is truthful. Sometimes that conviction can be based on mere intuition, but the internal discussion in the writing unit has given us strength to overcome the difficulties of the environment.

I: Do you think that Chavismo has positively contributed in the last 20 years?

EDUARDO: Chavismo has made Venezuelans consider aspects that we did not value as democracy or the important one of the separation of powers. In journalistic terms, the importance of contrasting information, access to statements or documentary elements. In short, many things that are part of journalistic practices. I hope for an immediate political change in Venezuela. Some of the practices that we did not take into account, will be seen with different eyes and we will see the relevance they had. I also believe that it has allowed us to understand what the role of the journalist is in comparison to what it means to work in a commercial environment. I believe that these years have shown us that what is in crisis is the journalistic company, not journalism itself. Journalists are still good agents that analyze different sources. What is in crisis is the business model of the company, so this has allowed us to establish a distinction, a gap between who we are journalists and what is a journalistic company overall.