

Venezuela: a Case Study on Polarization and Freedom of the Press

Honors Project

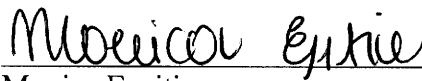
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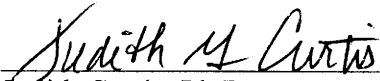
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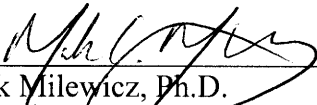
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	10
History of the Press in Venezuela.....	12
Polarization.....	15
Freedom of the Press.....	19
Protest of 2014.....	24
Findings.....	26
Conclusion.....	49
References.....	52

ABSTRACT

VENEZUELA: A CASE STUDY ON POLARIZATION AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS:

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This research paper analyzes the political and media polarization that characterizes Venezuela. The problem became extreme during Hugo Chavez's government, when the media were used as powerful political tools by both the government and the opposition. The polarization and lack of freedom of the press have resulted in biased and superficial coverage of the news, which has caused the Venezuelan society to lose interest in and trust with the national media. The limitations to the freedom of the press that exists in the country and the role that these limitations have played in the national protest of 2014 are examined in the content analysis of the similarities and differences between the way in which U.S. and Venezuelan newspapers covered the protest of 2014. Although there were some differences in the issues covered and the sources used, the stories published in Venezuelan newspapers were not substantially less objective or less detailed than the stories published in American newspapers. In addition, a brief historical record of the origins of polarization in Venezuela is presented.

Venezuela: a Case Study on Polarization and Freedom of the Press

This study analyzes the problem of polarization that characterizes the media in Venezuela. The polarization of the media is a reflection of the serious case of political polarization that has traditionally divided the country between supporters and opponents of the government. Although the country has been politically divided for years, the polarization has increased dramatically under the governments of Hugo Chavez (1999-2012) and his faithful successor Nicolás Maduro (2012-today) (Ramirez Alvarado, 2006).

The media became a central part of the political fight when President Chavez decided to build a media “hegemony plan” that was designed to use the public media, which are directly controlled by the president, as a propaganda machine that supports the government and attacks the opposition (Bermudez, 2011). To counteract Chavez’s actions, the commercial media outlets also became active participants in the political battle. In fact, the commercial media replaced the political parties of the opposition, which proved to be incapable of representing the will of the Venezuelan people (Block, 2011).

As a result of the political polarization between the government and the media, the Venezuelan government has imposed serious limitations to the freedom of the press. Part of these restrictions is the reformation of old laws or the creation of new ones (Bermudez, 2011). Arguably the most controversial of these laws is the Law on Social Responsibility on Radio and Television, which was put into effect in 2004 and applies to every “image or sound which diffusion and reception take place inside the territory of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and is produced through the public or private services of radio and television” (Ramirez

Alvarado, 2007, p.11). To guarantee the implementation of the Law on Social Responsibility, the government created the National Commission of Telecommunications (CONATEL), which is authorized to arbitrarily impose heavy fines on the media outlets that do not follow such law. On top of these measures, the government has made it almost impossible for the media to access governmental information or public records, and the executive branch has unlimited control over the legislative and judiciary branches, which means that the presidential administration has the freedom to impose restrictive laws and to punish those who allegedly violate them. It is also important to point out that, as a consequence to the excessive number of attacks, intimidations, and personal threats, many journalists and media workers have opted for self-censorship (Bermudez, 2011).

As this study explains, the violations to the freedom of the press, and in general to the freedom of speech, have been one of the main causes of the national protest that started as a student pacific movement in February 2014. In spite of the national demonstrations, the government keeps committing violations against the freedom of the press and continues to manipulate the media programming through the excessive use of the “cadenas,” presidential speeches that every television station in the country is forced to transmit whenever the president gives the order (Protesta y Derechos Humanos, 2014).

Due to the polarization and lack of freedom, the Venezuelan media, in particular radio and television, often offer biased, superficial, and unreliable reporting. The lack of objectivity, accuracy, and depth of reporting has caused Venezuelans to remain only partially informed, but especially to lose trust with the traditional forms of media, either public or private (Bacalao, 2010).

One of the main sections of the paper provides a quantitative analysis of the coverage by both Venezuelan and U.S. newspapers of the protest that took place in early 2014. The purpose of the analysis is to examine the extent of the differences between the coverage offered by the Venezuelan media and the American media. Considering the case of polarization of media in Venezuelan and considering the lack of freedom of expression in the country, the hypothesis was to notice significant differences in coverage. However, after analyzing different aspects such as main issues discussed, the language used, the variety of sources, the presence of citizens' testimonies, and the general length of the stories, it was possible to conclude that, while there were some differences, they were not as significant as hypothesized.

The paper also includes a brief historical report of the development of the media in Venezuela. This report was included with the intention to help the reader understand the origins of the political polarization that has dominated the country for several years.

Literature Review

In "Escenarios de Comunicación en una Venezuela Polarizada: del Grupo Cisneros a la Ley Resorte" ("Scenarios of Communication in a Polarized Venezuela: from the Cisneros' group to the Resorte Law"), Maria del Mar Ramirez Alvarado (2006) explains that the extreme confrontation and polarization present in the country is the consequence of the fact that the Venezuelan media have traditionally been in the hands of a very selective group of wealthy families.

According to Ramirez Alvarado (2006), the dominance of a small group of families over the media generated an automatic clash with Chavez's socialist ideologies. Consequently, when he became president the political polarization of the country assumed extreme positions that had not been seen until then. At one extreme, Chavez constantly accused the media of being a tenacious and direct opponent of the government. On the other extreme, the media accused the president and his supporters of committing serious violations to the freedom of speech.

Ramirez Alvarado (2006) also outlines the Law on Social Responsibility. She explains that while the members of the opposition think that this law constitutes a definite violation to the freedom of speech, the government supporters affirm it encourages journalists to exercise their freedom of speech in a responsible way. They also argue that the law stimulates the development of the national audiovisual industry and guarantees the portrayal of Venezuelan cultural values on TV and radio. Ramirez Alvarado (2006) focuses on three aspects of the law in particular: its emphasis on social participation, its encouragement of national production, and the creation of the Counsel of Social Responsibility (CONATEL)¹.

Adding to Ramirez Alvarado's points, Mariana Bacalao (2010) explains that the radical division in Venezuela is the consequence of a combination of historical factors such as the constant exclusion of broad sections of society, the absence of strong political parties, and the lack of development in fundamental areas like education, employment, and health. In addition to these historical factors, Bacalao (2010) identifies two others that were characteristic of the Chavez era: the criminalization of the opposition and the total absence of a political program able to include and unify all the sections of society.

¹ The Counsel of Social Responsibility is an organization that has the responsibility to discuss and approve norms related to the Law of Social Responsibility and establish sanctions on the stations that do not follow it.

Bacalao (2010) also finds that the radical break-up between the government and the commercial media happened in 2001, when the private media assumed an active political role and Chavez started to transform the public media into instruments for political propaganda.

Complementing Bacalao's research, Elisa Bermudez (2011) states that although the Venezuelan media had been subject to censorship and intimidations before Chavez, there were more reported cases of violations to human rights during his regime than ever before. Bermudez (2011) also points out that Chavez, unlike previous presidents, openly and aggressively accused the media of the opposition. An interesting aspect about Bermudez's research is that she emphasizes that the Venezuelan government also scrutinized and censored the public and pro-government media.

Bermudez (2011) also discusses Chavez's "Hegemony Plan." As she points out, this plan would transform the public media into political instruments used by the president to promote his political views and attack not only the private national media, but also the international media. Bermudez (2011) identifies three major components of this plan: the criminalization of the media through legislations such as the Law of Social Responsibility, the nullification of the division between the three branches of power, and the foundation and reformation of media organizations designed to operate as propaganda machines.

The "Hegemony Plan" is also the subject of Elena Block's (2013) section "Chavez's Politically Mediatized Venezuela," taken from the article "A Culturalist Approach to the Concept of Mediatization of Politics: The Age of 'Media Hegemony.'" Block (2013) cites a number of previous studies that found Chavez was able to maintain a successful presidency because he effectively used the media as a governmental tool that allowed him to create an

illusion of political representation among his supporters. In fact, through his almost daily appearances on national television, Chavez managed to give a symbolic political voice to those sections of society that had been underrepresented until then.

In addition to explaining how Chavez used the media to his favor, Block (2013) also explores the essential role that the Venezuelan media play in the political life of Venezuela. As she said, the media are the primary way in which the Venezuelan society gets involved with the political issues of the country. Taking this into account, Block (2013) concludes that, ever since Chavez became president, the government and the opposition have opted for using the media as tools to gain political followers.

While Bacalao, Ramirez Alvarado, Bermudez, and Block present evidence of the government's active involvement in the media, Weisbrot and Ruttenberg (2010) claim that the government has no control over the media. In fact, in their study "Television in Venezuela: Who Dominates the Media?", they discovered that, until 2010, the Venezuelan government owned only 5.4 percent of the audience's share, which means that more than 90 percent of the TV watched by Venezuelans was not pro-government.

Nonetheless, Weisbrot and Ruttenberg (2010) also found that during times of political unrest or when there is a significant political event in process, the public television share of the audience tends to increase dramatically. For instance, during the presidential elections in December 2006 and during the months prior to the Constitutional Amendment Referendum in 2007, the public seemed to be more interested than usual in the state-run media.

Weisbrot and Ruttenberg (2010) argue that since the government has a very small share of the media, the main way in which the president can transmit his message is through the

“cadenas,” which are a series of speeches that the president uses to communicate with the Venezuelan society whenever he considers it convenient.

Methodology

In order to examine the extent of the polarization, lack of objectivity, and superficiality of coverage of the media in Venezuela, this research paper provides a qualitative content analysis that presents the similarities and differences between the coverage of the protest by Venezuelan newspapers and by U.S. newspapers. The content analysis involves the collection and examination of a total of 86 stories that were published on the websites of different American and Venezuelan newspapers and blogs.

Out of these almost 90 articles, 60 were taken from newspapers in Venezuela and 26 from newspapers in the U.S. The 60 articles from newspapers in Venezuela were published in the period between February 8, 2014, the date when the protest assumed national proportions, and May 31, 2014, the date when the protests started to subside. It is important to point out that the 60 stories collected were selected from different newspapers that have different political ideologies and different relationships with the Maduro administration. For instance, eleven of the articles were taken from *El Universal*, one of the most important and widespread newspapers in Venezuela (Estrada, 2014). *El Universal* is also considered a pro-opposition paper that is highly critical of the politics of former president Hugo Chavez and current president Nicolas Maduro (Estrada, 2014). The research also includes three stories published in *Últimas Noticias*, which is the highest selling daily newspaper in Venezuela. In 2013, *Últimas Noticias* was sold to the pro-

government company Cadena Capriles, since then the newspaper has assumed a political stand that sympathizes with the government (Periodistas, 2014). In addition, thirty stories from *El Nacional* were selected for analysis. *El Nacional*, also widely distributed through the entire Venezuelan territory, has traditionally supported the middle class and, in recent years, its political views have come closer to the political views of the opposition (Venezuela, Press Reference, 2014). The last nineteen news stories collected from newspapers in Venezuela were taken from *El País*, a newspaper that was originally only produced and distributed in Spain but that has progressively grown to be produced and distributed in Latin America (Voltmer, 2006). Ideologically, *El País* is situated in the conservative position and has consistently criticized the “populist-left” movement in Latin America. As a matter of fact, on more than one occasion, *El País* has accused President Chavez of establishing an authoritarian government and eliminating the separation of powers (Voltmer, 2006).

The analysis of the coverage by newspapers in the U.S., on the other hand, included journalistic pieces from various newspapers and blogs that were published between February 21, 2014 and May 24, 2014. Eleven of the stories were retrieved from *The New York Times*, six from the *Washington Post*, two stories from CNN’s website and *USA Today* respectively, one from Fox News’ website and one from the AP’s website. On top of analyzing news stories published in newspapers, the research also includes an examination of the pieces posted in three political blogs: The Action Institute Power Blog, the Global Voices Blog, and the Real News Blog.

The 86 stories were selected looking for variety of newspapers and variety of issues covered. I started collecting stories on February 8, 2014, because that was the day the protest caught the attention of the international media by assuming national proportions. Furthermore, I stopped my research on May 31 because after that day the coverage of the protest in both

Venezuelan and American newspapers became almost non-existent. During the almost four months that passed between February 8 and May 31, I search through the web twice a week looking for stories in different newspapers.

The content analysis focuses on different components of the articles, such as their objectivity, their balance, the presence or absence of direct and indirect quotes, the presence of opinion or commentary, the use of extreme or charged language, the presence or absence of the human touch, the selection of sources, and the length of the pieces. In order to examine the elements mentioned above, I read and summarized each of the 86 articles collected. During my reading I paid particular attention to the adjectives, adverbs, and verbs used. Furthermore, I also examined the sources of information and the quotes used. Finally, while conducting my analysis, I tried to identify if there were significant differences in length between the stories published in newspapers in Venezuela and the ones published in newspapers in the U.S.

The results of the different aspects analyzed will be thoroughly explained in the findings section of the paper.

History of the press in Venezuela

With the purpose to help the reader understand the complex relationship between the media and the government in Venezuela, the research paper also provides a brief historical report that highlights some of the events that gave origin to the polarization of the country.

According to Gabriel Samuel Niño (2009), a famous Venezuelan journalist, the first point that is important to take into account is the emergence of *La Gazeta de Caracas*, the very first newspaper produced in the country. This newspaper, edited by Andres Bello, was produced between October 1808 and January 1822, and was actively involved in the political life of the country. In fact, it reflected the opposing points of view of the Realists and the Republicans, which were the two most important political groups in Venezuela at that time.

Niño (2009) also points out that the newspapers produced during the 19th century (*La Gazeta de Caracas* and *El Correo del Orinoco*, for instance) were small or medium size and were only produced once a week. Furthermore, they were completely controlled by public powers and excluded the majority of the population by only exposing the opinions of the intellectual elite and the politically oriented groups.

At the beginning of the 20th century, on the other hand, the newspapers started to expand and started to lean towards information rather than opinion. The first two big informative newspapers that are still in existence today were *El Universal* (1909), and *Panorama* (1914). These newspapers, as well as *Últimas Noticias* (1941), *El Nacional* (1943), and *El Mundo* (1958), were and still are financially supported by advertising. This point is crucial to understand the problem of polarization in the country because newspapers and other types of media have fallen into the practice of supporting the political views of the conglomerates that advertise them. Additionally, the reestablishment of the politically oriented press in 1936 also contributed to the problem of polarization that characterizes the media today (Niño, 2009).

When discussing the origins of media polarization in Venezuela is also important to talk about the radio. The influence of the government in this type of media started since the beginning of radio production in Venezuela. In fact, the first radio station, AYRE, saw instant

success after airing for the first time in 1926 because it had the support of Colonel Arturo Santana, who was a close friend of President Juan Vicente Gómez. A decade later, the radio was transformed into a propaganda machine of the government when President Eleazar Lopez Contreras started using it to communicate his political messages. Lopez Contreras expanded his influence over radio by founding La Dirección General de Servicios de Radiotelefonía y de Radiodifusión (National Department of Radial Services), which gave origin to the current Radio Nacional (Niño, 2009).

The government also heavily influenced television since its origins. The first television station in the country was the publicly run Televisora del Estado Venezolano (Venezuelan State Channel), inaugurate on November 22, 1952. Only one year later, Gonzalo Veloz Mancera founded Televisa, the first private station in the country. It was also in 1953 that Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) started operating. This station operated until 2007, when it was forced by the government to close for its alleged participation in the coup d'état of 2002. The second private station to start operations was Televisiva, transformed into Venevisión in 1960 by Diego Cisneros, founder of one of the most important media conglomerates in Venezuela. Venevisión is the biggest station in the country today and one of the strongest opponents of the regime established by President Chavez (Niño, 2009).

The transformation of the private Cadena Venezolana de Television into the publicly run station Venezolana de Television in 1974 also serves as an example of the influence of the government over television. Ever since Chavez assumed power, Venezolana de Television has been one of the most important means of governmental propaganda (Niño, 2009).

While the Venezuelan government exercised direct control over the public media, the private newspapers, stations, and channels are owned by the most powerful corporations of the

country. This is an important point because the messages that the private media transmit are filtered by the ideologies of the different corporations. The influence of the corporations' ideologies in the information presented is particularly evident in publicity. In fact, the television channels advertise the radio and newspapers owned by the same company and vice versa. Moreover, different media belonging to the same company present the same information, which is different than the information presented by the media owned by another company. Consequently, the public ends up receiving distorted versions of the same piece of information (Niño, 2009).

Before closing this brief historical report it is important to explain that, according to Niño (2009), Venezuela has gradually become an information-seeking society that revolves around the media. It is because of the centrality of the media in Venezuelan society that it is so important and interesting to analyze the problems of polarization and lack of freedom of expression.

Polarization

According to Mariana Bacalao (2010), polarization is the process through which an originally unified group divides into two mutually exclusive poles. Taking this information into account, Bacalao (2010) explains that the deep political polarization in Venezuela is the consequence of a number of aspects such as the constant exclusion of a broad section of society from the political debate; the absence of strong political parties able to represent the needs of the population; the lack of development in areas like employment, education, and health; the

criminalization of the opposition; and the total absence of a political program able to reconcile the two poles.

Although as exposed in the brief historical report, the media in Venezuela has traditionally been polarized, the problem has become particularly serious since the government of President Chavez (Ramirez Alvarado, 2006). In fact, after the failed coup d'état against him in 2002, the traditional political parties of the opposition proved to be unable to protect the needs of the Venezuelan society and, therefore, were replaced by the commercial media in the political battle against the government (Mejias, 2009). In this way, the commercial media became the public and direct enemy of Chavez (Block, 2011).

Trying to formalize his fight against the commercial media, Chavez designed a “Hegemony Plan” that would allow him to use the public media as a tool for propaganda (Bermudez, 2011). The best example of this plan is the series of speeches known as cadenas that the president used at his discretion to communicate with the Venezuelan society (Block, 2013). In order to maximize the impact of the cadenas, Chavez forced all the radio and television stations in the country to interrupt their programming to air them. According to the study “Entorno Comunicacional Venezolano” (2012) (“Venezuelan Communicational Environment”) between February 2, 1999, and December 31, 2008, Chavez accumulated 1,179 hours talking through the cadenas, which was the most time a Venezuelan president has ever spent speaking through the media (Bermudez, 2011).

In addition to overusing the cadenas, as part of his “Hegemony Plan” Chavez also encouraged the development of community media (Bermudez, 2011). While in theory the development of community media outlets has the purpose to increase the participation of society in the political life of the country, in reality these outlets were, and still are, completely

dependent on state funding, which means they are generally forced to carry messages in favor of the government. It is important to say that even though international non-governmental organizations have openly offered to support the community media outlets, the Venezuelan government has consistently rejected this support (Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2014).

In order to become even more active on the media, Chavez also created the program “Aló Presidente”² and started a strong campaign online. As a matter of fact, he was very active not only on Twitter, with more than two million followers, but also on a blog he created to spread his ideology. To complete his involvement on the web, in 2009 Chavez began training a group of teenagers and young adults popularly known as “the community guerrillas” that have the responsibility to advocate for the “Bolivarian Revolution” on the web (Bermudez, 2011).

At this point, knowing how both the opposition and the government used the media as the pillar of their political fight it is possible to understand why the polarization reached extremes never seen before (Bacalao, 2006). During his thirteen years in power, Chavez constantly accused the media of making active attempts to overthrow him. On the other hand, the number of journalist denouncing attacks and threats from the government was so high that it forced the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights to dictate preventive measures in favor of them (Ramirez Alvarado, 2006).

Although Chavez is no longer the president, the constant fight between the commercial media and the government remains at the center of the political sphere (Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2014). Just like his mentor, the new president, Nicolás Maduro, keeps accusing journalists of trying to conspire against the “Bolivarian Revolution” and continues to have a very active participation in the media (Venezuela, 2014). As reported by the Freedom House, in 2013

² “Aló Presidente” was a talk show hosted by President Chavez that was broadcast on public television and radio every Sunday between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. (Bermudez, 2011).

Maduro officially controlled six television networks, four radio stations, three newspapers, one news agency, and one magazine (Venezuela, 2013). On top of controlling these public outlets, the government also offers financial support to other privately owned outlets that serve as its faithful advocates (Venezuela, 2014).

According to an investigation by Espacio Público, the public and pro-government media outlets represent 50 percent of the media outlets in Venezuela (cited in Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2014). As indicated by the study, the remaining 50 percent of the outlets are private and they are divided between those that identify with the opposition and those that choose not to cover politically delicate topics (cited in Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2014). It is important to mention two of the three Venezuelan leading newspapers, *El Universal* and *El Nacional*, have an editorial line that is clearly against the government (Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2013). On the other hand, *Últimas Noticias*, a former opponent of the government, was bought by Cadena Capriles, a pro-government organization, in 2013 and has now become a supporter of the Maduro administration (Periodistas, 2014).

One of the best examples of the polarization that impregnates the country is the problem between Globovisión and the government. On April 2013, Globovisión was sold to Juan Domingo Cordero, one of the closest supporters of the government (Rueda, 2013). Closing the deal a few weeks before, the previous owner of the channel, Guillermo Zuloaga, explained that one of the reasons why he had to sell the channel was because the Venezuelan government was constantly trying to force him off the air by refusing to renew the channel's broadcasting license. As Rueda (2013) explains, this was not the first time the government had directly attacked Globovisión. In previous years, The Venezuelan National Communications Commission CONATEL had issued fines against the channel in eight different opportunities. One of these

fines was a two million dollar penalty that was the consequence of Globovisión's critical coverage of the government's response to a major prison riot in 2010. Bacalao (2010) uses one of the many episodes of confrontation between Globovisión and the government to illustrate the extreme polarization of the country. On March 5, 2009, Globovisión's website reported that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights had announced the responsibility of the Venezuelan government in the violations to the freedoms of speech against journalists from Globovisión and had required the Venezuelan government to repair the damages caused. At the same time the website of "Venezolana de Televisión," one of the publicly-run stations, reported that the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights had determined that the Venezuelan government did not commit any violations against the rights of the journalists of Globovisión and, therefore, it was not forced to pay any type of compensation to them (Bacalao, 2010).

Reflecting on the radical partiality and lack of professionalism that have characterized the media as a consequence of the polarization, Bacalao (2010) encourages the media and the government to rebuild the principles of plurality and impartiality in order to make the Venezuelan society more democratic and inclusive.

Freedom of the press

Although the freedom of the press is guaranteed by article 57 of the Venezuelan Constitution, the extreme polarization of the media and the "Hegemony Plan" built by the government have caused censorship and have led to general limitations to this freedom (Venezuela, Freedom of the Press, 2014). According to Andres Cañizales (2003),

Communication Professor at the Catholic University Andres Bello, the implementation of the controversial Law on Social Responsibility in 2004 is the best example of the government's attempt to silence the media of the opposition. With 150 articles, the law is a "mechanism that gives the government the authority to control radio and television and limit the free flow of the political debate" (Cañizales, 2003, p.63). As stated by the Freedom House in 2013, the Law includes number of vague restrictions interpreted by the government at its own discretion (Venezuela, 2013). For instance, the law bans content that could "incite or promote hatred, foment citizens' anxiety or alter public order, disrespect authorities, encourage assassination, or constitute war propaganda" (Venezuela, 2013, para. 2). In addition, the law also puts restrictions on content that the government considers to be of "adult nature" to the hours between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. This content includes stories about sex and violence for example (Venezuela, 2013, para.3). As the Freedom House explains, these restrictions in the schedule of the news are deeply controversial because Venezuela has one of the highest homicide rates in the world (Venezuela, 2013). But on top of the content and schedule limitations, the law also forces all the television programs in the country to air the presidential cadenas (Venezuela, 2013).

To strengthen the power of the law, the government gave CONATEL, an organ directly dependent on the executive branch, the authority to impose heavy fines or disrupt the service of the stations that do not properly comply with the law. As explained in the Polarization section of this paper, the 2.6 million dollar fine that CONATEL imposed on Globovisión in 2011 is perhaps the best example of this commission's tremendous power to control the media (Venezuela, 2013).

The problem of contaminated waters in the southern state of Monagas provides another known example of the serious limitations of expression that the government has imposed on the

media (Campbell, 2012). In fact, when journalists went to Monagas to report the problem, Chavez reacted by saying they were part of a terrorist plan that was threatening to destabilize the country. Following Chavez's announcement, Attorney General Luisa Ortega Diaz declared a new federal order requiring journalists to base their reports about water quality on a "truthful technical report backed by a competent institution." (Campbell, 2012, para.4).

Another famous example of abuse by the government was the case against RCTV. In 2007, RCTV, one of the oldest private television networks of the country and also one of the most popular anti-government broadcasters, was forced to go off the air after being accused of participating in the 2002 coup attempt. This case has been particularly problematic because it never underwent proper investigation, it never had a due process in court, and the network never had the right to appeal. Although the channel tried to keep operating by moving to cable television as RCTV International, in 2010 CONATEL pulled it off the air once again for alleged problems with its certification (Bermudez, 2011).

As reported by the Freedom House, the actions that CONATEL took against Globovisión, RCTV, and many other stations, have encouraged many journalists to practice either leave the country or practice self-censorship (Venezuela, 2013). In fact, to the Human Rights Watch reports that the fear of governmental punishment has made journalist think "two, three, five times about what will be said, who will be interviewed, and how the interview will be conducted" (qtd. in Venezuela, 2013, para.6).

On top of the restrictions imposed by The Law on Social Responsibility, another way in which the government controls the media is by limiting or forbidding the access to public records and governmental information (Bermudez, 2011). Although article 51 of the constitution states the right to obtain public information by petition, there is no permanent law dealing with

information requests and therefore the government has the freedom to deny such petitions (Venezuela, 2014). According to a research conducted by the Venezuelan Press Watchdog Espacio Público, during 2009 about 70 percent of the information requests submitted to the government were never answered. The Freedom House reports that this situation has not improved in the last five years (cited in Venezuela, 2014). This information is supported by Bermudez's interview (2011) to Phil Gunson, reporter for *The Economist*. In the interview, Gunson told Bermudez that the access to public information depends on the reporter's personal relationship with the members of the government. Consequently, as Gunson explained, those who don't show their support for the "Bolivarian Revolution" do not have any chances to access the information they need. Nonetheless, Gunson also pointed that being a supporter of the revolution does not necessarily guarantee that the government will be willing to share the information (Bermudez, 2011).

Adding to the restrictive laws and the lack of access to public information, another limiting factor to the freedom of speech is the complete dominance of the executive branch over the other two branches of government. As a consequence to this uncontrolled power, the executive power has the freedom to create laws that silence dissent (Bermudez, 2011). Furthermore, journalist and the media outlets of the opposition cannot count on an impartial judgment of their cases because judges may face reprisals if they decide to rule against the president (Venezuela, 2014).

Journalists and other media workers are also constant victims of different forms of attacks such as: assault, confiscation of equipment, forced censorship of coverage, and death threats. According to Espacio Público, 61 percent of these incidents were perpetrated directly or indirectly by the government. In spite of the threats and attacks, murders of journalists are relatively rare. For instance, there were no journalists murdered in 2012 (Venezuela, 2014).

Besides these offenses, under orders of the government, in 2011 the Venezuelan hacker group N33 entered the social media accounts of several opposition journalists to post pro-government messages. N33 also used the personal information they found on social media to threaten the journalists hacked (Venezuela, 2014).

As Bermudez (2011) discusses in her thesis, while it is commonly believed that the limitations to the freedom of speech only affect the anti-government media outlets, the public and private media outlets that support the government are also subject to close scrutiny and censorship. Bermudez (2011) cites studies from Reporters Without Borders and the Venezuelan Human Rights Organization PROVEA that reveal that there were twelve cases of censorship, intimidation, physical or verbal attack, or judiciary prosecution against pro-government outlets between 1999 and 2008. These studies also found that this number has grown rapidly since 2009 (cited in Bermudez, 2011).

As this section has attempted to explain, since 1999 until today, the Venezuelan government has used different legal measures and communication strategies to drastically censor and limit the freedom of the press. These violations are indicated by Reporters Without Borders (2014) in their annual Press Freedom Index. In fact, between 2008 and 2014, Venezuela has occupied positions between 113 and 135 in the ranking of press freedom that Reporters Without Borders assemble every year³ (World Press Freedom Index, 2014). This numbers are confirmed by the Freedom House's report (2013), according to which Venezuela scored 76 in press freedom between 2011 and 2013. The scale used goes from 0, which represents the most freedom, to 100,

³ In order to obtain the results of the ranking, Reporters Without Borders uses a questionnaire that covers criteria such as the number of direct abuses to journalists and the mass media in general, legislation that limits the freedom of expression, and the scale of impunity, among others. It must be said as well that the ranking goes from 0, which represents the country with the most freedom, to 180, which represents the country with the least freedom (World Press Freedom Index, 2014).

which represents the least freedom. Following these results, the Freedom House classifies the Venezuelan Press as “Not Free”⁴ (Venezuela, 2013).

Considering the gravity of the limitations to the freedom of expression in this country, the Committee to Protect Journalists issued a number of recommendations to the Venezuelan authorities in 2012. Among the recommendations, The Committee to Protect Journalists encouraged the government to guarantee the independence of broadcast regulators and to make sure the regulators provide reasons and explanations for giving, renewing, and cancelling broadcast licenses. It also suggested the Maduro administration to give broadcasters the opportunity to present their cases in court in an open and objective manner. Furthermore, the committee also invited the government to amend the Law on Social Responsibility to eliminate the vague language that can be interpreted arbitrarily, to make sure that all journalists, regardless of their political views, have equal access to governmental information and sources, and to regulate the state media to prevent it from being an instrument of political propaganda (Campbell, 2012).

Protest in 2014

After explaining the ways in which the Venezuelan government has imposed limitations to the freedom of the press, it is important to explain that the lack of freedom of expression is one of the main reasons why millions of Venezuelans decided to protest against the government between February and June of 2014. The protest, which started as a pacific student movement in

⁴ The Freedom House (2013) divides the press in the different countries studied into three categories: “Free,” between 0 and 30, “Partially Free,” between 31 and 60, and “Non Free,” between 61 and 100.

the Venezuelan state of Táchira, rapidly evolved into a national phenomenon that assumed high levels of violence and left more than 40 people dead, almost 500 people injured, and almost 2,000 people arrested (Protestas en Venezuela, 2014).

On top of the lack of freedom of expression, the demonstrators were also protesting for the high levels of insecurity and violence in the country; the bad conditions of the economy; the extremely high rates of inflation, which is one of the worst in the continent; and the unavailability of basic supplies, such as food and hygiene products (“Protestas y Derechos Humanos”, 2014).

PROVEA’s report “Protestas y Derechos Humanos” (Protests and Human Rights”) revealed that even though the lack of freedom of speech is at the center of the protest, the government continued to violate this freedom. In fact, between January and April 2014 there were 174 registered cases of violations to the freedom of speech, a number that represents a 240 percent increase from the numbers from the same months in 2013. With a total of 67 registered cases, the most common type of violation was aggression, which was characterized by the disproportionate use of force by officers from different governmental security bodies. In addition to aggression, there were 65 cases of threats, 61 episodes of intimidation, 38 instances of censorship (the government blocked social networks and deliberately closed television channels). PROVEA also reported 27 cases of physical attacks, 9 cases of administrative restriction, and 1 death (the information leader Jose Alejandro Marquez hit his head against the ground after being shot by one of the officers from the National Guard) (“Protestas y Derechos Humanos,” 2014).

On top of these violations, in the same four months every radio and television station in the country was forced to transmit an average of 30 minutes of cadenas a day, which adds up to a total of 73 hours (“Protestas y Derechos Humanos”). According to an article by *New Republic*,

President Maduro uses these cadenas to defend his political plan and send political accusations to the opposition (Duarte, 2014). Furthermore, the executive director of the Institute of Press and Society Marianela Balbi explained that the government used the cadenas and other methods to prevent the live coverage of the protest (cited in Badgen, 2014). As a consequence to this governmental strategy, the web, especially social media, became almost the only source of information about the manifestations. Nonetheless, as Balbi is quoted saying in the article by *New Republic*, the excessive use of social media as a source of information presents two fundamental problems: the information posted on the social media sites can be false and cannot be verified, and the people who live in the poorest areas of the country do not have access to the web and, therefore, remain uninformed. Noticing the central role that social media assumed during the manifestations, the government also tried to censor many of the media sites. For instance, Twitter confirmed at the beginning of February that the images about the protest posted on the website were being blocked. Although it was not officially confirmed, Twitter suspected the Venezuelan government was involved in the obstruction (Badgen, 2014).

Findings

Considering the strong case of polarization and limitations to the freedom of the press, I hypothesized there might be fundamental differences both in the objectivity and depth of analysis between the news stories published in U.S. newspapers and the ones published in Venezuelan newspapers. Nonetheless, although there were some differences, they were not as extreme as I had anticipated.

It is important to note that in addition to the differences in coverage between the U.S. and the Venezuelan newspapers, there were also some important differences in the way in which the different newspapers in Venezuela covered the protest. For instance, one difference that is worth noticing was that *Últimas Noticias* generally favored quotes from Maduro or other members of the government. The other newspapers, on the other hand, exposed the opposite positions of the government and of the opposition in a more balanced way.

Another important difference is that, contrary to the information presented in other newspapers, the stories presented in *Últimas Noticias* tell the reader that the manifestations against the government were primarily violent. In addition, unlike other newspapers, they blamed the protesters for most of the injuries and deaths (Sube a 28, 2014). The news story called “Sube a 28 el número de muertos en las protestas en Venezuela” (The Number of dead during the protests in Venezuela raises to 28) serves as an example to illustrate this point. This article, published in *Últimas Noticias* on March 13, 2014, presents the following quote by General Attorney Luisa Ortega Díaz: "Han sido manifestaciones violentas porque además hemos incautado 25 armas de fuego a quienes han sido aprehendidos durante las manifestaciones", señaló al explicar que, además, se han decomisado artefactos explosivos, como cócteles molotov, y hasta explosivo C-4.” (“The manifestations have been indeed violent because we have confiscated 25 fire arms from those who have been arrested during the protests,” she explained while adding that the government has also confiscated explosives like Molotov cocktails and even C-4 explosives.) (Sube a 28, 2014, para.5). In the last paragraph, the article says: “Desde el Gobierno se ha asegurado que hay grupos que solo buscan generar zozobra para que la situación se torne incontrolable y se justifique una intervención internacional, para lo cual ha asegurado que el miércoles incluso francotiradores dispararon contra una marcha en Valencia.” (The

government firmly believes that there are opposition groups who are only trying to cause the situation to lose control in order to justify international intervention. Therefore, they have even gone to the point of hiring snipers to shoot against a protest in Valencia.) (Sube a 28, 2014, para. 9).

Últimas Noticias also differs from the other newspapers by stating that the accusations against the government for its excessive use of force against protesters were only unsupported claims made by the opposition. The position of *Últimas Noticias* regarding this matter is evident in paragraph one of the same article, when the author writes: “Fuentes de la oposición han acusado a supuestos colectivos chavistas de disparar contra manifestantes, de ‘brutalidad’ en la represión de los manifestantes por parte de la Guardia Nacional y de exceso en el uso de la fuerza.” (Sources of the opposition, have accused “alleged” governmental army forces of shooting against protesters. They have also accused the national guard of using “brutal means” and “excessive force” to repress the manifestations.”) (Sube a 28, 2014, para 7). As it can be seen in this quote, the language the author chooses and the use of quotation marks around “alleged,” “brutal means,” and “excessive force” imply that this accusations are falsely formulated by the opposition (Sube a 28, 2014, para 7).

Unlike *Últimas Noticias*, the newspapers that support the opposition maintained that although some protests went violent, most of them were peaceful movements. For example, an article called “El estado Venezolano viola sistemáticamente los derechos humanos” (“The Venezuelan state has systematically violated human rights”), said that according to PROVEA, 95 percent of the protests that took place between February 12 and May 22, 2014 were peaceful (Velazquez, 2014). Furthermore, many of the articles in *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, and *El País* also point out the consistent violations of human rights that the Venezuelan government

committed to keep the allegedly violent protests under control. One article that exposes this issue is “Una ONG de Venezuela documenta 18 casos de tortura” (A Venezuelan NGO documents 18 cases of torture). This news story, published in *El País* on May 22, 2014, describes some of the most brutal cases of torture that the government perpetrated since the beginning of the protests. As written in the story: “El caso más escandaloso es el de Juan Manuel Carrasco, que según su madre Rebeca González fue violado con el cañón de un fusil.” (The most absurd case was Juan Manuel Carrasco’s, who, according to his mom Rebeca Gonzalez, was raped with the cannon of a rifle.) (Meza, 2014, para. 2). It is worth noting that when the article was published, the Venezuelan criminal forum had already reported 18 cases of torture. It is also important to point out that, as the article explains, although the government violated the right to defense to all the people who were arrested in the month of February, it forced them to sign a form saying that they were properly represented by an attorney (Meza, 2014).

In spite of Ortega Diaz’s declaration, many of the stories published in the anti-government newspapers point out the fact that majority of the injuries and deaths were caused by the government. For instance, Roderick Navarro, one of the student leaders, is quoted in *El Nacional* saying that it was the government, and not the opposition, who used violence against civilians. Navarro said, for example, that among the more than 3000 people detained between February and May, more than 200 were underage and almost all of them have been imprisoned without due process of investigation (Estudiantes, 2014).

On top of the issues mentioned, the newspaper in Venezuela, in particular the ones of the opposition also amply discuss the many problems that the Venezuelan media had to face in order to cover the protest. The most evident of these problems is the shortage of printing paper that forced many small-size newspapers to suspend publication and many medium and large size

newspapers to limit their editions and cut the number of pages (Scharfenberg, 2014). The root of the problem is that the Venezuelan newspapers are not allowed to import printing paper without the approval of the government (Scharfenberg, 2014). Since the private newspapers did not receive such approval during the six months of protest, they were forced to either suspend publication, like most small-size newspapers had to do, or to limit the number of pages per publication, like *El Nacional* and *El Universal* did (Scharfenberg, *El Regimen Venezolano* 2014). This issue is amply explained in “El regimen Venezolano ahoga a la prensa” (“The Venezuelan regime draws the press”), a news story published in *El País* on February 12, 2014. The article opens as follows: “¡A los periódicos les llegará su hora!”, juró sin recato el presidente venezolano, Nicolás Maduro, el pasado viernes en un acto en el céntrico Estado de Miranda. Me llamarán dictador, no me importa; pero voy a endurecer las normas para acabar con el amarillismo y con la propaganda que alimenta la muerte.” (“The time to stop the newspapers have come!,” President Nicolas Maduro swore without modesty on Friday during a speech in the state of Miranda. “They can call me dictator, I don’t care, but I am going to strengthen the norms to stop the sensationalism and the propaganda that nourishes death.”) (Scharfenberg, *El régimen Venezolano*, 2014, para 1). Then the author continues: “Con la amenaza, una de las más abiertas que haya proferido durante su todavía corta gestión de 11 meses, el sucesor de Hugo Chávez al frente de la revolución bolivariana quería ponerle coto a la cobertura que los medios de prensa privados hacen de la inseguridad en Venezuela, uno de los principales problemas que aquejan a la ciudadanía y al que el chavismo no ha encontrado cómo darle respuesta.” (With this threat, Hugo Chavez’s successor wanted to stop the coverage by private media of the insecurity in Venezuela, one of the main problems that affect the population and that has not been solved by Chavismo”) (Scharfenberg, 2014, para. 2). A couple of paragraphs down, the author writes: “Por

tanto, el Gobierno ha optado por bajarle el volumen al tema en los medios, en particular, en la prensa escrita, el último rescoldo de la libertad de información luego de que los más populares medios como la televisión y la radio fueran domesticados o, simplemente, aniquilados.” (Therefore, the government has opted for bringing the volume of the media down, in particular of the press, which was the last type of media to survive after the most popular media, such as television and radio were domesticated or simply annihilated.) (Scharfenberg, 2014, para. 4). Later in the story, the author adds that, although most of the newspapers that were experiencing paper shortages during the protest followed the seventeen bureaucratic steps required to obtain the foreign currency, the government never granted the permission (Scharfenberg, 2014, para. 4). To emphasize the seriousness of the problem, the author mentions the case of *El Nacional*. In fact, since the newspaper had not received an authorization to import since May 2013, it was forced to reduce its editions to half a normal edition to be able to secure production until May 2014 (Scharfenberg, 2014, para. 4). By the time the story was published, eleven newspapers had already been forced to stop publishing (Scharfenberg, 2014, para. 5).

According to “SIP: La prensa venezolana vive su momento más dramático” (“SIP: The Venezuelan media lives its most dramatic moment”), the shortages of printing paper were not a consequence of the economic crisis but a result of the government’s intention to control the media. The story gives evidence of this statement by explaining that, on top of preventing private newspapers from accessing paper, the government created an office that had the sole purpose of buying massive quantities of paper for the newspapers that directly depend on the government (SIP, 2014).

Another article by *El País*, published in the last week of February, exposes another issue related to the hostile relationship between the media and the government during the protest.

According to this article, Maduro and other representatives of the government accused the international media of promoting anti-government propaganda (Scharfenberg, El Gobierno, 2014). The article quotes ex-member of the parliament Gabriela Ramirez saying that the international media were creating uneasiness in the population. She also supported Maduro's attacks on the media by saying that CNN was doing "war propaganda." (Scharfenberg, El Gobierno de Maduro redobla el acoso, 2014, para. 3). The story explains that because of these comments, and many other similar statements made by other sources close to the government, CNN's reporter for Latin America Patricia Janiot was forced to leave Venezuela after a few days in the country. It is also important to mention that, according to the same article, a few weeks before the accusation against CNN, the Venezuelan government had suspended the transmission of the Colombian TV channel NTN24, which had been covering the protest since the day when it started (Scharfenberg, El Gobierno de Maduro redobla el acoso, 2014). Expanding on the abuses of the government against the media, the author also explains that according to the Institute of Society and Press of Venezuela, there were over 50 cases of attack against the media during the first month of the protest (Scharfenberg, El Gobierno de Maduro redobla el acoso, 2014). Based on the information provided by "SIP: La prensa venezolana vive su momento más dramático," these numbers grew to 105 attacks by the beginning of April. According to the National College of Journalists, these attacks included detentions, threats, and beatings among other things. On top of these attacks, military and police officers confiscated equipment and erased pictures taken by many journalists who were mistreated. Towards the end of the article the author says that the impositions of the government forced many outlets to practice self-censorship to survive (SIP, 2014). For instance, the article says: "Actualmente los canales de televisión y la radio locales dan poquísima o ninguna cobertura informativa a actividades políticas de la oposición democrática, y

acallan situaciones donde se reprime a la ciudadanía que ejerce su derecho a la protesta.” (Currently, the TV channels and the radio stations are barely covering or not covering at all the political activities of the democratic opposition. They are also remaining silent in front of situations in which the government represses citizens who are exercising their rights to protest”) (SIP, 2014).

On top of talking about the nature of the protests, the human rights violations, and the methods used by the government to limit the freedom of the media, the Venezuelan newspapers also explain the reasons why the students are protesting. For instance, Roderick Navarro, chief member of the Patriotic and Popular Assembly of students in Venezuela, said that, contrary to the accusations of the government, instead of wanting to overthrow Maduro by force. They want him to resign (Estudiantes, 2014). In paragraph six Navarro is quoted saying: "No estamos en el palacio (de Miraflores) a caerle a los tiros (a Maduro), estamos en las calles cansados de la política de empobrecimiento a propósito" (We are not in the national palace trying to get Maduro out with our bullets, instead we are protesting in the streets because we are tired of the policies that purposely impoverish the country) (Estudiantes, 2014, para 7). To support his claim, Navarro added "Este regimen ha llevado a Venezuela a un deterioro en todos los ordenes, moral y espiritual también" (This regime has deteriorated Venezuela in all the ways possible, even morally and spiritually) (Estudiantes, 2014, para.10). While the government claimed that the protestors were the people from the middle class who wanted to go back to a regime in which 90 percent of the population was completely underrepresented, Navarro argued: “Es el mas falso de todos los mitos, la gente que mas sufre los problemas de Venezuela es la gente pobre y es la que mas nos defiende.” (That myth is absolutely false, the people who suffer the most because of the many problems in Venezuela are the poor people, and they are also those who defend us (the

protesters) the most.) (Estudiantes, 2014, para.11).

It is important to say that in addition to exposing the point of view of the student protestors, *El Nacional* also presents the opinion of the government. An article titled “Presidente Maduro calificó al movimiento estudiantil de ‘destructivo y degenerado” (President Maduro described the student movement as “destructive” and “depraved”), published on May 23, explains that Maduro made a radical distinction between what he called “el mayoritario y poderoso movimiento estudiantil de paz” (the peaceful majoritarian and powerful movement organized by students who support the government), and what he called “el minoritario destructivo y degenerado antimovimiento estudiantil, que ha quemado ciudades enteras; y ha quemado vivos a hombres y mujeres” (The minority and destructive student anti-movement that has destroyed cities and burn men and women) (Presidente, 2014, para. 1).

Another important issue that should be mentioned is the reaction of the Latin American community to the crisis in Venezuela. Enrique Krauze addressed this issue in his opinion column “La soledad de los estudiantes Venezolanos” (The solitude of the Venezuelan students”) (Krauze, 2014). In fact, Krauze openly criticized Twitter users in other Latin American countries who, according to Krauze, “surprisingly support the Venezuelan government” and attribute the “uneasiness” that took place in Venezuela between February and June to what the users call the “fascists” and “reactionary” forces who made “an alliance with the U.S. empire to organize a “coup d’état” against Maduro’s government (Krauze, 2014, para. 5). But on top of criticizing the position of these Twitter uses, Krauze castigates the governments in Latin America, in particular the Brazilian government, for choosing to protect their materialistic interests rather than helping Venezuelans fight for a free country (Krauze, 2014). Krauze concluded his extensive opinion article by saying: “América Latina —sus Gobiernos, sus instituciones, sus congresos, sus

intelectuales y aun sus estudiantes— es ingrata con Venezuela. El país que en gran medida la liberó hace 200 años, hoy lucha solo por su libertad.” (Latin America-its governments, its institutions, its intellectuals and even its students-are ungrateful to Venezuela. The country that, to a great extent, liberated Latin America 200 years ago is now fighting for its own freedom) (Krauze, 2014, para.14).

It is essential to point out that after Krauze’s opinion piece was published at end of February 2014, that is to say less than a month after the beginning of the protest. In the following months, the governments of Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and even the Vatican agreed to intervene by sending their ambassadors to mediate the talks between the government and the opposition (Venezuela espera reactivación, 2014). It is also important to mention that, as explained in many of the stories in Venezuelan newspapers, the Maduro administration did not agree with the international intervention (Ramirez Padrino, 2014). For instance, in an interview given to Telesur on March 28, 2014, the Venezuelan Chancellor Elias Juau said that although he agreed with UNASUR on the fact that a dialogue between the government and the opposition was necessary to solve the conflict, he did not think it was necessary to bring international referees to the discussion. In fact, Juau said that the government did not think the conflict was serious enough to justify the intervention of other countries in the region (Ramirez Padrino, 2014).

The last issue to be thoroughly discussed in the Venezuelan newspapers is the U.S. Congress’s intention to impose sanctions and prohibit entry to the U.S. to the Venezuelan officers who violated human rights and abused their power. As explained in the article “Las sanciones contra Venezuela, un dilema para EE UU” (“Sanctions against Venezuela, a dilemma for the U.S), while both the House of Representatives and the Senate approved in the last week of May a law to impose such sanctions and prohibitions, President Obama was still reluctant to

put the law in effect because he did not want to harm the diplomatic relationships between the U.S and Latin America (Las sanciones, 2014). Supporting the position of the administration, Efe Mark Weisbrot, analyst and director of the Center of Politics and Economy said: ““La implicación principal es que alejaría aún más a América del Sur y a la mayor parte de América Latina de los Estados Unidos. Como puede verse a partir de la declaración de Unasur, estos gobiernos lo verían como un acto de agresión y violación de los derechos fundamentales de soberanía por parte del gobierno de EE.UU., algo con lo que están profundamente resentidos en América Latina” (The main consequences of the sanction would be the even further distancing of South America and most of Latin America from the United States. As it can be seen in Unasur’s declaration, many of these governments would see a U.S. intervention as act of aggression and violation of their fundament rights to be sovereign over their territories, something that creates deep resentment among the governments of Latin America) (Las sanciones, 2014, para. 10).

Maduro responded to the possibility of the sanction by addressing the American people. In his letter, first published in The New York Times and then published in *El Nacional*, Maduro asked the American people to stop their government from imposing sanctions on a government that, he said, is trying to become a model for democracy in the world. President Maduro also argued that although the U.S. government thought it was helping the Venezuelan population, in reality it was siding with the one percent of the population who wanted to go back to the times in which 99 percent of the population was not taken into account. He added that the majority of the protesters belonged to the wealthiest section of society and, therefore, were those who tried to block the achievements of the revolutionary process of democratization that, starting in 1998, had benefitted the great majority of the population (Maduro pide al pueblo, 2014). After making his arguments, Maduro concluded: "Espero que el pueblo estadounidense, conociendo la verdad,

exprese que Venezuela y su pueblo no merecen tal castigo, y llamen a sus líderes políticos para que abstengan de tales sanciones.” (I hope that the American people, now knowing the truth, would express that Venezuela and its people do not deserve such a punishment. I also hope that the American people would encourage their political leaders to abstain from imposing the sanctions.) (Maduro pide al pueblo, 2014, para. 7).

It is important to note that the issues presented are also the ones that prevail among American newspapers. In fact, the stories published in the U.S. also emphasize the victims of the violence that originated from the protest. For instance, an article published on the Fox news website on March 24, 2014 talks about the death of a pregnant woman outside of Caracas on the evening of March 23. According to the article, called “Pregnant Woman Killed Amid Protests Near Caracas, U.S. Partially Suspending Visas,” the victim was a 28-year-old woman called Adriana Urquiola, who was shot after she left a bus that was stuck in front of one of the anti-government barricades. The person responsible for her death and the moment when she died were still undetermined when the story was published. The article also informs that by March 23 32 people had died (Pregnant woman, 2014).

The death of innocent people is also discussed in an article written by William Newman for *The New York Times* on April 27, 2014. The story, called “In Venezuela, Protesters Point to Their Scars,” exposes the death of another innocent young woman, Geraldine Moreno. Newman explains that on February 19, 2014, Moreno was standing outside of her apartment banging a pot as a sign of protest when a group of soldiers rode up on motorcycles, one of them got off the motorcycle and ran after Moreno, who fell on the stairs while trying to escape, when she was on the floor the soldier shot her in the head and killed her (Newman, In Venezuela, protesters, 2014). In the story, Newman (2014) also exposes some of the many cases of violation and abuse

committed by the Venezuelan government against the protesters. In paragraph 7, Newman says: “Soldiers have been accused of firing shotguns loaded with hard plastic buckshot at point-blank range, injuring numerous demonstrators and killing a 23-year-old woman. Soldiers and police officers have also been widely accused of beating detainees, often severely, with many people saying the security forces then robbed them, stealing cellphones, money and jewelry” (Newman, In Venezuela, protesters, 2014, para. 7). One of the cases of abuse presented in the article is the case of a man identified in the story as Mr. Gregory, a protestor who was detained along with ten others after a protest on February 13, 2014. According to Mr. Gregory, one of the soldiers smashed the detainees’ hands’ “with the butt of his shotgun, telling them it was a punishment for protesters’ throwing rocks.” (Newman, In Venezuela, protesters 2014, para. 20). Newman also writes that “the men said they were handcuffed together, threatened with an attack dog, made to crouch for long periods, pepper sprayed and beaten.” (Newman, In Venezuela, protesters, 2014, para. 21).

The U.S. newspapers do not cover the shortage of printing paper and the limitations to the freedom of expression during the protest as extensively as the newspapers in Venezuela. For instance, another article by Newman published on February 24, 2014 mentions that Maduro’s government was trying to “squeeze” the independent media since the moment when he became president. Nonetheless, the article does not expand on this issue (Newman, In Venezuela, protest ranks grow broader, 2014, para.9).

By contrast, an issue that is broadly discussed in the newspapers of both countries is the unresponsiveness of the other countries in Latin America. “In Venezuela, Protestors Point to the Scars,” Newman explains that, for the first almost two months of protest, the Latin American governments either supported Maduro, said little about the situation, or hesitantly encouraged the

Venezuelan president to initiate a process of dialogue with the opposition (Newman, in Venezuela, protest ranks, 2014). Nonetheless, similar to the article from *El Nacional* “Venezuela espera reactivación del diálogo mientras las partes hacen denuncias”, the article from *The New York Times* also explains that by the beginning of April the governments of Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil decided to send ambassadors who had the responsibility to supervise the dialogues between the government and the opposition. Furthermore, Newman also informs that in April Luis Ignacio Lula Da Silva, former president of Brazil, made open remarks against the way in which Maduro was handling the crisis (Newman, in Venezuela, protest ranks 2014). This remarks not only contradicted the initial support to the Maduro administration that the Brazilian government had manifested, but they also went against Da Silva’s traditional support to the Bolivarian Revolution (Newman, in Venezuela, protest ranks, 2014).

In addition to the issues analyzed so far, the last issue that is thoroughly discussed in the newspapers of both countries is the sanctions that the U.S. Congress wanted to impose on some Venezuelan officials. The coverage of this issue is fairly similar in the newspapers of both countries. In fact, both Venezuelan and American newspapers remain objective and present authoritative sources representing the position of both governments. One of the stories that exposes the issue is “U.S. government weary of sanctions in Venezuela,” published in the *Washington Post* on May 21, 2014. It informs that although Congress was moving forward with its proposal to issue a law with sanctions against Venezuelan officers who violated human rights, President Obama continued to disagree with the proposal because, in his opinion, the U.S. government should give more time to the governments in Latin America to solve the crisis. The *Washington Post*’s story also explains Maduro’s opinion. According to him, the sanctions would actually strengthen the Venezuelan government by showing the other Latin American

governments that the U.S. was indeed collaborating with the opposition in order to organize a coup d'état (Parlow, 2014).

Other articles from the *Washington Post* explain the reactions of both the anti-government leaders and the other governments in Latin America. The article "In Venezuela, fears that U.S. sanctions could rally public support for unpopular government," published on May 17, 2014, explains that there were different reasons why the opposition did not support the U.S. sanctions. The most important of these reasons is that the sanctions could allow the government to "change the subject and take attention away from the economic crisis and the lack of support for Maduro." (Diaz & Miroff, 2014, para. 20). In a similar way, the Latin American governments also disagree with the sanctions because they would not only intrude in Venezuela's internal affairs but they would disregard the efforts made by the Latin American governments and the Vatican (South America, 2014).

The U.S. newspapers also discuss the influence of the Cuban government in Venezuela and the rejection of this influence by a significant portion of the Venezuelan population. It is important to point out that these issues are almost absolutely absent in Venezuelan newspapers. Victoria Burnett and William Newman present these problems in their story "Protesting in Venezuela, With Antipathy Toward Cuba's Government," published in *The New York Times* on March 25, 2014. The story says that many of the demonstrators blamed the conflict on the close and interdependent relationship between the Venezuelan and the Cuban governments. The protesters argued that, since 1998, Cuba has taken advantage of Venezuelan oil and has imposed a radical form of socialism in the South American country. Some of the members of the opposition even went to the point of saying that the Venezuelan military operations were controlled by Cuban officials. Others added that Cuba had "infiltrators" who directed the course

of the protests (Burnett & Newman, 2014). One of the protesters to make this claim was Ruben Izquierdo, who is quoted saying: “You can hear their accents. I’ve seen it, they direct the opposition” (Burnett & Newman, 2014, para. 10). Like citizens, leaders of the opposition also pronounced themselves against the influence of Cuba. Ex-lawmaker Maria Corina Machado, for example, said that the Castro Brothers were behind the decision of the government to displace her from her position in Congress (Burnett & Newman, 2014).

Burnett and Newman inform that the major cause of frustration and resentment among protesters is the deal according to which Venezuela is required to send about four million dollars’ worth of crude oil to Cuba each year. In exchange, the Caribbean island is required to send doctors, scientists, coaches, and other specialists to the South American country. Although many protesters disapprove of this deal, Burnett and Newman point out that many Venezuelans of the lower classes actually value the presence of Cuban specialists (Burnett and Newman, 2014).

Now that the thematic content has been discussed, it is important to talk about the language used. Although most of the Venezuelan newspapers remain objective by using neutral terms and by avoiding commentary, some of the stories, in particular the ones published in *El País*, use language charged with opinion. For instance, in his article “¿Qué está en juego en Venezuela?” (What is at stake in Venezuela?), Moises Naim writes the following sentence: “El gobierno Venezolano usa el poder para comprar votos, encarcelar opositores o cerrar canales de televisión no para crear prosperidad para todos. La carestía, el miedo y la desesperanza se han vuelto insoportables”. (The Venezuelan government uses its power to buy votes, imprison members of the opposition, or close TV channels, not to create prosperity for everyone. The shortages, the fear, and the despair have become unbearable) (Naim, 2014, para.4). In this

sentence, Naim not only openly expresses his opinion about the government but also uses the word “unbearable” which is clearly charged with criticism (Naim, 2014, para.4). In a similar way, the author of the *El País*’ article makes the following remark: “Frente a las legítimas protestas ciudadanas, el régimen ha recurrido a una brutalidad desmedida. Los grupos paramilitares, los secuestros, las torturas y los allanamientos ilegales retrotraen a los tiempos más negros de América Latina. Ante todo esto, el silencio de los países vecinos resulta ominoso. La crisis venezolana ha ratificado la absoluta inoperancia de la Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA), donde el Gobierno de Caracas se garantiza lealtades a base de petrodólares (cada vez más escasos) e intimidación (ahí está la ruptura de relaciones con Panamá y la suspensión del pago de sus deudas).” (In front of the legitimate citizen protests, the regime has opted for disproportionate brutality. The paramilitary groups, the kidnaps, the tortures and the illegal raids hark back to the darkest times of Latin America. In front of all of this, the silence of the neighboring countries is dreadful. The Venezuelan crisis has ratified the absolute uselessness of the Organization of American States, in which the Caracas’ government can guarantee loyalty through petrodollars (more and more scarce) and intimidation (which would explain why Venezuela and Panama broke diplomatic relations and why Venezuela has suspended the payment of its debt) (Parálisis, 2014, para. 3). Once again, this sentence is full of criticism not only against the Venezuelan government, but also against the other governments in Latin America. The author defends the protest by describing it as “legitimate” and shows his disapproval against the government, which is described as using “disproportionate brutality”. In addition, the author uses the word “dreadful” to refer to the lack of intervention of the other governments in Latin America and the word “uselessness” to describe the operations of the OAS (Parálisis, 2014, para. 3).

Even though *El País* was clearly the most opinionated newspaper, one of the headlines of *El Nacional* also reveals the author's disapproval of the actions taken by the government. In the headline: "Venezuela: La libertad de expresión bajo acecho paramilitar" (Venezuela: Freedom of expression under paramilitary stalking) the author uses the words "paramilitary" and "stalking" to describe the different methods that the government, and especially the governmental supporters, used to control the media coverage of the protest (Venezuela: La libertad de expresión bajo acecho paramilitar, 2014). Unlike this story, most of the stories published in *El Nacional* are objective and do not contain any language charged with either a positive or a negative meaning. One of the stories that show the overall neutrality of *El Nacional* is "Marcha terminó con detención masiva de estudiantes" ("Protest ended with massive detention of students") published on May 15. Even though the story talks about the unjustified massive detention of students after a protest in front of the palace of Altamira in Caracas, a very controversial issue, Emily Avendaño keeps her writing neutral and attributes all the opinions to authoritative sources (Avendaño, 2014).

As hypothesized, the stories published in American newspapers are presented in a completely objective and neutral way. In fact, none of the stories presents any type of commentary or extreme language and all the articles attribute strong opinions and unconfirmed information to specific sources. While *El País*'s discussion of the hesitant intervention of the Latin American countries is full of opinion and harsh criticism, the article "In Venezuela, Protesters Point to Their Scars," objectively says: "Until recently, most countries in the region had supported Mr. Maduro, said little about the protests or gently urged him toward moderation. But there are growing signs that support for Mr. Maduro in the region is weakening, as some of Venezuela's neighbors show unease with the government's response to the crisis, including the

aggressive treatment of protesters” (Newman, 2014, para.3) As this quote shows, unlike Krauze, Newman limits himself to expose the reaction of the Latin American countries without expressing any type of opinion regarding this issue (Newman, 2014).

The only U.S. article that slightly reveals the opinion of the author is “The Definitive Guide to What's Actually Going on in Venezuela,” published by Marguerite Ward in the blog World.Mic on February 26, 2014 (Ward, 2014). Ward shows her opinion in the very first sentence of her post: “Perhaps even more disturbing than the death, destruction and violence that have ensnared Venezuela is the sweeping prevalence of conflicting reports and false information preventing people from making concrete observations on the country's situation.” (Ward, 2014, para.1). In this sentence, Ward uses the adjective “disturbing” and the verb “ensnared” to describe the violence and lack of accurate reporting in Venezuela, both these words have clearly negative meanings, therefore Ward reveals her rejection of the situation by using them. Later on in the article, Ward talks about the “brutality” with which the Venezuelan military forces reacted to the protest (Ward, 2014, para.21). Although Ward reveals her opinion at the beginning and at the end of the story, the rest of the story is completely objective. It must be said that the fact that Ward presents her opinion in a couple of sentences of the article is not surprising considering that World.Mic is a political blog, and blog stories are usually full of commentary (Ward, 2014).

Another aspect that should be examined as part of this qualitative analysis is the sources used. Even though most of the stories in both Venezuelan and U.S. newspapers attribute the opinions and the unconfirmed facts to authoritative sources, throughout my research I noticed that U.S. newspapers had in general more variety of sources than the Venezuelan ones. The difference in the quantity and variety of sources was particularly evident in the stories related to the U.S. sanctions. The stories published in *El Universal* between May 27, 2014, and May 31,

2014 quoted U.S. government officials such Congress members Ileana Ros-Lethinen and Mario-Diaz Balart, under-secretary of state for Latin America Roberta Jacobson, and secretary of state John Kerry. These stories also quoted political experts like Efe Mark Weisbrot, co-director and expert analyst of the Center of Political and Economic Investigation, and Michael Shifter, director of the Center of Interamerican dialogue secretary (Legisladores, Canciller & Theis, 2014).

On the other hand, the stories published between May 17, 2014, and May 24, 2014, in the *Washington Post*, included direct and indirect quotes from Kerry, policy director at the Council of the Americas Chris Sabatini, Republican senator Marco Rubio, and Jacobsen. On top of quoting these U.S. government officials, the *Washington Post* also quotes other relevant sources like Mexican secretary of state Jose Antonio Meade, President Nicola Maduro, head of PROVEA Marino Alvarado, political scientist at the Central University of Venezuela Rafael Romero, political analyst Carlos Romero, spokesman the Venezuelan United Socialist Party Jorge Rodriguez, and Venezuela expert at the Washington Office on Latin America David Smilde (Partlow, Alonso & Goodman, Diaz-Struck & Miroff, & South America, 2014). As it can be seen from the sources named, even though *EL Universal* used numerous authoritative sources that reveal the opinions of both the U.S. and the Venezuelans governments, the *Washington Post* included sources from other governments such as Mexico and sought the opinion of analysts and experts.

One difference that was not expected was that the U.S. newspapers, in particular *The New York Times*, have more quotes from the Venezuelan citizens that the newspapers in Venezuela. In fact, the Venezuelan articles tend to rely almost completely on official sources. Many of the

investigative pieces published in *The New York Times*, on the other hand, focused on the consequences of the protest for the Venezuelan citizens.

One of the few Venezuelan articles that presents the experiences and impressions of the citizens is “Motorizados armados sembraron terror en varias zonas de Caracas” (Armed motorcyclists caused terror in various neighborhoods in Caracas). This article quotes journalists and other civilians explaining the attacks that the so called “motorizados” executed in different areas of the capital city. Journalist Carmela Longo, for example, explains how she and her son were forced to hide on the floor while the “motorizados” from the National Guard shot the building where she lives. The following paragraphs include quotes from other civilians who were in other parts of the city were when, many hours after the end of the protest, the National Guard started shooting and throwing tear gas in the middle of the night. As can be noticed through these quotes, rather than presenting the official version of the shootings, Mata prefers to expose the experiences of the civilians who actually witnessed the attack of the National Guard (Mata, 2014).

Like Mata’s stories, “In Venezuela, Protest Ranks Grow Broader” also presents the human side of one of the many protests that took place in February in the city of San Cristobal, the main center of the opposition. The story explains the causes of that particular protest. It also describes how the citizens organized themselves to fight the National Forces. A very interesting aspect about this particular story is that it emphasized the fact that most of the people participating in the protests were just regular citizens who were tired of the shortages, the insecurity, the limitations to the freedom of expression, and the general economic crisis (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014). Carlos Alvarez, one of the protesters, was quoted saying:

“We’re normal people, but we’re all affected by what’s happening. Look, I’ve got a rock in my hand and I’m the distributor for Adidas eyewear in Venezuela.” (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014, para. 4). Newman’s story also offers the testimony of Isbeth Zambrano, a woman who was “casually guarding a beer crate full of firebombs” in front of her apartment (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014, para. 13). While Zambrano was explaining that she wanted Maduro to go away because she wanted more freedom, less crime, and more access to medicine, her neck was covered with a diaper soaked in vinegar that she said she was wearing to limit the effects of the tear gas in case there was another attack by the government (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014).

Continuing with the detailed description of the protest of February 24 in San Cristobal, Newman reports that he went into Teresa Contreras house while she was watching TV. Although the streets were completely covered with barricades and there were clashes in different parts of the city, Contreras flipped through the channels but could not find any sign of news coverage of the protest that was happening right in front of her house (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014). Contreras told Newman that the absence of coverage was the best proof of the government’s control over the media (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014).

Alvarez’s, Zambrano’s, and Contreras’ quotes were just three of the many civilians’ testimonies that Newman included in his detailed description of the protest in San Cristobal (Newman, In Venezuela, 2014). Through these direct and indirect quotes from the citizens, Newman is able to make the reader understand how serious the protest was.

The last aspect of the news stories I would like to mention is their length. After qualitatively analyzing over 85 news stories published in both Venezuelan and American newspapers, I did not find any significant differences in the length of the stories. In fact, both

countries' newspapers published stories as shorter than 130 words, and longer than 2,500 words. Out of all the stories analyzed, 33 were between 600 and 1,000 words long, 23 were between 300 and 600 words long, 14 were under 300 words long, 13 were between 1,000 and 1,500 words long, and only 3 were over 1,500 words long. The longest articles were usually found in *El País*, *El Nacional*, or *The New York Times*. On the other hand, the shorter stories were spread out throughout the different newspapers.

In sum, although there were some differences related to the language used, the variety of sources, and some of the issues exposed, the coverage of the protest by Venezuelan and American newspapers was in general fairly similar. The results of the analysis of the American newspapers were consistent with the expectations. In fact, the vast majority of the stories were presented in an objective, accurate, and thorough way, and they were supported with authoritative sources.

Instead, the results obtained after the examination of the Venezuelan newspapers differed a little from the expectations. Indeed, when the project was started, it was hypothesized to find that the coverage by Venezuelan newspapers was seriously polarized. For example, it was predicted that the anti-government newspapers were going to show strong criticism against the government and were going to limit the number of quotes taken from government officials. In a similar way, it was also anticipated that the pro-government newspapers were going to show open support for the actions taken by the government. However, the results of the analysis led to the conclusion that while some of the Venezuelan articles included some commentary and opinion, the majority were primarily objective.

The most unexpected result was that the U.S. newspapers had more quotes from civilians than the Venezuelan ones. These results were surprising because since the Venezuelan government was constantly trying to prevent international media from entering the country, it would be logical to conclude that it was harder for international reporters to get in contact with the Venezuelan people.

Conclusion

The political polarization of the media in Venezuela has been, in part, a consequence of the “media culture” that characterizes the Venezuelan society (Block, 2013, p.272). In fact, as Block (2013) explains, throughout the 21st century the media have been the main way in which Venezuelans have participated in the political life of the country. Taking advantage of the “media culture,” both the government and the opposition have transformed television channels, radio stations, and newspapers into political tools used to create consent among the citizens (Block, 2013, p.272).

As it has been explored throughout this paper, the transformation of the media into a political weapon has led to two major consequences: the imposition of legislation and policies that have limited the freedom of expression, and the creation of a form of political coverage that is fractional, superficial, and sometimes even unprofessional (Bermudez, 2011).

Even though the polarization of the media had its origins in politics, it has come to involve many other aspects of the Venezuelan society. In fact, the division of the media has become so radical that different media outlets have started to limit their coverage to issues and

events that only appeal to a specific section of society. For instance, while some television channels and radio stations target the elite class in particular, others choose to focus only on the working class (Bermudez, 2011).

As Bermudez (2011) points out in her study, the general polarization of the media, combined with a form of reporting that is not objective and not in-depth, have caused Venezuelans to remain partially uninformed and to lose trust with the national media. In fact, while television, radio, and newspapers have traditionally been the most popular means of information and political participation, in the past years Venezuelans have started to turn their eyes towards other forms of media, such as Twitter and YouTube, that give them the possibility to be more directly involved (Bermudez, 2011).

After analyzing 86 articles published in both U.S. and Venezuelan newspapers, It was possible to conclude that some of the differences in coverage were related to the issues discussed, the value given to the sources, and the variety of the sources used. For instance, the Venezuelan newspapers that support the government, such as *Últimas Noticias*, had in general more quotes from government officials than from leaders of the opposition. On the other hand, the newspapers of the opposition were more balanced in their use of quotes. Another difference was that while the American newspapers remain objective for the most part, some of the articles published in Venezuelan newspapers revealed the opinion of the author. For example, some of the stories from *El País* revealed their opinion about the protest by using language charged with commentary. Furthermore, although both Venezuelan and U.S. newspapers were in general balanced in their use of sources, the U.S. newspapers presented more variety of sources than the Venezuelan ones. Talking about the issues discussed, while the Venezuelan newspapers emphasized the strategies used by the government to limit the freedom of the press during the

protest, the U.S. newspapers focused on the dissatisfaction among protesters that resulted from the strong influence of Cuba in Venezuela. The most surprising result was that the newspapers in the U.S., especially *The New York Times*, had more testimonies from the Venezuelan citizens than the newspapers in Venezuela. This result was surprising because before starting the analysis I hypothesized that the policies imposed by the government would make it almost impossible for international media to get in contact with the Venezuelan people.

In spite of these differences, the coverage of the protest by Venezuelan newspapers was not substantially less objective, less accurate, or less detailed than the coverage by U.S. newspapers. Since all the articles used for the qualitative content analysis were collected from the web, it is possible to deduce that the Venezuelan web has not been as affected by the government's policies as the more traditional forms of media. The lack of influence of the government on the web might be the reason why Venezuelans have gradually moved from television and radio to the internet.

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