

Broadcasting Populist Leadership: Hugo Chávez and *Aló Presidente*

EDUARDO FRAJMAN*

Abstract. The transcripts of the television programme *Aló Presidente*, the centrepiece of President Hugo Chávez's media strategy, provide insight into the different ways in which his movement promoted the image of its leader and sought to solidify his emotionally charged connection with the Venezuelan masses. The study outlines the dynamics behind the changing format and content of *Aló Presidente* and places it within the context of earlier research on populist media use in Latin America. Although similar to its predecessors, the programme was a unique creation of Chavismo, designed to balance Chávez's knack for improvisation with a structure designed to curb his excesses and keep him on message. This led to occasional tension between Chávez and the media professionals charged with the programme's production. The article provides a corrective to inaccurate treatments in the media and scholarly literature, and offers new information on *Aló Presidente* to facilitate future comparative studies.

Keywords: Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, *Aló Presidente*, populism, mass media

Populist movements tend to have at their helm charismatic leaders who are able to promote themselves effectively through the mass media.¹ Media proficiency has become increasingly important for politicians of all stripes. Across the political spectrum, 'image is paramount' and 'political leaders must

Eduardo Frajman is assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at Aurora University. Email: efrajman@gmail.com.

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¹ The term 'populism' is here understood as 'a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers': see Kurt Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics', *Comparative Politics*, 34: 1 (2001), p. 14; Gianpietro Mazzoleni, 'Populism and the Media', in Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 49; Silvio Waisbord, 'Media Populism: Neopopulism in Latin America', in Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart and Bruce Horsfield (eds.), *The Media and Neopopulism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 201; and Taylor C. Boas, 'Television and Neopopulism in Latin America: Media Effects in Brazil and Peru', *Latin American Research Review*, 40: 2 (2005), p. 46.

be good “actors” and master the tools of drama.’² But media savvy is particularly essential for populists: they tend to be political outsiders who lack the support of an established party base and seek to interact with their followers in as direct a fashion as possible.³ The history of Latin American populism abounds with great media manipulators: foundational national leaders of the 1930s and 1940s such as Lázaro Cárdenas, Getúlio Vargas and Juan Perón; ‘neopopulists’ of the 1990s such as Carlos Menem, Alberto Fujimori and Abdalá Bucaram; and more recent left-leaning leaders such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The literature on Latin American populism is vast, yet experts point to a lack of detailed studies of the media mechanisms that populists use to transmit their messages and cultivate the attachment of the masses.⁴ Carlos de la Torre, for example, suggests that scholars emphasise rigid categories that can be used for comparative studies at the expense of a deeper understanding of the different manifestations of populism, in ‘different historical moments and different political cultures’.⁵

This study explores one recent populist leader, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, and the key media instrument he employed for communicating with his supporters: the television programme *Aló Presidente*. The Venezuelan government allows free access to the great majority of transcripts of the programme.⁶ This offers an excellent opportunity for an in-depth analysis of their content, with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of Chávez’s ‘semi-religious rapport with the masses’.⁷ The study presents some of the findings of the first scholarly reading of the entire corpus of available transcripts, spanning most of Chávez’s tenure in power (1999–2011), after which Chávez effectively stopped leading the programme due to his deteriorating health. The methodology employed is qualitative content analysis, which encourages flexibility in focus and allows for ‘categories to emerge out of data’.⁸

² Mazzoleni, ‘Populism and the Media’, p. 52.

³ Linda Bos, Wouter van der Brug and Claes de Vreese, ‘How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders’, *Political Communication*, 28: 2 (2011), p. 182; Boas, ‘Television and Neopopulism in Latin America’, p. 30.

⁴ Mariano Ben Plotkin, ‘Perón y el peronismo: un ensayo bibliográfico’, *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 2: 1 (1991); Mazzoleni, ‘Populism and the Media’, p. 50.

⁵ Carlos de la Torre, ‘Masas, pueblo y democracia: un balance crítico de los debates sobre el nuevo populismo’, *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 23: 1 (2003), p. 64.

⁶ Comprising over 20,000 pages of text and accompanied by several hundred hours of video recordings, the transcripts can be found on the website of the Venezuelan Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información (Popular Power Ministry for Communication and Information), at www.alopresidente.gob.ve. All internet references were last checked in May 2014.

⁷ ‘In Hugo’s Hands’, *Economist*, 12 April 2006.

⁸ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 542.

Aló Presidente was the centrepiece of Chávez's media strategy.⁹ It is, however, poorly understood. Several recent studies have explored the main features of Chávez's discourse, but they barely delve into his main tool for transmitting his message to the masses. Journalistic accounts show no understanding of the programme's true nature or intent, and often assert that it was merely a platform for Chávez to indulge his love of the spotlight and seemingly unappeasable loquaciousness. The current literature, in short, provides no reliable information for comparative research on the similarities or differences between *Aló Presidente* and comparable media mechanisms used by other populists across the region.

In order to counter the existing perfunctory accounts and provide a more detailed understanding of *Aló Presidente*, the discussion below locates the programme within the history of populism and its use of the media in Latin America. On the one hand, Chávez's main rhetorical style shared with the authoritarian populist regimes in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s the goal of propagating what Kirk Hawkins calls a 'cosmovision': 'less specific ... but more profound and unconscious than an ideology'.¹⁰ On the other, it was similar to the more recent neopopulist wave of the 1990s in its neglect of organised political movements in favour of the atomised masses, which made effective use of the mass media all the more imperative. Unlike the early populists, however, Chávez could not control the national media through censorship, and unlike the neopopulists, he did not (or could not) develop a close relationship with the mainstream media in his country. His government's communication strategy relied heavily on *Aló Presidente* for several ends: to shape the political debate, to publicise the accomplishments of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution, to attack the opposition and make surprising announcements, and to strengthen the bond between leader and followers. Given its specific historical context and the particular qualities of its leader, Chavismo's unique features were inevitably reflected in its flagship programme.

Two sets of findings from the textual analysis are then presented. The first outlines the format and structure of *Aló Presidente*, and describes major changes to these over time, hitherto ignored by the scholarly literature. It shows that the programme served different purposes throughout its existence.

⁹ Elías Pino, *El divino Bolívar: ensayos sobre una religión republicana* (Madrid: Los Liberos de la Catarata, 2003), p. 214; Andrés Cañizales, *Pensar la sociedad civil: actores sociales, espacio público y medios en Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2007), p. 50; Boris Muñoz, 'Cesarismo mediático', *Comunicación*, 147 (2009), p. 9, available at www.gumilla.org/biblioteca/bases/biblio/texto/COM2009147_5-11.pdf.

¹⁰ Kirk A. Hawkins, 'La organización populista: los Círculos Bolivarianos en Venezuela', in Carlos de la Torre and Enrique Peruzzotti (eds.), *El retorno del pueblo: populismo y nuevas democracias en América Latina* (Quito: FLACSO, 2008), p. 128.

At first it was primarily a phone-in show that allowed individuals to speak to the leader and focused on highlighting the government's achievements. Media professionals mediated the exchanges on air. Gradually, particularly following the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002, the emphasis turned more to the image of the leader, and his interaction with his followers became more unmediated. Crowds around the set began to be the norm, with many of those present becoming the beneficiaries of the government's largesse on national television. This detailed account should serve scholars interested in comparing different television or radio programmes used by other Latin American populists, past or present, and their evolution over time.

The subsequent section describes the strategy employed to connect the leader with the masses: a combination of various propaganda techniques and Chávez's trademark improvised monologues, which notoriously could last for several hours. Populism seeks to present the leader as a normal person, no different from the individuals who make up his mass of supporters – an outsider to power, a 'fish in water'.¹¹ At the same time, his position as leader must be unquestioned, as his hold on power relies on the ability to mobilise the masses that will lend legitimacy to his goals through a 'participatory' or 'plebiscitary' political process.¹² Different populist leaders, depending on their personalities and the political conditions with which they contended, have used a variety of strategies to achieve a balance between the two. In order to deal with this duality, *Aló Presidente* relied on Chávez's facility with the spotlight, his 'gift of the gab', his extensive knowledge of Venezuelan folk culture, songs and food. These qualities are crucial for understanding the phenomenon of Chavismo and for differentiating it and its leader from previous instances of Latin American populism. Moreover, to complement the leader, the broadcasts were structured in ways that kept the discussion on track and ensured the intended messages were not left aside. The transcripts clearly show that melding spontaneity and structure was not always easy, and occasionally was the source of visible tension between Chávez and the media professionals he entrusted to maintain his media platform. While the leader preferred to ad-lib and follow his momentary whims, his producers found different ways to manage his excesses and keep him on message. This insight should likewise open the door to comparative research on the relationship between populist leaders and their media operatives, which has not received much scholarly attention.

¹¹ Steve Ellner, 'The Contrasting Variants of the Populism of Hugo Chávez and Alberto Fujimori', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 35: 1 (2003), p. 146.

¹² René Antonio Mayorga, 'Outsiders and Neopopulism: The Road to Plebiscitary Democracy', in Scott Mainwaring, Ana María Bejarano and Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez (eds.), *The Crisis of Democratic Representation in the Andes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 141.

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Populism, as understood here, implies the presence of charismatic leadership.¹³ Margaret Canovan asserts that the populist 'mood' is closely tied to 'the tendency for heightened emotions to be focused on a charismatic leader'.¹⁴ Populists seek repeated direct interactions with the masses and therefore are particularly media-conscious and media-savvy.¹⁵ This points to the importance of the image-makers, the media professionals who fashion the iconography of a particular leader. In populist politics, media professionals perform, according to Kenneth Roberts, 'functions that were previously labour-intensive affairs within the domain of mass party organizations'.¹⁶ Furthermore, populism sees the state as the centre of media production, with a suspicious nod to the market and civil society, and a clear dichotomy between 'popular-national' and 'foreign oligarchic' interests in the media.¹⁷ This has manifested itself in different ways in Latin America, as a function of particular historical environments.

Latin American populism in the 1930s and 1940s was more likely to employ authoritarian tactics, and populist leaders openly borrowed propaganda strategies from Italian fascism and German National Socialism.¹⁸ Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas pioneered the use of propaganda in the region. As a presidential candidate he travelled across his country, more than any Mexican politician before him, affecting the dress and speech of the poor peasant farmers and thus gaining their sympathy and trust.¹⁹ Once in power, he created the Departamento de Prensa y Propaganda (Department of Press

¹³ As originally conceptualised by Max Weber, charismatic leadership is 'personal authority deriving from devotion to the specific sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns or order revealed or obtained by him': Max Weber (ed. Talcott Parsons), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1947), p. 328.

¹⁴ Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, 47: 1 (1999), p. 6. See also Roberts, 'Populism, Political Conflict and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America', p. 132; Liah Greenfeld, 'Reflections on Two Charismas', *British Journal of Sociology*, 36: 1 (1985), p. 122.

¹⁵ Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept', p. 14.

¹⁶ Roberts, 'Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization', p. 136. See also Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart and Bruce Horsfield, 'Power to the Media Managers', in Mazzoleni, Stewart and Horsfield (eds.), *The Media and Neopopulism*, p. 234.

¹⁷ Silvio Waisbord, 'Democracy, Journalism, and Latin American Populism', *Journalism*, 14: 4 (2013), p. 507.

¹⁸ Charles Ameringer, *The Socialist Impulse: Latin America in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2009), p. 102; Félix Luna, *Perón y su tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1989), p. 23; Juan Alberto Fraiman, 'Medios de comunicación masiva y populismo en América latina: posibles articulaciones para analizar los casos en el peronismo argentino, el getulismo brasileño y el cardenismo mexicano', *Razón y Palabra*, 70 (2009), available at www.razonypalabra.org.mx/10%20Fraiman_revisado.pdf.

¹⁹ Pere Foix, *Cárdenas: su actuación, su país* (Mexico City: Fronda, 1947), p. 99.

and Propaganda) and, with a monopoly of the radio waves and clever use of propaganda documentaries shown in cinemas, promoted a vision of the government that revolved around the leader as saviour of the nation.²⁰ In Brazil, Getúlio Vargas built his own press and propaganda unit, the Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda (DIP), under the direction of his propaganda chef, Laurival Fontes, and likewise charged it with the task of promoting 'the image of the dictator as the great benefactor of the working class'.²¹ Fontes directed the production of dozens of short documentaries, which were shown at cinemas before feature films to promote the accomplishments of Vargas' Estado Novo.²² Commercial stations were mandated to broadcast the daily radio programme *Hora do Brasil* – 'a compendium of music, general news, uplifting speeches, tips, and anything else deemed appropriate by the DIP'.²³ A direct ancestor of *Aló Presidente*, it was the main mechanism for establishing a bond between leader and masses.²⁴ Competing versions of events often met with repression or censorship.²⁵ In Argentina, Juan Domingo Perón's cultural strategy centred on the mass media, cinema and radio especially, giving his tenure in power a 'media aesthetic'.²⁶ Images of Perón and his wife, Eva 'Evita' Duarte, often consorting with film or sports personalities, were ubiquitous. Some scholars argue that Eva Perón herself deserves to be characterised as a charismatic leader.²⁷

In the 1990s, with the advent of democracy in the region, neopopulists sought to create close ties with the private media in order to ensure ample coverage and, if possible, media bias in their favour. The targets of their media campaigns were the unorganised segments of the public, especially the poor, who would be responsive to their anti-establishment calls.²⁸ Peru's Alberto Fujimori expertly radiated an image to the cameras that sought to endear him to the general public.²⁹ He was an effective communicator who presented

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102; Eduardo J. Correa, *El balance del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Acción, 1941), p. 354.

²¹ R. S. Rose, *One of the Forgotten Things: Getúlio Vargas and Brazilian Social Control, 1930–1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 82. ²² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²³ Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97; Doris Fagundes Haussen, 'Radio and Populism in Brazil: The 1930s and 1940s', *Television and New Media*, 6: 3 (2005), pp. 252–3.

²⁵ Levine, *Father of the Poor?*, p. 40; Fagundes, 'Radio and Populism in Brasil', p. 257.

²⁶ Alberto Ciria, *Política y cultura popular: la Argentina peronista, 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Flor, 1983), p. 259; Mirta Varela, 'Peronismo y medios: control político, industria nacional y gusto popular' (2007), p. 2, available at www.rehime.com.ar/escritos/documentos/idxalfa/v/varela/Mirta%20Varela%20-%20Peronismo%20y%20medios.pdf.

²⁷ Ciria, *Política y cultura popular*, p. 305; Ricardo del Barco, *El régimen peronista, 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1983), p. 77.

²⁸ Boas, 'Television and Neopopulism in Latin America', p. 33.

²⁹ Bruce H. Kay, 'Fujipopulism' and the Liberal State in Peru', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 38: 4 (1996), pp. 55–98.

his ideas in easily understandable language, while his wardrobe and bearing identified him as a 'man of the people'.³⁰ As he sought to extend his time in power, his corrupt dealings with the country's media conglomerates eventually led to his disgrace and exile.³¹ Peru had perhaps the most crowded roster of populists at the time: both Fujimori's predecessor, Alan García, and his successor, Alejandro Toledo, used populist tactics and discourse.³² In Brazil, Fernando Collor de Mello ran for the presidency on an anti-elite platform, but remained 'vague on ideology' while emphasising his ties to the public through his love of sports and popular culture. His popularity was much enhanced by the support he received from his country's largest media conglomerates.³³ Carlos Menem in Argentina and Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador used similar strategies, though with less support from their respective national media.³⁴ Chávez would follow their strategy of broadcasting their 'governmental actions as a televised show that represented power as the dramatization of nonpolitical spaces of popular culture such as football and mass entertainment'.³⁵ These neopopulists supported free-market economic policies that, to differing degrees, earned the anger of some groups of initial supporters.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, the left-leaning populists who came to power as a result of region-wide disillusionment with neoliberalism – starting with Chávez in 1998, followed by Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and others – have had less success in courting the mainstream media in their countries. In Argentina, for instance, the love affair between Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the country's major newspapers turned sour in early 2008, during a period of clashes between the government and protesters from the agricultural sector. Kirchner then implemented legislation designed to silence critics in the media.³⁷ Venezuela and Ecuador, likewise, saw in the last decade attempts at the expropriation of private media assets or the denial of broadcasting licenses to private interests.³⁸ The new generation of populists have reverted to the strategy of Perón and Vargas and have

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³¹ Catherine M. Conaghan, 'Cashing in on Authoritarianism: Media Collusion in Fujimori's Peru', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7: 1 (2002), pp. 116–8.

³² John Crabtree, 'Populisms Old and New: The Peruvian Case', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 19: 2 (2000), p. 165; Boas, 'Television and Neopopulism in Latin America', p. 35.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 33; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), p. 316.

³⁴ Carlos de la Torre, 'Neopopulism in Contemporary Ecuador: The Case of Bucaram's Use of the Mass Media', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 12: 4 (1999), p. 557.

³⁵ De la Torre, 'Neopopulism in Contemporary Ecuador', p. 564. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 557.

³⁷ Gustavo Valle, 'Los Kirchner vs. Clarín', *Letrillas*, 2010, available at www.letraslibres.com/revista/letrillas/los-kirchner-vs-clarin.

³⁸ Waisbord, 'Democracy, Journalism, and Latin American Populism', p. 512.

pursued an increase in their control of the media by emphasising the conflict between the ‘popular’ on one side and the foreign and elite on the other.³⁹ Chávez and Correa forced private channels to broadcast a large amount of government material as public service announcements.⁴⁰ They also expended much effort and resources on media products created by the government and featuring the presidents themselves as stars and targets of adulation. *Aló Presidente* is the most important recent example of this.

Even in comparison to earlier populists, Chávez’s tenure in power was seen as highly media-conscious.⁴¹ ‘The main key to Chávez’s enthronement’, according to Enrique Krauze, was ‘his handling, through the media, of his colossal persona’.⁴² As the core of his media strategy, *Aló Presidente* exhibited many of the characteristics of the populist media developed by its predecessors in earlier decades. This, however, is largely ignored by most media commentators on the programme, who focus on the improvised manner and colloquial language that dominated the broadcasts. Observers identify, and frequently mock, the seeming lack of structure or organisation, with epithets such as ‘rambling’, ‘clown show’, ‘car-crash TV’, a ‘reality programme’ that ‘goes on forever’.⁴³ The *Encyclopaedia of Political Communication* says of *Aló Presidente* only that ‘Chávez sings patriotic songs, addresses topics of the day, and makes important decisions’.⁴⁴ ‘Speaking live, without a teleprompter, Chávez gabs about whatever catches his fancy’, claims one feature.⁴⁵ ‘The show’, conclude the authors of a biography of the Venezuelan leader, ‘is completely unscripted, relying solely on what

³⁹ Carlos de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 189; Enrique Patriau, ‘El populismo en campaña! Discursos televisivos de candidatos presidenciales en la Región Andina (2005–2006)’, *Colombia Internacional*, 76 (2012), pp. 293–325.

⁴⁰ Carlos de la Torre, ‘El tecnopopulismo de Rafael Correa: ¿es compatible el carisma con la tecnocracia?’, *Latin American Research Review*, 48: 1 (2013), p. 32.

⁴¹ Michael Reid, *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America’s Soul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 176; Hal Weitzman, *Latin Lessons: How South America Stopped Listening to the United States and Started Prospering* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012), p. 196.

⁴² Enrique Krauze, *Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), p. 476.

⁴³ ‘Political Agent of Change, the Latin American Edition’, *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2008; Krauze, *Redeemers*, p. 476; Weitzman, *Latin Lessons*, p. 196; Alma Guillermoprieto, ‘Don’t Cry for Me, Venezuela’, *New York Review of Books*, 52: 15 (2005), available at www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2005/oct/06/dont-cry-for-me-venezuela/.

⁴⁴ Thomas Fischer, ‘Chávez, Hugo’, in Lynda Lee Kaid and Christine Holtz-Bacha (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*, vol. 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), p. 97.

⁴⁵ *Washington Post*, ‘“Aló Presidente,” Are You Still Talking?’, 30 May 2009.

Chávez decides to improvise.’⁴⁶ ‘He makes it up as he goes along’, declares another expert.⁴⁷

In fact, the transcripts clearly show that *Aló Presidente* was designed as a propaganda tool. This can be seen from the mechanisms and techniques used during the broadcasts, discussed below, but also by Chávez’s statements on the air. At the start of the inaugural broadcast he declared: ‘The reason for *Aló Presidente* is the imperative necessity for the President of Venezuela ... to be in contact with the great majority of Venezuelans.’⁴⁸ Much lip service was paid to the off-the-cuff nature of the proceedings. On the air, Chávez and his guests repeatedly highlighted the unscripted, conversational aspects of each broadcast. The goal was to listen to the people, to communicate with ‘the sovereign’.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the programme was, by Chávez’s admission, a key part of the effort to ‘fill up the Revolutionary process with ideological content’.⁵⁰ On the air, Chávez proudly stated his love for ‘the science of social communication’ and proclaimed that he had ‘lived it and played with it my whole life’.⁵¹ He made no secret of what he had learned: in one episode he instructed a member of his communications team to inform the people more effectively by being ‘persistent, persistent. That is the use of repetition. Repetition, repetition. That is one of the fundamental bases of propaganda: repetition, repetition.’⁵² He told another that the revolution’s accomplishments at helping the poor must be ‘explained, I repeat, with ... the technique of information soaking [*empape*] ... This must be repeated 100 times. Repeat it, explain it, repeat it again; make dolls, drawings, pocketbooks for leaders to carry; spokespeople, explaining it on every street corner.’⁵³ When he complained that television programmes produced by his government were ‘repetitive, repetitive, repetitive’, he meant only that they did not show enough of the revolution’s accomplishments.⁵⁴ He had a mental list of quotes from his favourite thinkers and historical figures; when he forgot one of his usual Bolívar sayings on air, he ordered his aide to ‘engrave it on a little token’

⁴⁶ Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera, *Hugo Chávez: The Definitive Biography of Venezuela’s Controversial President* (New York: Random House, 2007). See also Guillermo Morón, *Memorial de agravios* (Caracas: Alfadil, 2005), p. 228; Rachel Nolan, ‘Must Watch Television, Literally’, *New York Times Magazine*, 5 June 2012, p. 68.

⁴⁷ Interview with Jon Lee Anderson, ‘The Hugo Chávez Show’, *Frontline*, 3 March 2009, available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/hugochavez/interviews/anderson.html#3.

⁴⁸ Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información (MPPCI), ‘*Aló Presidente*, no. 1’, p. 1, available at www.alopresidente.gob.ve/materia_alo/25/p-31/. For brevity’s sake, all quotes from *Aló Presidente* are referenced by the number of the broadcast in which they appear and the page number in the transcript available on the MPPCI website. All quotes from the programme are my translations from the original Spanish. On some occasions, punctuation changes have been made to correct grammatical errors in the transcripts or to preserve the intended meaning of a statement.

⁴⁹ No. 87, p. 1.

⁵⁰ No. 13, p. 44.

⁵¹ No. 30, p. 31.

⁵² No. 157, p. 35.

⁵³ No. 310, p. 73.

⁵⁴ No. 359, pp. 136–7.

because 'I am going to memorise it'.⁵⁵ He also took it upon himself to invent slogans for the people to sing: 'Alert! Alert! Alert!', he bellowed, 'that Bolívar's sword walks across Latin America!'⁵⁶

The content of Chávez's message in speeches and on *Aló Presidente* – the language, symbols and ideas he used to promote his revolution – have received significant scholarly attention. Venezuelan scholars have discussed in depth Chávez's use of his own persona and of Venezuelan history as part of the key to his appeal.⁵⁷ Recent works in English have followed their lead, often relying on transcripts of the programme.⁵⁸ They have found, as Kirk Hawkins puts it, 'a populist worldview, or a Manichean outlook that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring minority'.⁵⁹ Like earlier populists, Chávez used *Aló Presidente* as a ritual to periodically raise the emotional intensity of his following and strengthen the mystical link between himself and his supporters.⁶⁰ Like Perón, who promoted the paradoxical message that Peronism had brought an era of prosperity and contentment to Argentina while the country was simultaneously under constant threat due to imperialist aggression, Chávez celebrated the new era that his revolution had brought about while constantly warning of the impending counter-offensives of his enemies.⁶¹

Indeed, it was in his treatment of the powerful sectors of Venezuelan society that the extremes of Chávez's rhetorical style became most visible.⁶² 'Privileged elites used to govern here', he stated during one broadcast, 'and those elites

⁵⁵ No. 71, p. 22.

⁵⁶ E.g., no. 109, p. 8. He also purportedly improved on Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's call 'motherland or death' ('patria o muerte') with the mystifying 'motherland, socialism or death' ('patria, socialismo o muerte'), which seems to imply that his followers must choose one of the three – clearly not the intended message. Whether any of his aides ever pointed this out is unclear. What is plain is Chávez's intent on creating some immortal words for history to remember him by: 'It is a profound concept – philosophical, definitional, ideological, moral, ethical – which calls for endless battle' (no. 272, p. 17).

⁵⁷ Adriana Chirinos and Lourdes Molero de Cabeza, 'La imagen del yo y del otro: construcción de identidades en los discursos de toma de posesión de los presidentes de Venezuela y Brasil', *Boletín de Lingüística*, 19: 27 (2007), pp. 70–93; Juan E. Romero, 'El discurso político de Hugo Chávez (1996–1999)', *Espacio Abierto*, 10: 2 (2001), pp. 229–45.

⁵⁸ Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 53–65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29; see also Marco Aponte Moreno, 'Metaphors in Hugo Chávez's Political Discourse: Conceptualizing Nation, Revolution, and Opposition', unpubl. PhD diss., City University of New York, 2008, pp. 22–3, available at http://elies.rediris.es/elies27/aponte_moreno_final_thesis.pdf.

⁶⁰ For comparison, see de la Torre's discussion of populist leaders Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro, and Juan and Eva Perón: Carlos de la Torre, 'The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms', *Social Research*, 59: 2 (1992), pp. 400–5.

⁶¹ Varela, 'Peronismo y medios', p. 7.

⁶² Reinaldo Cortés, Belisa Méndez and Rosiris Materán, 'Análisis de la estrategia discursiva de Hugo Chávez de cara a la creación del PSUV', *Disertaciones*, 1: 1 (2008), available at <http://revistas.saber.ula.ve/index.php/Disertaciones/article/viewFile/33/13>.

enriched themselves and that is the reason they live so well and the reason they do not like this government.’⁶³ They were spared no insult. On air they were called ‘corrupted and immoral’, ‘bacteria’, a ‘bastard political class’, ‘the devil’, ‘blood-sucking ticks’, ‘irrational’ people who suffer from a ‘psychological ailment’, a ‘tumour’, a ‘diabolic spirit ... that breathes hatred and violence’, a ‘monster’ that is ‘covered in excrement’.⁶⁴ The private media that opposed him was ‘grotesque, inhuman’, like ‘the Ku Klux Klan’; its organisations were ‘terrorists, satanic cults ... obsessed and sick ... [who] poison the minds of the youth’.⁶⁵ When media executives complained about restrictions of freedom of the press, he mocked them as ‘a truck full of squealing pigs’.⁶⁶ Revolution was not an ideological choice, in this view, but a moral imperative to, literally, save the world: ‘There are two options here. There are not five options, nor four. Two options ... We are in the time of the Apocalypse, says the Bible; that is, a time in which one cannot be with God and the Devil at the same time. No, either you are with God or you are with the Devil.’⁶⁷

The side of God was embodied by the leader himself. Chávez identified himself with the people; he was of the people and cared for nothing else, much like fellow populists from Mexico’s Cárdenas in the 1930s to Ecuador’s Correa in more recent times.⁶⁸ José Zúquete, who characterises Chávez’s rhetorical style as ‘missionary politics’, finds that he portrayed himself as ‘an exemplary figure’, a ‘moral archetype’, a man who ‘always lived for his ideal’ and was ‘a model of patriotism’. In addition, Chávez identified himself with ‘the excluded, the downtrodden, and the poor’, and put forward a life story of a ‘simple and common man with humble origins’ while at the same time comparing himself to great historical figures.⁶⁹ He had at his fingertips hundreds of anecdotes from his personal biography and easily moulded them to fit the specific topic he was addressing at the time. He was also well aware that such rhetoric made him vulnerable to criticisms from the opposition. Hence, he made a point of periodically reminding his audience that he was not important, merely an instrument of the people.⁷⁰ He frequently charged the opposition with repeating its lies over and over, so ‘some people might think they are true’, because ‘a lie repeated a hundred times might come to be

⁶³ No. 150, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Respectively, no. 15, p. 4; no. 61, p. 1; no. 89, p. 78; no. 94, p. 24; no. 187, p. 59; no. 88, p. 13; no. 89, p. 8; no. 132, p. 2; no. 130, p. 14; no. 203, p. 8; no. 194, p. 20.

⁶⁵ No. 188, p. 31; no. 130, pp. 21–2. ⁶⁶ No. 166, p. 34.

⁶⁷ No. 33, p. 32. See Hawkins, *Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 58–60.

⁶⁸ Foix, *Cárdenas*, p. 102; de la Torre, ‘El tecnopopulismo de Rafael Correa’, p. 29.

⁶⁹ José Pedro Zúquete, ‘The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez’, *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50: 1 (2008), pp. 98–101; see also Aponte Moreno, ‘Metaphors in Hugo Chávez’s Political Discourse’, pp. 145–8. ⁷⁰ E.g., no. 104, p. 16; no. 266, p. 7.

believed'.⁷¹ Chávez always seemed to believe that he was proclaiming truths, but the strategy he used was precisely the same as that which he claimed to abhor. If something was worth saying, it was worth saying a thousand times.⁷²

A prominent example was the main historical precedent for the revolution: Simón Bolívar. The name of Bolívar is repeatedly mentioned in every single transcript, and multiple connections between Bolívar and Chávez are discussed.⁷³ This feature of Chavismo is well understood and has been discussed extensively in the literature, so it is not elaborated on here. Krauze sums it up neatly: '[Chávez's] takeover of the Bolívar myth [was] complete. All the fantastic strains of popular religiosity, its folk political ideology, ... centred around him.'⁷⁴ Chavismo transformed the Venezuelan veneration of Bolívar into a quasi-religious worldview in which Chávez functioned as messiah, prophet and high priest: 'Therefore today we stand, we march. We finish the century marching in a revolution, a democratic revolution, a peaceful revolution ... [I]t is a Bolivarian Revolution. Bolívar returns with his banner of redemption.'⁷⁵

Chávez appropriated Christianity and the figure of Jesus Christ as much as he did Simón Bolívar. In this respect, he emulated previous populist leaders from Perón to Bucaram.⁷⁶ Zúquete shows that Chávez made constant use of 'invocation of religious rhetoric [that] infuses [his] image with a messianic aura. References and analogies to Christ permeate Chávez's statements.'⁷⁷ He often connected the two, so as to deify Bolívar and humanise Christ. 'Bolívar did not truly die', he proclaimed on *Aló Presidente*, 'He left us in body, but this is a Bolivarian month to revitalise ourselves in the idea of Christ the Redeemer.'⁷⁸ At the same time, he stated that Mary 'was the mother of Christ but not of God', one of several examples that suggest Chávez was interested less in religious dogma and more in the significance of religion for the people.⁷⁹ Chávez was not particularly religious himself and occasionally expressed animosity towards organised religion, like Cárdenas and Vargas before him.⁸⁰ God and all the saints were nevertheless on the side of the revolution, of course, and 'if Christ appeared right now' he would don a 'red beret' like a Chávez supporter.⁸¹ Christ was 'the commander-in-chief' and, after 2005, he was also a socialist who died fighting empire and was

⁷¹ Chávez often compared the opposition to Nazis and accused them of imitating Joseph Goebbels: no. 26, p. 2; no. 222, p. 13. ⁷² No. 34, p. 24.

⁷³ Zúquete, 'The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez', p. 101.

⁷⁴ Krauze, *Redeemers*, p. 476. ⁷⁵ No. 1, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Ciria, *Política y cultura popular*, p. 305; de la Torre, 'Neopopulism in Contemporary Ecuador', p. 563. ⁷⁷ Zúquete, 'The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez', p. 109.

⁷⁸ No. 87, p. 4. ⁷⁹ No. 311, p. 100.

⁸⁰ Correa, *El balance del cardenismo*, p. 22; Levine, *Father of the Poor?*, p. 60.

⁸¹ No. 98, p. 4; no. 166, p. 13.

'crucified by the bourgeoisie'.⁸² Such messages were constantly repeated, along with Chávez's endless anecdotes about his family, his travels around the country and his love of baseball.⁸³

Repetition aimed to create a mass of followers who spoke the same language, used the same terms, were inspired by the same historical figures and recited the same quotes as their leader – who adopted, as Boris Muñoz puts it, the 'audiovisual grammar of the Revolution'.⁸⁴ No better evidence of this is needed than the pronouncements of the hundreds of callers who conversed with Chávez on the air. Every slogan that he adopted was used by a caller soon afterwards. This was essential for Chávez to maintain what Canovan calls the 'revivalist flavour' of his movement, 'powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally apolitical people into the political arena', as well as for conditioning his audience should rapid mobilisation be needed.⁸⁵

Although the messages that *Aló Presidente* aimed to transmit have been studied in detail, the mechanisms through which they were broadcast to the public have been almost wholly ignored. This is partly due to the dominance of quantitative textual analysis methods used to study the transcripts. Qualitative analysis appears less stringently systematic than quantitative approaches, but it gains with this flexibility 'an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data'.⁸⁶ As a result, it is 'less likely to impose restrictive a priori classifications on the collection of data' and is 'less driven by very specific hypotheses and categorical frameworks and more concerned with emergent themes and ideographic descriptions'.⁸⁷ While such an approach has been criticised for lacking scientific rigour, there is value in direct engagement with the text as a complement to quantitative textual research.⁸⁸ For example, Dominic Smith's extensive and thorough analysis of *Aló Presidente* – computer-driven and quantitative – leads him to make

⁸² E.g., no. 125, p. 34; no. 216, p. 8; no. 354, p. 144.

⁸³ Frances Erlich, 'Características y efectos del discurso autocentrado en *Aló Presidente*', *Boletín de Lingüística*, 24 (2005), pp. 3–32; Antonio Reyes-Rodríguez, 'Discursive Strategies in Chávez's Political Discourse', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 5: 2 (2008), pp. 133–52; Adriana Bolívar, "'Democracia" y "revolución" en Venezuela: un análisis crítico del discurso político desde la lingüística de corpus', *Oralia*, 12 (2009), pp. 27–54.

⁸⁴ Boris Muñoz, 'Cesarismo mediático', p. 8.

⁸⁵ Canovan, 'Trust the People!', p. 6. For a discussion of propaganda as conditioning its audience, see Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, 'The Death and Life of Propaganda', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 12: 1 (2012), p. 34.

⁸⁶ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 542.

⁸⁷ Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon, 'Qualitative Research in Work Contexts', in Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon (eds.), *Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 1994), p. 4.

⁸⁸ On the conflict between proponents of quantitative vs. qualitative content analysis, see Julianne Cheek, 'Beyond the "How To": The Importance of Thinking About, Not Simply Doing, Qualitative Research', in Klaus Nielsen et al. (eds.), *A Qualitative Stance: Essays in Honor of Steinar Kvale* (Landelansgade: Aarhus University Press, 2008), pp. 203–14; and Florian Kohlbacher, 'The Use of Qualitative Content Analysis in Case Study

some demonstrably false claims, such as his conclusion that ‘Chávez generally tends to avoid nomination of those who oppose his policies’ and that exceptions to this are ‘relatively rare’.⁸⁹ Many of the insights achieved by Smith’s methodology could probably only be achieved by electronic data analysis, yet the inverse may often be true, and enormous computing capacity may still miss certain types of information. The focus here, on changes in the format of the programme as well as on rarely stated and non-repetitive forms of interaction between Chávez and his production team, does not fit the type of rapid, high-quantity sweeps of data for which digital tools are best suited. The following two sections provide some insights regarding the structure of the programme and the changes it experienced over its lifespan, the media professionals who were intimately involved in its creation – and who receive no mention anywhere in the literature – and the different formats they tried in order to best strengthen the link between the leader and his followers.

The Format of Aló Presidente

Scholars who ably glean a variety of symbols, ideas and messages in Chávez’s speeches and television appearances have paid little attention to the specific communication strategies that he and his media advisers employed.⁹⁰ An exception is Venezuelan linguist Adriana Bolívar, who offers some description of the broadcasts’ basic characteristics.⁹¹ Another is Smith, who asserts that the broadcasts were ‘entirely unscripted, apart from a few cue-cards which remind[ed] him of the general topics that he planned to cover’ while also addressing some features of the broadcasts that were clearly not spontaneous.⁹² ‘By any standard’, he adds, ‘and regardless of what one thinks of his politics, Chávez must be regarded as an exceptional communicator’.⁹³ Indeed, the broadcasts relied heavily on the delight Chávez took in being in the spotlight. As one profile observes, television was ‘his natural medium’; he showed himself to be ‘articulate, artless, more than a little hefty, completely at his ease, open-faced and just-folksy’.⁹⁴ As a result, Chávez played up his ad-libbing: ‘What we

Research’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7: 1 (2006), available at www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/%20view/75/153January%202006.

⁸⁹ Dominic Smith ‘A Corpus-Driven Discourse Analysis of Transcripts of Hugo Chávez’s Television Programme “Aló Presidente”’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2010, p. 404, available at http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/731/1/Smith10PhD_A1a.pdf.

⁹⁰ Aponte, ‘Metaphors in Hugo Chávez’s Political Discourse’, pp. 134–5; Zúquete, ‘The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez’, p. 116 n. 1.

⁹¹ Adriana Bolívar, ‘Nuevos géneros discursivos en la política: el caso de *Aló Presidente*’, in Leda Berardi (ed.), *Análisis crítico del discurso: perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Providencia: Frasis Editores, 2003), pp. 101–30. ⁹² Smith, ‘A Corpus-Driven Discourse Analysis’, p. 150.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 151. ⁹⁴ Guillermprieto, ‘Don’t Cry for Me, Venezuela’.

do [on *Aló Presidente*] is spontaneous: we inform, we talk, criticise ourselves, things happen.⁹⁵ In this sense, Chávez resembled leaders such as Perón, who was a masterful public speaker and good at improvising on the spot, more than other populists like Vargas, who was uncomfortable speaking in public and was not as charismatic.⁹⁶

It is crucial to note that, Chávez's talents notwithstanding, he was aided and counselled by a number of media professionals who played key roles in creating and transforming the programme through the years. Among them, Teresa Maniglia is repeatedly referred to in the transcripts as the originator of the idea for the programme and its director, at least for the first several years. 'Teresita Maniglia is always here directing', Chávez reported in one broadcast. 'She directs all of this. She makes us sing. She is the one in charge here. I am an employee and I don't get paid.'⁹⁷ Other media professionals and intellectuals such as Freddy Balzán, Juan Barreto, Roberto Ruiz and Aristóbulo Istúriz were also important contributors in the initial years, as were eventual influential figures within Chavismo such as Diosdado Cabello, Blanca Eekhout and Nora Uribe. Their repeated appearances in the transcripts attest to the degree to which Chávez had to rely on these subordinates to accomplish his media goals, and to which they understood the programme's impact. Barreto, for example, asserted on the air: 'Just as people go to Mass every Sunday, so they turn on the radio or television to listen to *Aló Presidente*.'⁹⁸

The importance of media professionals in Latin American populism has not been studied in detail. To what extent do personalistic leaders craft their own message, as opposed to being guided by their subordinates? The answers cannot be gleaned from the current literature, which offers piecemeal or ambiguous information. Laurival Fontes, Getúlio Vargas' propaganda chief, is credited by one author with crafting Vargas' public image.⁹⁹ Another study, however, dismisses Fontes as a 'patronising yes-man'.¹⁰⁰ One scholar makes the astonishing claim that the cult of personality around Perón was forced on him by his advisers,¹⁰¹ and another that Bucaram, abjuring the help of foreign advisers, 'designed his own propaganda'.¹⁰² It is difficult, then, to find reliable accounts of the interactions between these leaders and their media advisers. The *Aló Presidente* transcripts offer a glimpse, albeit an incomplete one, of dynamics within populism that have so far been invisible.

Aló Presidente began on the radio in 1998. This constituted the trial run for what the programme would later become. After the move to television,

⁹⁵ No. 197, p. 61.

⁹⁶ Ciria, *Política y cultura popular*, pp. 302–11; Levine, *Father of the Poor?*, p. 61.

⁹⁷ No. 59, p. 9.

⁹⁸ No. 100, p. 26.

⁹⁹ Levine, *Father of the Poor?*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Rose, *One of the Forgotten Things*, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ Del Barco, *El régimen peronista*, p. 75.

¹⁰² De la Torre, 'Neopopulism in Contemporary Ecuador', p. 560.

proposed and orchestrated by Maniglia, it retained essentially the same format as the radio broadcasts, though naturally taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the new medium.¹⁰³ During the first three years, Chávez shared the airwaves with one or most often two moderators who touted the accomplishments of the revolution, announced upcoming segments, served as Chávez's sounding boards (they never disagreed with him on anything substantive) and laughed at his jokes. Throughout this initial period the programme was used primarily to broadcast the leader's movements and accomplishments, and as a venue for poor Venezuelans to express their grievances and, most importantly, ask for direct assistance with housing, health, legal or work problems. Chávez and his moderators made a point each week of reminding the audience of the service being provided by the *Aló Presidente* team. This type of direct-assistance call, however, became progressively rarer after the first year on the air. This much is admitted on the official website, which states that 'after many moons, the programme ... changed its style a little'.¹⁰⁴ Sure enough, the number of calls kept shrinking until, in 2010–11, virtually no such calls were taken at all.

They were in part replaced with pre-taped video segments, with names such as 'Habla el soberano' ('The Sovereign Speaks') and 'Venezuela somos todos' ('We Are All Venezuela'). These videos discussed government initiatives, the supposed lies of the opposition, and snippets on Venezuelan history titled 'Efemérides'. Sometimes there was a video segment on the wonders of *Aló Presidente* itself, in which the audience was reminded of the importance of the 'open space between the president and his people'.¹⁰⁵ The goal of the videos was fundamentally to extol Chávez and the revolution:

[I]n the midst of defeat came he who was sent, [the victor, the leader that Venezuela needs ... And anyone who disagrees with me, honestly, is defeated and afflicted. And thus I will say to him these words: 'Brother, repent. You still have time. Look with your eyes. Love your country. Love your country and love your president with all your heart.' ¹⁰⁶

Following the failed 2002 coup attempt to remove Chávez from power, significant changes to the broadcasts' structure were implemented. Chávez began to lead the proceedings essentially on his own, without moderators. Large crowds began to be positioned around the set, while Chávez distributed government handouts – such as deeds of property – to poor Venezuelans who, sometimes deliriously, proclaimed their gratitude. Such new features were presumably considered more effective in conveying Chávez's benevolence towards the people than callers asking for particular favours.

¹⁰³ No. 312, p. 73.

¹⁰⁵ No. 200, p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ See www.alopresidente.gob.ve/historia/28/1633.

¹⁰⁶ No. 94, p. 1.

Table 1. *Changes in the Structure of Aló Presidente over Time*

Format 1

No. 1 (23 May 1999) – no. 35 (24 March 2000) – 33 transcripts

- Chávez monologues
- Banter with moderators.
- Conversations with ‘normal people’ on the phone (average 8.7 per broadcast).
- Finding ways to help individuals solve their problems.
- Emphasis on Chávez’s upcoming schedule.
- Emphasis on creating common language with the audience.
- Emphasis on the catastrophic legacy of the Punto Fijo regime.

Format 2

No. 37 (10 April 2000) – no. 82 (22 Sep. 2001) – 20 transcripts

- Chávez monologues.
- Banter with moderators.
- Conversations with ‘normal people’ on the phone (average four per broadcast).
- Finding ways to help individuals solve their problems.
- Conversations with scheduled guests – in the audience or on the phone.
- Emphasis on Chávez’s previous week’s schedule and upcoming schedule.
- Emphasis on the main goals of the revolution.
- Emphasis on the catastrophic legacy of the Punto Fijo regime.

Format 3

No. 87 (2 Dec. 2001) – no. 101 (7 April 2002) – 10 transcripts

- Chávez monologues.
- Pre-taped video segments (average five per broadcast).
- Conversations with scheduled guests, in the audience or on the phone.
- Conversations with ‘normal people’ on the phone (average 2.7 per broadcast).
- Emphasis on Chávez’s previous week’s schedule and upcoming schedule.
- Emphasis on specific policy projects.
- Emphasis on the destructive influence of the opposition.

Format 4

No. 102 (28 April 2002) – no. 209 (24 Oct. 2004) – 76 transcripts

- Chávez monologues.
- Pre-taped video segments (average four per broadcast).
- Handing out stipends or land deeds to people in the audience.
- Conversations with scheduled guests, in the audience or on the phone.
- Conversations with ‘normal people’ on the phone (average 1.7 per broadcast).
- Emphasis on putting the revolution back on track after the 2002 coup.
- Emphasis on the destructive influence of the opposition and the United States.

Format 5

No. 210 (9 Jan. 2005) – no. 375 (5 June 2011) – 158 transcripts

- Chávez monologues.
- Conversations with scheduled guests, in the audience or on the phone.
- Conversations with ‘normal people’ on the phone (nos. 210–328, average 0.7 per broadcast; nos. 329–375, no callers).
- Pre-taped video segments (average 1.8 per broadcast).
- Direct interactions with the audience.
- Musical numbers.
- Books are discussed at length.
- Journalists conduct interviews with audience members.

Table 1. (Cont.)

- Emphasis on ‘deepening’ the revolution – twenty-first-century socialism.
- Emphasis on the destructive influence of the opposition and the United States.
- Between no. 265 (15 Feb. 2007) and no. 286 (17 June 2007), several broadcasts a week alternating between radio-only and television.

Source: compiled by author from MPPCI transcripts.

In early 2005, a final and definitive format was introduced (with the exception of a brief and ill-fated attempt in early 2007 to turn *Aló Presidente* into a daily broadcast). Along with the introduction of a new set, an increase in artistic performances and a segment for Chávez to discuss his favourite books, it entailed several minutes in which Chávez moved away from his initial position and towards the main set. As the audience witnessed his movements, his team of journalists took over, sometimes for extended segments, and conducted interviews.¹⁰⁷ More emphasis was given to Chávez’s conversations with notable guests, including foreign dignitaries and public figures, and to his lengthy disquisitions on ideology, history, literature and other topics. Adriana Bolívar argues that Chávez started taking fewer calls after the 2002 coup attempt in order to reduce the risk of direct interactions with potentially critical callers and therefore to emphasise the positive aspects of his image.¹⁰⁸ Colette Capriles suggests that the changes after 2005 reflected more ideological rigidity and the abandonment of the ‘heterodox’ rhetoric that Chávez employed to gain power originally.¹⁰⁹ The changes may also have been spurred by the windfall of oil revenues that fell into Chávez’s lap by the middle of the 2000s; an emphasis on subsidised food, redistribution of land and other examples of government largesse would seem more effective than trying to help individuals with their very personal problems. With only the content of the transcripts as evidence, it is not possible to explain satisfactorily the precise reasons for the changes in format over the years.

Those changes do hint at the tensions that sometimes surfaced between the self-assured Chávez and the media professionals whose job was to broadcast the leader to his audience. The moderators and other media professionals almost never contradicted or challenged Chávez on the air, but the difficulty of getting the leader to conform to pre-established parameters was a running theme of their conversation.

¹⁰⁷ No. 301, pp. 35–53. ¹⁰⁸ Bolívar, ‘Nuevos géneros discursivos en la política’, p. 124.

¹⁰⁹ Capriles Colette, ‘La enciclopedia del chavismo o hacia una teología del populismo’, *Revista Venezolana de Ciencia Política*, 29 (2006), p. 75.

The Balancing Act between Spontaneity and Structure

At least initially, the transcripts show an attempt to shape a 'dialogue' between the president and the people. The moderators often remarked how 'unheard-of in the world' it was to see a president 'interacting with the people' to such a degree.¹¹⁰ Chávez aimed to be simultaneously leader, father figure, friend, teacher, even sex symbol.¹¹¹ He sometimes used his time on the air for purely educational (that is, non-political) purposes, lecturing his audience about the geography of Caracas, ancient Greece, AIDS prevention and vasectomies, and, of course, Venezuelan history, since it was 'necessary, imperative' for Venezuelans to know 'where we came from, why we are the way we are'.¹¹² The broadcasts were also used as a medium to inform the public of Chávez's movements and the accomplishments of the government, and, on several occasions, to cause havoc – placing the national and international media on high alert while his supporters celebrated giddily – with a surprise announcement.¹¹³ One instance was his firing of several executives of the national oil company, whom he accused of participating in a conspiracy to remove him from power: 'Any senior executive who calls for a strike, who calls for people to stop working, is automatically fired.'¹¹⁴ On another occasion he called US President George W. Bush a 'donkey' on the air, as well as a 'mass murderer', a 'drunk' and 'the worst thing that has ever been on this planet'.¹¹⁵ Most notorious was his decision to order 'ten battalions' of tanks to be mobilised toward the border with Colombia, following a Colombian raid against a guerrilla group within Ecuador's borders.¹¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, Chávez expected the members of his government to pay close attention to his every utterance. '[Y]our high rank obligates you', he recounted on the air, telling a government official 'to be attentive to what I say. What do you know of all the things I say, the instructions I give, the reflections I make, in four or five hours? Everyone must take notes.'¹¹⁷

As long as *Aló Presidente* effectively worked to educate the public, to transmit the messages that positioned Chávez as the unquestioned leader of, and synonymous with, the nation, it was an enormously valuable tool. 'You gave us life, Mr. President', declared a supporter on the air, 'and when a president gives life, he is never alone; you are a president whom the people love.'¹¹⁸ One of Chávez's most impressive achievements was his ability,

¹¹⁰ No. 39, p. 1.

¹¹¹ 'I fell in love with you, and I chase you everywhere', said a female caller during one broadcast (no. 108, p. 8); 'I admire you and love you; with my husband's permission, I love you', declared another (no. 211, p. 67). See Richard Gott, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 6.

¹¹² Respectively, no. 199, p. 5; no. 66, p. 9; no. 13, p. 15; no. 32, pp. 13–14; no. 1, p. 2.

¹¹³ E.g., no. 100, p. 26.

¹¹⁴ No. 101, pp. 118–20.

¹¹⁵ No. 249, p. 66.

¹¹⁶ No. 306, p. 34.

¹¹⁷ No. 331, p. 48.

¹¹⁸ No. 111, p. 7.

of which he was indubitably proud, to accomplish this in large part through unrehearsed sessions that lasted for hours: 'I don't write speeches', he boasted during one broadcast; 'I sit down to think, I call my friends, I ask the ministers, whoever is close.'¹¹⁹ At the same time, as the critics in the opposition and around the world were eager to point out, some of what ended up on screen was risible.

Chávez at his best was an eloquent, forceful and charismatic speaker. He espoused an ideology that pursued real democracy as he understood it:

There is no democracy without popular participation. They are fake, those cardboard democracies with representatives elected each five years, or four years, or six years, and then are accountable to no-one and believe themselves to be sovereign. No, the people are sovereign ... There, on the horizon and here, on stage, all around us, participatory democracy becomes more of a reality.¹²⁰

Such language echoed the views of many left-wing activists and thinkers around the world. From the beginning of his presidential tenure, Chávez promoted the messages of transparent democracy, social justice, respect for all cultures, and environmental protection. The great number of foreign guests who went to Venezuela to meet him and often to be interviewed on *Aló Presidente*, such as actor Danny Glover, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and social activist Cindy Sheehan, attests to his enormous popularity outside of his own borders.¹²¹

Yet Chávez frequently made choices that potentially undermined the impact of his message. Sometimes, his zeal to make his point on economic policy culminated in a soporific lecture: '[The price of] chicken fell by 5.2 per cent. Goose, 5.6 per cent. Fell. All of these are price reductions. Plantains, 1.8 per cent. Pork chops, 1.3 per cent. I said goose already. Did I say goose? How much did goose fall? You forgot, you see. You are not paying attention.'¹²² On other occasions, his anger was the culprit, as when he called for a battle against his opponents: 'I am, and I have taken it on because it is my responsibility, commander-in-chief of the battle for oil, a social and political [battle] for the country. And military, military and social, popular, moral, communicational [battles]. It's a complete battle, even international.'¹²³ Or when a visiting journalist asked him a question he did not like: 'I will not respond to stupid questions, because that would make me stupid as well. I mean it's a totally stupid question that does not deserve an answer. Because anyone who responded to it would end up looking stupid. Right? I don't have an answer for stupid questions, OK?'¹²⁴ He also occasionally exclaimed something contrary to his intended message in the heat of passion. For example, early in

¹¹⁹ No. 40, pp. 71–2.

¹²¹ No. 177, p. 7; no. 232, p. 19; no. 245, p. 22.

¹²³ No. 134, p. 11.

¹²⁰ No. 155, p. 20.

¹²² No. 271, p. 27.

¹²⁴ No. 294, p. 32.

his tenure as president he complained that his opponents were trying to 'keep me from governing in any way I want'.¹²⁵ It was likewise not always easy for him to balance the promotion of his cult of personality with his determination to show that he was an enlightened left-wing democrat. He sometimes found himself in rhetorical dead ends when trying to reconcile the two: 'I have a goal, which is not mine, each time I fly over Caracas in a helicopter.'¹²⁶

Moreover, in his zeal to portray himself as a man of the people who shared his followers' likes and beliefs, Chávez made the type of pronouncements that fed his critics' characterisations of the programme as an artless circus. On the air he discussed alien abductions ('this must be respected, I respect it a lot') and astrology, which is 'a thing of antiquity' represented by 'many charlatans, but also serious people'.¹²⁷ He questioned whether US astronauts ever made it to the Moon or whether Superman and Lois Lane 'ever consummated anything'.¹²⁸ He had regular conversations with young children in highly politicised 'kids say the darndest things' sessions that sometimes backfired.¹²⁹

Without a doubt, Chávez had a great deal of leeway in deciding where to take the discussion, but this should not lead to the facile conclusion that the programme was just a self-indulgent luxury. The production team, led by Maniglia and others, worked hard to keep the star of their programme on track. This was a difficult task, not least because of the epic duration of the broadcasts. The original radio editions were supposed to last one hour, but Chávez swiftly imposed his ideal model: the broadcast would go on until he decided it should stop. The broadcasts stretched to an average duration of over five hours.¹³⁰ Maniglia half-heartedly complained about it on a rare appearance on the air in August 2004, but to no avail.¹³¹ Thereafter the transmissions became significantly longer. 'Sometimes I wish we could have a 14-hour-long programme', said Chávez longingly.¹³² He was nonetheless

¹²⁵ No. 5, p. 13.

¹²⁶ No. 45, p. 42. Chávez was fascinated by helicopters. He utters the word 'helicopter' in about three-quarters of the transcripts. Possibly he took his helicopter to be a symbol of his authority, as well as a tool for overseeing the revolution. He was particularly enamoured of the image of himself vigilantly flying over his country in a helicopter, a 'flying horse' (no. 244, p. 49): 'It is not the same looking at the map ... as flying over the country in a helicopter' (no. 99, p. 16). And he was always ready to swoop down when needed to combat laziness and corruption: 'Sometimes I show up with no warning, and they start running around: "There's a helicopter, who is it?" And then I get off: "Oh, it's the president!"' (no. 30, p. 46).

¹²⁷ No. 109, pp. 38–9.

¹²⁸ No. 288, p. 36; no. 244, p. 16.

¹²⁹ In one instance Chávez urged an eight-year-old boy to tell the audience about his day at one of the Bolivarian schools, which were at the core of Chávez's education programme. The boy mentioned that some days the school had no breakfast to serve the children, even though school meals were promised as part of the programme. Chávez, taken aback, blamed the food shortages on the opposition's coup attempts of the previous year (no. 150, pp. 16–18).

¹³¹ No. 200, p. 10.

¹³⁰ Bolívar, "Democracia" y "revolución" en Venezuela, p. 36.

¹³² No. 164, p. 43.

beginning to realise that the length of his addresses was counterproductive, admitting once that ‘nobody likes six-hour broadcasts, except for me’.¹³³ Maniglia and the early moderators such as Balzán and Barreto continuously sought to control the duration of the broadcasts. Although Chávez always had the final say on when he was done talking – and his preference was to follow his mentor Fidel Castro; that is, the longer the better – there were many instances in which the moderators on the air tried to convince Chávez, sometimes successfully, to finish early. By mid-2007 broadcasts ran for five or six hours, but this was eventually reduced to between three and four, with the leader’s blessing: ‘You know, I now say that *Aló Presidente* must be about three hours long.’¹³⁴

This semi-public tug of war between Chávez and his media team characterises the entire run of *Aló Presidente*. The programme relied heavily on Chávez’s gifts as a political communicator, particularly his ability to speak informally and improvise for hours on end, clearly under the assumption that this would bring him closer to his followers. Yet, his subordinates were often concerned about curbing the leader’s excesses and finding a balance between spontaneity and structure.

Every broadcast relied on a script, which allowed Chávez to elaborate on whatever caught his attention but always steered him back to the planned course of the discussion. He ‘turn[s] the script this way, then that way, but in the end it all works out nicely’.¹³⁵ When he shared the air with one or two moderators, part of their role involved making sure Chávez followed the script.¹³⁶ The moderators, especially Barreto and even Maniglia on occasion, cut in when he seemed to have missed or failed to emphasise an important point.¹³⁷ Throughout the years, there was a low-intensity struggle, which Chávez often mocked, to keep him from veering away from the script: ‘Here is the script ... two minutes between greeting the camera and calling for the first video ... That’s why the programme is long, because I have no discipline. They give me two minutes and I take half an hour.’¹³⁸ To keep the broadcast on course, the role of the moderators was complemented, and later replaced, with increased direct communication between Chávez and the producers, though such communication was there from the start. At first Maniglia was always ‘there with her signs’, which were later replaced by more advanced technology, the most notable being the ever-present communication device that Chávez took to wearing on his ear.¹³⁹ When he did not follow the script, the producers gave him ‘nasty looks’ until they persuaded him to fall in line.¹⁴⁰ Eventually, he came to embrace the importance of the show’s

¹³³ No. 255, p. 51.¹³⁴ No. 301, p. 66.¹³⁵ No. 221, p. 19.¹³⁶ No. 99, pp. 41–2.¹³⁷ No. 47, p. 24.¹³⁸ No. 200, p. 16.¹³⁹ No. 13, p. 61.¹⁴⁰ No. 148, p. 18.

structure: 'We must include things in the script so I can have guidance. We use the script to guide us.'¹⁴¹

Barreto, and other moderators such as Nora Uribe and Blanca Eekhout (both of whom served as ministers of information and communication during the 2000s), engaged Chávez in conversations that expressed complete confidence in the leader while struggling to keep him from raging against his enemies. Sometimes guests played this role, assisting the producers in preventing Chávez from making statements that could have imperilled his popularity. During an on-air conversation with a priest, Chávez hinted that he did not really believe in the divinity of Christ. His interlocutor replied: 'Mr. President, please leave theology to me, so you don't get confused', and swiftly changed the subject.¹⁴² After Chávez's announcement that he had nothing but disdain for the date of 23 January (on which Venezuelans traditionally celebrate the fall of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez) created rumbles of dissatisfaction among supporters, Caracas Mayor Freddy Bernal stated his disagreement with the president on the air.¹⁴³ Thereafter, Chávez embraced and then co-opted the date as part of the rituals of his movement. Modifications to *Aló Presidente* in 2002 and 2005 aimed to make it more difficult for him to abandon the script. The minister of communication and information at the time, William Lara, asserted on air that the goal of the new format was to solidify the 'segmented structure' of the programme in order to achieve 'higher precision in terms of the treatment of each of the themes addressed each week'.¹⁴⁴

Over the years, several of the changes reduced direct interaction between Chávez and the public and expanded the emphasis on his role as father figure and saviour of the nation. While the number of video segments per broadcast went down, live artistic performances became more numerous and elaborate. Chávez spent extended periods conversing with audience members, but more so with crowds of delirious supporters and less with individuals with specific problems.¹⁴⁵ The production team became progressively more adept at combining interactions with the audience with other segments designed to convey a particular message. For instance, on one occasion Chávez handed out new Iranian-made tractors to farmers in the audience, and used the gesture as an opportunity to laud his accomplishments on the international stage as well as his agricultural policy, which was then fully covered in the subsequent video clip.¹⁴⁶ When he deliberately remained on one topic for an hour or more, the next video often brought him back on track. After a newspaper made a disparaging remark about his son, for instance, he decided to give the

¹⁴¹ No. 264, p. 82; see also no. 325, pp. 79–80.

¹⁴³ No. 60, pp. 84–5.

¹⁴⁵ No. 210, pp. 2–10.

¹⁴² No. 311, p. 100.

¹⁴⁴ No. 255, p. 52.

¹⁴⁶ No. 258, pp. 11–13.

opposition a lesson in Venezuelan history that seemed to go on forever: ‘This is how I respond to provocations. Because if you mess with my son ... you are provoking me.’¹⁴⁷ But eventually he received the signal for the next video segment on government programmes in the state of Zulia, and the broadcast moved forward.¹⁴⁸

The transcripts reveal that Chávez was not always pleased with the changes imposed on him by his subordinates. The introduction of video segments was difficult for him to get used to at first. ‘What do we have, another video?’, he exclaimed in exasperation during one broadcast. ‘So many videos! Another video. Let’s watch the video ... Let’s see what surprise *Aló Presidente* has for us.’¹⁴⁹ When a change in format instituted extended shots of Chávez walking among the crowds or inspecting new projects, it constituted the first time that Chávez had allowed other people to take over while he was off the air. He did not like it in the least. On the first occasion that a member of the team began to interview guests without his direct instruction, she earned a reprimand: ‘I would like to interact directly with them ... I ask for control so I can interact directly with them.’¹⁵⁰ Crucially, on both occasions Chávez lost the battle and became accustomed to the new format. Indeed, he came to expect the connections between segments: ‘Don’t we have a call, a contact? What is going on with the phones today, *chico*? We had planned for a contact for this activity, which is very important.’¹⁵¹ This tug of war between the programme’s creators and its star did not always end happily, however. Chávez liked to suggest to his producers changes that might improve his ability to communicate with his audience, including what types of videos to create and even where to place the cameras – ‘I just give some ideas. I’m not a producer, but I’ve learned a little bit. Nine years already of *Aló Presidente*’ – and was occasionally cross when his advice was not followed.¹⁵²

In sum, Chávez’s strong personality could be channelled as charisma, to the benefit of his emotionally charged connection with his mass of followers, but often turned into aggressive stubbornness to its detriment, at least in the eyes of his aides. Now that the Chávez era has come to an end, possibly more avenues will be opened to enable researchers to understand the relationship between the leader and his close aides, and to those who want to better understand Chávez’s place in the history of Latin American populism.

¹⁴⁷ No. 241, pp. 52–62.

¹⁴⁸ No. 241, pp. 62–3.

¹⁴⁹ No. 114, p. 69.

¹⁵⁰ No. 213, p. 43.

¹⁵¹ No. 270, p. 23.

¹⁵² No. 293, p. 34. This, too, sometimes produced unfortunate results, as when Chávez berated a cameraman live on the air: ‘We have nature. We are surrounded by fertile land. Focus on the fertile land. Look! I’m talking about fertile land and you focus on the gas pipes. Look! There! Beyond the pipes. Look! If you can zoom in, over there, you can go in. Look for a snake I saw earlier. You can look for it, *compadre*. Look for it, look for it! The cameramen need to be more ready. I thank them for their work, but they need to do more’ (no. 294, p. 19).

Conclusions

In recent years, Latin American populists have had a rocky relationship with major media outlets in their countries. As a result, they have resorted to a stronger presence of state media programming designed to bring the leader into his followers' households, to promote his iconography, to inform the public about his achievements, and generally to solidify emotional ties with his supporters. *Aló Presidente's* notoriety and innovative style, relying on a combination of Chávez's loquaciousness and ability to improvise and a series of structured formats designed to control these qualities, attracted the attention of media and scholarly observers of Venezuela. Yet, the existing literature has little to say about the actual content of the broadcasts that became *de rigueur* viewing during the Chávez era.

The discussion above outlines extensive new information about the structure and format of the broadcasts and how these changed over time. It also suggests new venues for comparative research with other Latin American populists, past and present, many of whom possessed Chávez's charisma and self-confidence. To what extent were the images of populist leaders crafted by media experts, and did this cause friction within populist movements and regimes? In what ways did the image of the leader projected through the media change?

This study shows that the programme served different purposes throughout its existence, gradually transforming from its initial format as a call-in show into a grand stage for Chávez to promote his position as revolutionary leader and be cheered by crowds of loyal supporters. Crucially, the transcripts reveal a constant tension between Chávez, who wanted to pontificate endlessly, and the producers of the programme, the media professionals who wanted to help the leader achieve his goals. The presence of this tension, as well as the fact that Chávez sometimes gave in to his underlings, is significant given the widely held assumption that Chavismo was 'nothing more than the personal property of Hugo Chávez'.¹⁵³ These findings should give pause to analysts of Latin American populists, from Cárdenas to Correa, whose work often portrays populist leaders as having complete and unchallenged control over the image they project.

On the other hand, it is important to take note of the unique qualities of a particular leader and the movement erected around his particular personality. Few politicians could carry off such a performance weekly, for hours on end, for over a decade. At the same time, Chávez's loquaciousness, overconfidence and temper forced his media team to seek various ways to keep him on track

¹⁵³ José E. Molina, 'The Unraveling of Venezuela's Party System', in Jennifer McCoy and David Meyers (eds.), *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 168.

and to protect him from his own excesses. The influence of this group of Chávez's followers may have been a moderating one, curbing the leader's more drastic impulses. On the other hand, Chávez's willingness to relent to his followers may signal a more sophisticated and astute political persona than his critics gave him credit for. Were Chávez's followers successful in restraining him in other ways not identified in this study? The answer would inform much that we know about how politics in Chávez's Venezuela unfolded, and how they may do so in the post-Chávez future.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Las transcripciones del programa televisivo *Aló Presidente*, el instrumento mediático clave del presidente Hugo Chávez, dan luces sobre las diferentes formas en las que su movimiento promovió la imagen de su líder y buscó solidificar su conexión emocionalmente cargada con las masas venezolanas. El estudio señala las dinámicas cambiantes detrás del formato y contenido de *Aló Presidente* y las ubica al interior de investigaciones anteriores sobre el uso populista de los medios de comunicación en América Latina. Aunque similar a sus predecesores, el programa fue una creación única del chavismo, diseñado para equilibrar la habilidad de Chávez para improvisar con una estructura diseñada para limitar sus excesos y no perder el mensaje principal. Esto llevó a tensiones ocasionales entre Chávez y los profesionales mediáticos encargados de la producción del programa. El artículo provee un correctivo a otros tratamientos inexactos en los medios de comunicación y en la literatura académica, y ofrece nuevos datos de *Aló Presidente*, para facilitar estudios comparativos en el futuro.

Spanish keywords: Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, *Aló Presidente*, populismo, medios de comunicación

Portuguese abstract. As transcrições do programa de televisão *Alô Presidente*, peça central da estratégia midiática do presidente Hugo Chávez, permitem observar as diferentes maneiras pelas quais o movimento liderado por ele promoveu sua imagem e buscou solidificar sua conexão emotiva com as massas venezuelanas. Este estudo traça as dinâmicas por trás da mudança de formato e conteúdo do *Alô Presidente* colocando o programa no contexto das primeiras pesquisas acerca do uso populista da mídia na América Latina. Apesar de ser parecido com seus predecesores, o programa foi uma criação única do Chavismo, elaborado para balancear o talento de Chávez para a improvisação com uma estrutura criada para conter seus excessos e mantê-lo fiel ao roteiro do programa. Isso criou tensões ocasionais entre Chávez e os profissionais de mídia responsáveis pela produção do programa. O artigo permite corrigir abordagens imprecisas na mídia e literatura acadêmica e oferece novas informações sobre o *Alô Presidente* que facilitarão futuros estudos comparativos.

Portuguese keywords: Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, *Alô Presidente*, populismo, mídias de massa