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# The Language of the American Mass Media as an Instrument to Destabilize the Political Regime in Venezuela

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## ABSTRACT

The **study aims** to determine the role of the US media as a destabilizing factor in the contemporary domestic politics of Venezuela, especially in the context of the power crisis of 2013–2019. The study used the **methods** of data analysis obtained through interviews, discourse analysis, the method of grounded theory, content analysis of selected sources (CNN, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Bloomberg) and event analysis, which made it possible to analyze the most frequently mentioned in the American media developments in the domestic politics of Venezuela for the period 2013–2019. The **results** of the study reveal the bias of the American media and their dependence on the main US political course towards Venezuela, demonstrate the systematic creation of a negative image of Venezuela in the American media with a focus on the economic crisis and low living standards in the country, and attempts to influence US and international public opinion on the issue of recognizing the illegitimate parallel government of self-proclaimed President Juan Guaidó. **The practical significance** of the work's findings is the that they can be used in developing a strategy for information interaction between Venezuela and the United States, creating an information security system that accounts for the identified threats and strengthening the regional media of Venezuela.

**Keywords:** media language; information war; Venezuela; US media; Juan Guaidó; Nicolás Maduro; political crisis in Venezuela; information security

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ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

# Язык американских средств массовой информации как инструмент дестабилизации политического режима в Венесуэле

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## АННОТАЦИЯ

**Цель** исследования заключается в определении роли средств массовой информации (СМИ) США как дестабилизирующего фактора в современной внутренней политики Венесуэлы, в особенности в условиях кризиса власти 2013–2019 гг. В исследовании использованы **методы** анализа данных, полученных через интервьюирование, дискурсивного анализа, метод обоснованной теории, контент-анализ выбранных источников (CNN, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Bloomberg) и ивент-анализ, позволивший проанализировать наиболее часто упоминаемые в американских СМИ события внутренней политики Венесуэлы за период 2013–2019 гг. **Результаты** исследования позволяют говорить о необъективности рассматриваемых американских СМИ и их зависимости от основного политического курса США в отношении Венесуэлы, о планомерном создании негативного образа Венесуэлы в американских СМИ, основными опорными пунктами которого являются экономический кризис и низкий уровень жизни в стране, а также

влияние на общественное мнение, как в США, так и за рубежом, в вопросе признания нелегитимного параллельного правительства самопровозглашенного президента Хуана Гуайдо. **Практическая значимость** результатов работы заключается в том, что ее выводы могут быть использованы при разработке стратегии информационного взаимодействия между Венесуэлой и США, создании системы информационной безопасности, которая бы учитывала выявленные угрозы, и укреплении региональных СМИ Венесуэлы.

**Ключевые слова:** язык СМИ; информационная война; Венесуэла; средства массовой информации США; Хуан Гуайдо; Николас Мадуро; политический кризис в Венесуэле; информационная безопасность

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## **Introduction and literature review**

Language is the human being's ability to express and communicate through many systems of signs: oral, written, or gestural. Communication requires this system of signs to reach the goal of common understanding. Marcus Aurelio said, "everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth" [1].

Language allows the construction of social realities through discursive constructs, while the mass media and cultural industries serve as channels of mass dissemination and socio-cognitive gear, so that these realities founded through discourse are appropriated, socialized, and institutionalized in public opinion.

The media uses mechanisms such as the repetition of expressions that become a discourse that distorts the vision of those who receive these messages with the aim of building their own experiences, which are essential for understanding public opinion. Currently, it is not only traditional media but also social networks; they also follow another theoretical model that is as interesting as it is worrying: the model of "digital niches" formulated by Sunstein [2]. This model maintains that we listen to what we previously and selectively wanted to hear, which only reinforces a cognitive bias that is present in everyday reasoning: the misinformation bias.

According to E. G. Ponomareva, "the overthrow of the regime is possible remotely, by transmitting information through various networks" [3]. According to the findings of S. V. Orlova [4], mass media is a profitable platform for both the stabilization and destabilization of political regimes. S. V. Volodenkov notes that Internet technologies and the media can change not only the perception of political reality but also the political reality

itself [5]. According to the author, the elements of the information invasion are the justification of this invasion for its own population, the formation of favorable interpretations of the processes occurring in the target countries, the discrediting of the authorities of the target countries, the displacement of pro-state actors from the information space, the recoding of national value-semantic spaces, the refocusing of public attention, and the management of the protest movement from its creation to the promotion of its ideas in the media [6].

The issues of using the US media as a tool for destabilizing political regimes in Latin America, in particular in Venezuela, were covered in the works by E. N. Pashentsev [7], O. S. Polunina [8], A. Colmenares [9], L. S. Salazar [10], D. S. Figueredo [11], G. Maihold [12], Ph. Kitzberger [13], and others. However, their research focuses primarily on US policy towards Venezuela, especially in times of political crisis, and on the role of US politicians in creating a negative image of Venezuela. Due to the fact that the American media cite these statements of politicians regarding Venezuela, the media themselves play the role of a political instrument that influences the perception of the region both in the United States and abroad, and in Venezuela itself, especially among the opposition strata of the population.

The various social networks are mostly owned and controlled by American corporations with their own agendas or political affiliations, such as Facebook and Twitter, networks which censor official accounts of presidents, government entities, and the like that are not in favor of hegemony. Americans draw attention because those same networks censor and promulgate a discourse of being impartial digital media without any political inclination. But what about the American media,

who controls or opposes their line of discourse or other government media such as the British BBC, the German Deutsche Welle, the French AFP, or Radio y Televisión Española? Facebook's head of cybersecurity policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, recently stated that the world's largest social network will start flagging "foreign state-controlled media because we believe that people should know if they read news from a publication, possibly under government influence".<sup>1</sup>

Within the framework of this article, it is intended to analyze the media as an instrument of destabilization of the Venezuelan government. They are reconverted and assume the role of political opposition in a clear overflow of their communicative and informative functions, largely replacing the hegemonic forces hitherto out of place in the face of the profound changes that are taking place in the political scenarios of Latin America. This attack by the media is due to the arrival of the governments, of the new social and political forces, and is not the consequence of social outbursts but of victories in elections, with absolute respect to the democratic legality in the different countries. It is important to highlight this reality because, subsequently, the accusation against these governments of being tyrannies or dictatorships will continue.

### Research methodology

The study focuses on evaluating the American media as instruments of destabilization in Venezuela. The following methods of collection and analysis of the flow of information on the subject under consideration were involved: methods of data analysis of interviews, discourse analysis, "grounded theory" technique, social media analysis of information flows, event analysis allowing us to characterize the most frequently mentioned episodes in the period from 2013 until 2019.

### Results of the investigation

In the analysis carried out on the American media, it was possible to determine an evident class defense of their economic and political interests. In this way, all kinds of actions against the government began to be operationalized (sabotage

of the economy, diplomatic boycott, "soft coup", etc.), and it was the media that played an important role in the attempt to generate environments of social upheaval, wear, defamation, and manipulation of public opinion. Informative and communicational aggression thus enters an important phase, playing an essential role in the political struggle against progressive governments and social movements.

### Analysis of American media that has a political and economic interest

- CNN

CNN was founded by Atlanta businessman, Ted Turner, who in October 2016, just weeks before the presidential election, expressed explicit support for Hillary Clinton. In particular, this medium is the pioneer in disseminating fake news [14, 15], misinforming viewers and being controversial in the face of countless political situations in Latin America.

- The Washington Post

The Washington Post is still known for being the media for reporters Bob Woodward and Karl Bernstein, who were the first to raise the Watergate scandal that led to the collapse of US Ex-President Richard Nixon in the 1970s. In 2013, the world's richest man and Amazon founder, Jeff Bezos, bought The Washington Post for \$ 250 million from the Graham family, which has managed the media for decades.

- The New York Times

Historically, The New York Times has been owned by the Sulzberger family. Arthur Oaks Sulzberger Jr. is its current president. Since 1967, the company has been listed on the New York Stock Exchange, although most of the shares belong to the Sulzberger family. In 2015, the American conservative website Washington Free Beacon stated that the Clinton Foundation donated \$ 100,000 to The New York Times charity in 2008 and that same year, the newspaper supported her, Hillary Clinton, in the Democratic primary elections for a seat in the Senate, which she finally got.

- Bloomberg

The financial news provider corporation is named after its founder, billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who in early 2020 personally ran for the US Presidency. Bloomberg, who is 78 years old, was officially a member of the Democratic Party until 2001, when he joined the Republican

<sup>1</sup> Website NPR. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/04/870105673/facebook-begins-labeling-state-controlled-media>



Fig. Timeline of political processes in Venezuela, 2013–2022

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Party to become the mayor of New York, replacing Rudy Giuliani.

### The role of the language of the American mass media as an instrument to destabilize the Bolivarian Government of Venezuela

Every analysis of Venezuela must start from the premise that it's a country with the largest certified oil reserves in the world (around 300,000 million barrels). That amount of black gold must be added to being among the ten main reserves of gas, biodiversity, and minerals and "rare earths", such as coltan. The timeline of political processes in Venezuela for the period from 2013 to 2022 is shown in *Figure*.

If we look at a previous period and move to the date of the death of Ex-President Hugo Chávez, in 2013, Venezuela remained a politically and economically stable country, despite its oil dependence, playing a fundamental role in geopolitics. In 2013, Nicolás Maduro was elected president; legitimate and constitutional. However, a series of protests began by violent groups of the Venezuelan extreme right. They began conducting their coup plans against the government of Nicolás Maduro through the so-called "guarimbas" (arbitrary closure of streets with violent actions), which left 43 dead. The extremists demanded "La Salida" ("The exit" in Spanish), which is the resignation of the head of state, outraging the will of the citizens reflected in the elections of April 14, 2013, where they approved the continuation of the Bolivarian Revolution. Those were not student protests. The Venezuelan extreme right sought to disguise the violent acts as "student protests". The US media disseminated false images that the Venezuelan government violated human rights. It was carried out to interfere in the internal affairs of Venezue-

la – a nation that has promoted Latin American integration through organizations such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), among others.

The American media reflected the internal conflict of 2014 in Venezuela with a series of errors and distortions, endorsing fake news, and pointing out that the forces of public order violated human rights and went against the freedom of expression. The media monitoring organization Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (Fair) and its magazine ¡Extra! evaluated the coverage of the main US media during the weeks of the protests in Venezuela and concluded that it has been "simplistic", with a script that reduces the dispute to "students against people loyal to the anti-American government, not very difficult to understand which side one is supposed to support,"<sup>2</sup> according to Peter Hart.

In 2018, the Washington Office for Latin America declared that 798 Venezuelans related to the government of President Nicolás Maduro had been sanctioned, as well as companies and vessels; these sanctions included the freezing of accounts, confiscation of assets of the people involved, as well as the prohibition of transactions with them, the oil industries, the gold, mining and banking industries. At that time, a leader of the Venezuelan opposition, David Smolanski, declared that the sanctions were focused on the government of Nicolás Maduro, also expressing that these sanctions were going to have little impact on ordinary citizens, a situation that of course has not been the case. Venezuelans are experiencing an economic and financial crisis as a result of these sanctions.

<sup>2</sup> TeleSur. URL: <https://www.telesurtv.net/analisis/Venezuela-bajo-ataque-mediatico-de-EE.UU.-20140317-0023.html>

In April 2019, Human Rights Watch published a report<sup>3</sup> where they said that the initial sanctions were not directed at the Venezuelan economy, alleging that the sanctions imposed could worsen the situation, but justifying that the economic crisis came from a long time ago. Sanctions are crimes against humanity, systematic actions that violate the very personal rights of the civilian population or part of it.

Because of these sanctions, Venezuela has suffered the biggest food and hospital crisis of this decade. Being a country dependent on the sale of oil and exports, these measures have very real consequences. For example, in November 2018, 23 operations were returned, with seven in the international financial system valued at 39 million dollars for the purchase of food, basic supplies, and medicines. Since there is no money inflow, people suffer from shortages of food and medicines, among others. These unilateral coercive measures are a total war that affects the Venezuelan people's way of life, their way of working, producing, and consuming. The blockade is, as Von Clausewitz would say, the continuation of the war by other means,<sup>4</sup> in this case through economic means.

### **Media that recognizes a president who was never elected**

The United States of America has made a lot of plans to get rid of Venezuela's legitimately elected government. They have tried various strategies, such as the "soft coup", to destabilize it, proposing and supporting violent ways, but they are also investing large sums of money in the implementation of the soft coup and its supposed parallel government. The American President, Donald Trump, not only recognized Juan Guaido as president of Venezuela last January, but he also took it upon himself to lobby the world in an attempt to get other governments to recognize him. Faced with a government that didn't have the right to rule, the US media re-

ported that the US and 50 other countries had recognized the government, even though it was clearly not legitimate and broke international law.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

It can be concluded that there is an ongoing media campaign against Venezuela and President Nicolas Maduro because their opponents are unable to acknowledge any result, let alone success. It is crucial to emphasize the idea of democracy, which is a system of political power organization in which the people are not only the subject of government but also the object of government that must be controlled [16]. In Venezuela, since the arrival of the revolution, a constituent process has been called. The Constituent Assembly was elected and installed, and the Constitution was elaborated, which materialized the demand that had been postponed for years. The explanatory statement of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela indicates that the Republic be "refounded" to establish "a more democratic society; it is not only the state that must be democratic, but also society". From the beginning, it is emphasized that democracy should not be restricted exclusively to the political sphere, but should permeate all spaces of social life.

This newly minted democracy has incorporated in its discourse novel proposals for addressing the serious problems of exclusion and social injustice faced by the majorities of the country. Because these proposals go against the current of world hegemonic thought, they have been viewed with distrust and frank aversion, both by some socio-political actors and power factors in Venezuelan society as well as by hegemonic factors in the world capitalist system. The findings of this study are confirmed by the results of the studies by other authors. For example, an event analysis of the image of Venezuela in the US media, conducted by N.S. Pivovarova in 2021, showed that the position of the American media when covering Venezuelan events reflects the official strategy of Washington. The press's emphasis on information about the economic crisis in Venezuela and the low standard of living creates a negative perception of the region's policy [17]. However, despite the active work of the United States to destabilize the politi-

<sup>3</sup> Venezuela 2019 Human Rights Watch Report. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/04/venezuelas-humanitarian-emergency/large-scale-un-response-needed-address-health>

<sup>4</sup> The original phrase of Carl von Clausewitz is "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means" (Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. New and Revised edition with Introduction and Notes by Col. F. N. Maude, in Three Volumes. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., 1918. Vol. 1. Chapter: CHAPTER I: What is war?).

cal regime of Venezuela, especially in 2018–2019, the color revolution failed, and J. Guaidó could not become the legitimate president of the country. According to the study by A. N. Sytnik, N. A. Tsvetkova and I. A. Tsvetkov [18], this is also due to the fact that US international broadcasting information channels were not popular among Venezuelan users, local digital media. The activity of individual bloggers and politicians had more influence than specially created US digital diplomacy channels.

As we can see, throughout modern history, the United States has sought to portray Venezuela in a negative light as a weak state with a low standard of living, emphasizing the economic crisis that arose mainly due to sanctions imposed

by the United States itself. The American media broadcast exactly this image of Venezuela, hushing up the positive things that are happening in the country and not paying attention to the objective, positive, and neutral statements of American politicians about the state of affairs in Venezuela. As mentioned earlier, the main American news outlets have close ties to the US government. This means that the US has a well-thought-out and appropriate information policy for this Latin American country. But the failed attempt by J. Guaidó to take power, which was strongly backed by the American media, showed that the Venezuelan public and political elite can stand up to pressure from the media, even in a situation of political instability.

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