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The Media

This is Not The Nine O'Clock News

"We (the coup organisers) had a deadly weapon: the media."

Vice-Admiral Victor Ramírez Pérez, speaking on Venevisión, a private channel, April 11, 2002

The April 11 coup was both an object lesson in the power of the corporate media in the modern world and, ultimately, the limitations of that power in the face of popular protest.

Having supported, encouraged, legitimised and even participated in the coup, Venezuela's private media then found themselves utterly redundant as the Venezuelan public - aware they were being fed a diet of lies and distortion - turned to foreign and non-corporate sources of information in order to discover the truth about the coup.

Bereft of any pretence of impartiality, objectivity or even a willingness to report the news, the Venezuelan media single-handedly laid bare many of the comfortable assumptions upon which the media as a whole depends for its very existence: holding the powerful to account, a fearless adherence to the truth, independence from vested interests.

Much 'western' reporting of the coup simply recycled many of the false and baseless allegations leveled at Chavez by Venezuelan press and TV.

Venezuela's five largest television channels - Venevisión, Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), Globovisión and CMT - are privately owned and universally hostile to the Chavez government. Aligned with them, are nine of the ten major national newspapers.

The most important and widely-watched television network - Venevisión - is part of a media empire owned by multimillionaire Gustavo Cisneros. The Organización Diego Cisneros has over 70 outlets in 39 countries. These include: Univision, which accounts for 80 per cent of Spanish language broadcasts in the US; Canal 13, Chilevisión, DirectTV Latin America, Galavisión,

Playboy TV Latin America, Playboy TV International, Uniseries, Vale TV, Via Digital, AOL Latin America (see Maurice Lemoine, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Sept 2002).

In addition to its joint ventures with Playboy and US media giant AOL, the Cisneros group also enjoy profitable partnerships with Coca Cola and Pizza Hut. Not surprisingly, Cisneros is a strong advocate of the neoliberal economic model tirelessly promoted by bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Cisneros is also a friend of former US president - and father of the current incumbent - George Bush snr. They have reportedly enjoyed fishing and golfing trips together and Bush snr has spent holidays on Cisneros's property in Venezuela. Cisneros was a keen supporter of the privatisation of the state oil company, PDVSA.

Against this formidable media muscle, the government could muster just one television channel - the state-owned Channel 8 - and a small section of the print media.

In order to combat this, and get his message across, President Chavez took to the airwaves for a weekly show - *Alo Presidente* - in which people were encouraged to phone in and talk to him.

The private media's hostility towards the government was manifest in a daily barrage of anti-government stories and positive coverage of opposition figures. In December 2001, the Venezuelan Press Bloc - an association of key media owners - joined the first 'strike' against the government.

Insults, outrageous allegations and outright calls for the

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overthrow of Chavez were common in print and on television.

For example, a month prior to the coup, the El Nacional newspaper alleged that the Chavez government had entered into a secret deal with Hizbollah and the Iranian government, which would see Iran establish an "operational base" in Venezuela and unidentified Venezuelans trained to aid Iran in "defence of the Islamic Revolution."

The report concluded ominously: "Terrorism is in our midst." The ludicrous allegation had an obvious intent - to link the Chavez government with President Bush's "axis of evil."

Pursuing the same theme, Chavez supporters were routinely referred to, across the media, as 'Taliban'. The same paper later claimed Chavez had admitted to being the head of "a criminal network." Both television and print media routinely compared him to Idi Amin, Mussolini and Hitler.

While the media campaign helped the opposition bring hundreds of thousands out on to the streets, what was remarkable was the fact that so many ignored what they were hearing and reading on a daily basis and chose instead to stay loyal to the Chavez government. The power of the media is not absolute.

Four days prior to the coup, the editor of El Nacional, Miguel Enrique Otero, attended a press conference with leading opposition figures Carlos Ortega (head of union federation, CTV) and Pedro Carmona (head of the Chamber of Commerce, Fedecamaras and soon to be installed as the 'coup president').

The newspaper editor made common cause with Ortega and Carmona, claiming that: "We are all involved in this struggle in defence of the right to information." This process reached its denouement on April 12, when coup plotters and journalists openly congratulated each other on their apparent success, live on Venevision. Indeed, according to Le Monde Diplomatique, key conspirators -including Gustavo

Cisneros – had met the previous day, April 11, at the offices of Venevision.

When the government attempted to block the signals of the main offenders on the day of the coup, media owners simply rerouted their broadcasts through cable and satellite. On screen, they repeatedly broadcast selectively edited TV footage that appeared to show 'Chavistas' shooting into a crowd of unarmed opposition marchers.

And when Chavez was restored to power on April 13, the private media continued with their diet of fiction. Rather than broadcast the unpalatable truth, many instead showed cartoons, cookery programmes and action films.

Outraged by the media's behaviour, Chavez supporters demonstrated outside RCTV, Venevisión, Globovisión, Televen and CMT, and the offices of El Universal and El Nacional, on April 13. Some threw stones and demanded the media broadcast a call for the restoration of "their" president. Some brave journalists, appalled by the behaviour of network bosses and owners, resigned rather than participate in the campaign of disinformation. One journalist was also killed during protests surrounding the coup.

Remarkably, since Chavez came to power in 1998, not one journalist has been jailed and the media continued to broadcast what was often seditious material. Few democratic governments would have tolerated such behaviour.

Nonetheless, many of the media magnates persist in behaving as if they are Venezuela's true rulers.

During the most recent, failed 'general strike', television stations

broadcast an average of 700 pro-strike adverts every day (see Naomi Klein - 'Venezuela's Media Coup', The Nation). During the same strike, there were also reports of increased attacks on individual journalists.

In February, Chavez announced plans to investigate the media's violations of broadcasting standards and draw up new regulations. ■