

The boom in counter-hegemonic news channels: a case study of Telesur

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Chapter 1: Posing the questions

The way news and information is delivered to consumers in most parts of the world has changed more quickly in the last decade than at any other time in history. The rapid growth in new platforms such as the internet and mobile phones, the proliferation in the exchange of user-generated content and the explosion of 24-hour news channels around the world are arguably the most important developments. Of these, the arrival of the new TV channels, which can be international, regional, national and even local to a city, has attracted a considerable amount of press attention. For example in Britain, the launch of Al-Jazeera International in November 2006 was considered sufficiently newsworthy to be featured in the main newscasts of broadcast media and in full-page spreads of broadsheet newspapers.

Less attention was paid to other new arrivals. Much of the boom in recent years has taken place in the commercial sector, particularly in South and East Asia. But in many ways 2006 was the year of the state-funded sector. Al-Jazeera International, which like Al-Jazeera in Arabic receives most of its financing from the emir of Qatar, received the most attention, but it was not alone. France 24, in which the French government has a large financial stake, started its TV and internet broadcasts in December; Russia Today, funded by President Putin's government, announced its desire to expand from English into Arabic and Spanish; the BBC World Service, which the British Foreign Office funds, confirmed its diversification from radio into Arabic and Farsi TV; Germany's public international broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, said it was expanding its Arabic TV operation to 24 hours a day; Euronews, which is financed by several European governments, announced its expansion into Spanish and Portuguese to Latin America, and the Iranian government revealed its intention of starting its own English language TV channel.

Even industry leaders have at times pronounced themselves perplexed by the giddy speed at which new players are arriving on the scene or traditional players are shifting priorities.² For media analysts, be they from the academic, market or journalistic world, the arrival of so many channels, most of them based outside the West, has raised a series a number of intriguing questions. Some of these are being addressed in the academic literature. Broadly speaking, they can be grouped into four general themes (although they of course overlap in certain areas): programme or editorial content; the resurgence of state-financed channels; the emergence (or not) of a new regional or global public sphere; and finally, the reasons for the success or failure of a particular channel.

One of the main lines of inquiry is whether the new channels offer editorial content that is substantially different to that offered by established media giants such as CNN and BBC World, particularly in the selection and treatment of stories. For example, a study of Singapore's Channel News Asia (CNA), which purported to have an Asian vision of the news when it launched in 2000, concluded that CNA was broadly similar to CNN in its presentation and selection of news.³ Another

² Jerry Timmins, the head of the BBC World Service's Africa and Middle East Region, told the *International Herald Tribune* in June 2006 he was 'losing track' of developments in the Arab market. Doreen Carvajal, "Big Fish dive into Arab news stream", *International Herald Tribune*, 18 June 2006.

³ The authors concluded that there was no new focus in its treatment of conflicts in Asia, no more positive images of Asia, and no more 'development' news such as education and health issues. They speculated that Asian media organisations had little choice but to present Asia the way to which audiences were accustomed. K. Natarajan and H. Xiaoming, "An Asian Voice? A Comparative Study of Channel News Asia and CNN", *Journal of Communication* 53(2):300-314.

study of Zee TV, India's first private Hindi language satellite channel, found that its news bulletins were largely derivative of the style of Western media, adopting similar standards of production and news values.⁴ Indeed the same author argues that in many markets the new regionally-based channels ape the Western tendency towards 'infotainment' by which the visually appealing, sensationalised news and light treatment of serious issues predominate.⁵ Ever since the debate kicked off in the 1980s over a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), there has been plenty of discussion around the existence or desirability of a 'non-Western' or 'Southern' perspective on news. Al-Jazeera International promises to mark a radical change by offering a 'non-Western' perspective on the news, which includes a break with the dominant negative images of people in developing countries being seen as little more than passive recipients of natural disasters. However, these are early days for the channel and a substantive study is yet to be published.

There are several interesting questions about the arrival of new state-financed channels. Do those that aim to be 'counter-hegemonic' such as France 24, Russia Today and Telesur, represent a new age of soft propaganda or 'soft power'? To what extent are they reacting against the domination of a Washington-based international agenda and its world view? How do they show, or do they show, they are independent of their funders? How are they different from state-owned propaganda stations of the past? What do governments get in return? In what sense are those that propagate a point of view different to partisan commercial channels like Fox News? There has been considerable research published on several aspects of Al-Jazeera, but little substantive on the others.⁶

In contrast, there is extensive literature on whether the proliferation of new channels is fomenting the emergence of a genuinely global or regional 'public sphere', and if so, of what it consists.⁷ There is considerable debate as to whether traditional players continue to dominate the new media landscape through their control of picture distribution, or by successful partnerships with local providers where they remain the dominant partner, or by the universalisation of Western news values or by their large advertising and marketing budgets. There is undoubtedly a more heterogeneous, hybrid and pluralistic media environment as new channels challenge the Western giants in many local or regional markets. But there is much doubt as to whether they generate new contra-flows of information reversing the dominant flow of news from 'the West to the rest'. Most authors are

⁴ D.K. Thussu, "Localising the Global: Zee TV in India" in D. K. Thussu ed. *Electronic Empires: Global Media and Local Resistance* (London: Arnold 1998).

⁵ D.K. Thussu, "Live TV and bloodless deaths: war, infotainment and 24/7 news" in D. K. Thussu and D. Freedman eds., *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (London: Sage, 2003)

⁶ Amongst the most recent are Naomi Sakr, "Al-Jazeera: challenger or lackey?" in *Media on the Move: Global flow and contra-flow*, D. K. Thussu ed. (London and New York, Routledge, 2006); Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press 2006). Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World* (London: Abacus 2005) and Mohamed Zayani ed., *The Al-Jazeera phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media* (London, Pluto 2005). Steven Guanpeng Dong and Anbib Shi's chapter "Chinese news in transition" in D.K. Thussu ed., *Media on the Move*, analyses the Chinese domestic 24-hour news channel, but not the international channel in English, CCTV-9.

⁷ Mugdha Rai and Simon Cottle, "Global Mediations: On the Changing Ecology of Satellite Television News" in *Global Media and Communication*, forthcoming April 2007. D.K. Thussu, *Media on the Move*. I. Volkmer, "The Global Network Society and the Global Public Sphere", *Development* 46 (1). Colin Sparks, "Is there a Global Public Sphere?" in D.K. Thussu ed., *Electronic Empires*, pp.108-124. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park eds., *De-Westernising Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

agreed that the flow is more like a trickle restricted to diaspora communities living in the North, but without much impact on host populations.

Finally, specialist media analysts are not the only people to address the question of why some channels are successful and others not. The Economist's influential overview of the main international developments forecasted for 2007, *The World in 2007*, highlighted the boom in new channels and asked whether they all made commercial sense. ITN's 24-hour news channel for example was forced to close down in December 2005 after just five years. The article suggested that distribution and quality content are the key factors which determine audience figures (and profits for those in the commercial sector).⁸ These are of course important and may be necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for success, but there are a whole host of other factors which will be discussed later. Many of the new channels hope to emulate Al-Jazeera's remarkable impact, but few operate in markets which replicate the predominately state-controlled Arab media market which Al-Jazeera broke open. Practitioners and academics alike have also stressed the importance of international channels 'localising' the product in order to compete successfully.⁹ Sadly, all too often, in some markets the dearth of independent, reliable market figures about a particular channel's performance restricts the analysis.

Telesur has received little attention outside of Latin America. Based in Caracas, it is a 24-hour channel, mixing news, documentaries, round-table discussions, films and cultural programmes. Of these, news and information account for about 40 per cent of all programming. Launched in October 2005, it is funded by the oil money of the '21st century socialist' government of Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez. It is the first of its kind to emerge from Latin America. It says it is offering a different vision of news from CNN or the BBC, 'not propaganda, not anti-Americanism, but in favour of Latin American integration and a reflection of Latin America's diversity.' Telesur's directors claim they are offering a new angle on stories, new voices, and new issues, without violating universal journalistic principles such as accuracy and balance.

The four issues outlined above are all germane to any discussion of Telesur, and are all covered to a lesser or greater extent in this paper. Chapter 2 gives the essential context in Venezuela and the region for understanding the emergence of the channel, and describes its first year of operations. Any analysis of Telesur has to be placed firmly within the framework of President Chávez's antipathy towards Venezuela's private sector media and his desire for an anti-Bush platform on the regional and world stage. Chapter 3 draws some parallels with the emergence of news channels in other parts of the world, and gives a framework for analysing the potential impact of Telesur in the future. Will it be able to reach a mass audience, or will it be condemned to be a niche channel broadcasting to left-wing activists?

Chapters 4 and 5 address what is probably the most pertinent of the four issues outlined above. Four hypotheses are posed and then tested about the editorial content of Telesur's news programmes. An attempt is made to give a preliminary answer to the question of whether Telesur is little more than TeleChávez. Is it slavishly following a *Chavista* agenda or are there important nuances to be unravelled? Detailed content analysis of

⁸ The Economist, *The World in 2007* (London: The Economist, 2006) p. 128.

⁹ Jean Chalaby, "Transnational Television in Europe: The role of pan-European Channels", *European Journal of Communication* 17 (2): pp.183-203.

several days of coverage in November and December 2006 of the recent elections in Nicaragua, the United States and Venezuela both by Telesur and by the leading international news channel in Latin America, CNN en español, forms the backbone for the conclusions.

Finally, chapter 6 summarises some of the findings. It can be argued that Telesur fits the pattern seen in other parts of the world of state-funded TV stations providing an additional voice and perspective. This perspective is not presented in the dull, *dirigiste* style of communist propaganda of old. But there is clearly a strong political pro-Chávez agenda which will probably be a major factor in delimiting its reach. For the moment, the evidence is that Telesur is missing what could have been an interesting opportunity to break the pattern in Latin America and most parts of the developing world whereby state-funded media are instruments of government.

Chapter 2: The arrival of Telesur

It is not journalistic hyperbole to describe 24 July 2005 as an historic date in the evolution of Latin American television. It was the day Telesur launched four hours of programming, which was to expand to 24 hours a day in October. President Hugo Chávez was attempting to reverse years of private sector TV domination in Latin America by investing millions of dollars of state money in a new TV channel. It was the first government-funded round-the-clock news and information channel based in a Latin American country with a regional news agenda. It is hard to think of a larger state investment ever made in a single media operation in Latin America. His venture may turn out to be a colossal waste of money, but there is no doubting the significance of his intent.

Telesur is based in Caracas, but aims to have an audience around Latin America. Several left-leaning governments have a stake in the operations of the company, but its start-up and running costs are almost entirely borne by Venezuela. It would not survive without President Chávez's political and financial backing. Its genesis cannot be understood outside of the political and media context of Venezuela. Chávez's hostility towards the privately-owned media and his desire to spread his influence beyond Venezuela form the essential backdrop to the channel's rationale.

Media wars

The two worlds of Venezuelan politics and Venezuelan media have at times been so intertwined that it is hard to discuss them as separate entities. In the period between the run-up to the failed coup against Chávez in April 2002 and the end of 2005, it was not uncommon to hear the view that the privately-owned media had filled the gap left by the political parties and taken over as the main, and at times the only, opposition to Chávez. The narrow identification of interests between the opposition and large chunks of the media had negative consequences for both sectors from which, it could be argued, they are still recovering. But for Chávez, their close association justified a constant stream of verbal and legislative attacks against them. When he first came to power in early 1999, his relations with the opposition media were mixed. But after the recall referendum in 2004 until early 2007, he aimed to neutralise their influence not by closing them down or censoring them, but by passing restrictive laws and promoting state-funded media to correct the asymmetry of market domination by an oligopoly of private companies. The use of oil money to fund Telesur was part of the effort to level the media playing field, albeit over a wider ambit of operations than Venezuela.

Hugo Chávez became president after winning the elections of December 1998 with 56 per cent of the vote. Prior to his candidature, he was best known for his leadership of a failed coup attempt in 1992. At that early stage in his political career, he was already aware of the importance of television for pursuing political objectives. On the morning of 4 February, in return for calling off the coup, he was allowed a short broadcast which catapulted him (and his red beret) to national prominence. He spoke of 'new possibilities', a 'better future' and the objectives of his rebellion not being achieved 'for

the moment' (*por ahora* in Spanish). This last phrase in particular was seen by several political analysts outside and inside Venezuela as hugely prescient of the revolution to come. British left-wing author and leading Chávez supporter, Richard Gott, said it captured the popular imagination. 'One minute of air time, at a moment of personal disaster', wrote Gott, 'converted him into someone perceived as the country's potential saviour.'¹⁰

Chávez's opposition to the corruption, wastefulness and incompetence of the two main parties which had dominated Venezuelan politics since 1958, the social democrat Democratic Action (AD) party, and the Christian Democrat COPEI party, clearly appealed to the frustrations amongst the poorer sectors of Venezuelan society. The wide-sweeping welfare programmes funded by oil money started to unravel in the 1980s and 1990s because of corruption, mismanagement and declining revenues. His image as a political outsider and his promise of a sharp break with the past were key factors behind his continuing support. After 1998, he and the parties supporting him won several further elections, including a second presidential election held under a new constitution in July 2000. However, the country was widely described as becoming increasingly polarised. The opposition remained weak, divided and leaderless. In such a political vacuum the privately-owned media, and particularly television, played a major role in fomenting opposition to Chávez.

The media opposition was led by two TV stations, Venevisión and RCTV (Radio Caracas Television), which in recent years have held a dominant share of the market. In the early 2000s, this was variously estimated at between 60 and 80 per cent.¹¹ Two other privately-owned stations, Globovisión and Televen, make up the other two members of the group of four terrestrial channels Chávez likes to demonise as the 'four horses of the Apocalypse'.¹²

Venevisión forms part of the Cisneros group, Compañías Grupo Cisneros, which has interests not only in various media operations, including the export of Venezuelan soap operas, but also in bottling, retailing and other industries. It was the main operator of Telcel, the country's largest mobile phone company, before it was bought by the Spanish firm, Telefonica. Diego Cisneros arrived in Venezuela in 1960 as an exile from Castro's Cuba. His son, Gustavo, took over on Diego's death in 1980, and restructured the group in several ways including dropping the Pepsi Cola franchise in favour of Coca-Cola.¹³ It

¹⁰ Richard Gott, *In the Shadow of the Liberator* (London: Verso 2002) p.70-1. See also Franklin Foer, "The talented Mr Chávez", *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2006.

¹¹ John Sinclair, "The globalization of Latin Media", *NACLA*, Vol XXXVII, No 4 January/February 2004, p. 19, and C. Lawson and S. Hughes, "Latin America's Postauthoritarian Media" in *Uncivil societies: Human rights and democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, ed. A.K. Milton and R. May (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2005), p. 177.

¹² Phil Gunson, "Venezuela's media in a Bolivarian storm", *openDemocracy*, 7 August 2006. Available online at www.openDemocracy.net.

¹³ John Sinclair, *Television in Latin America: A Global View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 80-4.

is a huge company with concerns in several countries.¹⁴ In the 2006 Forbes list of the richest people in the world, Gustavo Cisneros came in at 114th with an estimated value of US\$5bn. He is the second richest person in Spanish-speaking Latin America after Carlos Slim of Mexico (another billionaire who made his fortune from his media operations). He is well-connected internationally, counting George Bush senior amongst his personal friends.

RCTV also belongs to a family-based group called Phelps with commercial interests in a wide variety of activities, including the sale of soap operas abroad. One of its owners, Marcel Granier, is well-known for his outspoken opposition to Chavez. Founded in 1953, it is Venezuela's oldest commercial TV station and does the least of all the four stations to hide its opposition – a stance for which it may well end up paying a high price. Globovisión and Televen do not enjoy such a global presence or local market share, but they fit the pattern in Venezuela of family-owned TV stations being only part of a wider portfolio of business interests.¹⁵ Despite globalisation, there is a notable absence of foreign investment in the Venezuelan media, a pattern which is repeated throughout much of Latin America with the exception of Argentina.¹⁶ In global media terms, Grupo Cisneros and Grupo Phelps are essentially big fish in a small pond. But within Venezuela they have a hugely enhanced potential, if they choose, to influence national media coverage of political events.

Prior to Chávez's electoral victory in 1998, the Venezuelan media had the reputation of being staffed by some of the best journalists in Latin America. The close political association between media groups and long-established economic elites commonly found in Latin America was not the norm in Venezuela. Indeed, licences were often given to 'newcomers' to the media (like Cisneros), and then renewed or not according to their behaviour during the presidential term. In the 1990s the media regularly criticised the traditional political parties for allowing the country to reach its poor economic and political state. From mid-1996 and during the 1998 campaign, some of them (Venevisión, Televen partially and the newspaper El Nacional) gave favourable treatment to Chávez with positive headlines, wide coverage and a generally friendly approach. For others (Globovisión, RCTV and the newspaper El Universal), it was 'hate at first sight'. They were generally supportive of the candidature of Chávez's rival, Henrique Salas Romer.¹⁷

¹⁴ The official account of Cisneros' operations can be found in Pablo Bachelet, *Gustavo Cisneros: un empresario global* (Caracas: Organización Cisneros 2004). For a blistering attack on him and the book, see Richard Gott, 'Venezuela's Murdoch', *New Left Review* 39, May/June 2006. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes wrote the introduction to Bachelet's book, a decision which Tariq Ali described as 'despicable'. Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (London: Verso 2006), p.11.

¹⁵ Globovisión is an all-news channel owned by Nicomedes Zuloaga, who also owns an insurance company and advertising agency amongst other interests. Televen is owned by the Camero family, which also owns Multinacional de Seguros, an insurance company.

¹⁶ Sinclair, "The Globalisation of Latin American Media", *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Jairo Lugo and Juan Romero, "From Friends to Foes", *Sincronia*, Spring 2003. Accessed online at www.cucsh.udg.mx. In contrast, José Antonio Mayobre argues all major broadcast media were against Chávez's candidacy until the last moment. See his chapter "Venezuela and the Media: The new paradigm," in E Fox and S. Waisbord eds., *Latin Politics, Global Media* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

The honeymoon period lasted only a few months. The reasons for their transition to open confrontation were probably a combination of individual government decisions (for example, in the case of Venevisión, the open support for the Cuban regime), and their exclusion from any new formation of a ‘consensus of power’ between government and media that had been the norm under previous administrations.¹⁸ By 2002 private-sector media coverage was openly siding with opposition political parties and civic groups. Their explanation was that they had to resist what they saw as Chávez’s stewardship of the country to a form of Castro-like communism. But the effect was disastrous for journalism in Venezuela. Their stance is best summed up in the words of the Venezuelan media analyst, Andrés Cañizalez, as ‘the convergence <.> of two things: grave journalistic errors – to the extreme of silencing information on the most important news events – and taking political positions to the extreme of advocating a non-democratic, insurrectional path.’¹⁹

Starting in March 2002, the opposition began a series of huge anti-Chávez marches, to which the four main stations gave blanket coverage but downplayed or at times ignored the pro-Chávez response. In their coverage of the failed coup attempt on 11 April and after, the same four stations were wholly selective of what they decided to cover, in effect supporting the coup. They initially encouraged Venezuelans to join a large anti-Chávez march. Then they failed to cover the pro-Chávez riots and protests, the collapse of the short-lived Carmona regime, and Chávez supporters taking control of the presidential palace. Despite the failure of the coup attempt, the protests continued with a two-month long national strike, an oil production stoppage, and a recall referendum in August 2004 (which Chávez won).²⁰ The main TV stations and the principal radio stations and newspapers (with some minor exceptions) were widely viewed as leading the opposition to Chávez.²¹

Some saw Gustavo Cisneros as the key figure behind the April 2002 coup, an allegation he denies.²² He is rarely in the news or has a high public profile. However, a highly publicised meeting between himself, Chávez and former US president Jimmy Carter in June 2004 led to a (tacit) pact between Chávez and the Cisneros group which local press reports said included an agreement for the media to be more balanced in their coverage. The other channels made it clear they were not interested, but many observers detected a softening of Venevisión’s shrill hostility to Chávez in the months that followed the meeting. Whether this was a result of a formal deal, which included some commercial *quid pro quo* between Chávez and Cisneros, is not clear. It may have been simply for broad business reasons to do with Cisneros’ calculation that Chávez was here to stay and better relations with the government was good for business. (Too close an identification

¹⁸ Lugo and Romero, “From Friends to Foes.”

¹⁹ Quoted in John Dinges, “Soul Search”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2005.

²⁰ Much of the opposition continues to regard the result as fraudulent, partly because of the partisan behaviour of the National Electoral Council (CNE) in the pre-referendum period.

²¹ Dinges, “Soul Search”. For a fuller account of the media coverage of the coup attempt and the ensuing months, see Nikolas Kozloff, *Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2006), pp. 68 ff. and Javier Castillo Briceño, “Hugo Chávez y los medios de comunicación”, available online at www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas.

²² Kozloff, *Hugo Chavez*, *ibid.*, and Gott, “Venezuela’s Murdoch”, p. 156.

with one side in highly polarised societies can of course be bad for audience and readership figures, and so bad for advertisers.)

Whatever the exact reason, Venevisión dropped its most polemical presenters and hard-hitting talk shows to such an extent that it started to be called the Disney Channel for its abundance of cartoons and bland news coverage.²³ In the run-up to the December 2006 elections, for the first time for several years both Venevisión and Televen ran an interview with President Chávez that was also broadcast by the state media (although the decision may have been in part due to Venezuela's electoral rules specifying balanced coverage). Televen too toned down its general hostility and took significant amounts of government advertising. On the other hand, Globovisión and RCTV kept up their anti-Chávez stance which some ascribed to the die-hard *anti-chavismo* of their owners.

Levelling the playing field

Unlike other self-avowed socialist presidents with illiberal tendencies, from 1999 to the start of 2007, Chávez chose not to shut down the opposition media – much to the surprise of some of his supporters. Whatever the merits and defects of his rule, on the whole freedom of expression existed, there was seldom any overt censorship, and unlike in Cuba, journalists were not imprisoned for long periods for criticising his regime.²⁴ After the 2004 referendum vote, he gave priority to bolstering investment in the state sector, issuing threats against the private media and passing laws which his opponents interpreted as circumscribing their area of action. His attitude to the press was seen by some critics as an embodiment of his political DNA – one foot in democracy, with the other in authoritarianism.²⁵ However, there was a major change after his electoral success in December 2006 both in the overall direction of the government's policies and in its attitude towards the media. Chávez was clearly emboldened by his overwhelming victory to break with his previous stance and in effect announce the closure of RCTV as a terrestrial broadcaster.

Chávez himself is a consummate media performer. His programme 'Aló presidente' broadcast on Sunday mornings on state TV and radio rarely fails to get a mention in any analysis of his popular appeal. In it, he talks for several hours in the style of a tele-evangelist, combining songs, colloquial language and diatribes against Bush's America, which he abbreviates to the sobriquet 'the empire' (*el imperio*). Chávez on television is in the words of one foreign visitor, 'the Castro of an era brought up on soap operas and reality TV'.²⁶

²³ Foer, "The Talented Mr. Chávez."

²⁴ Chavez ordered the closure of the private TV channels on 11 April 2002 during the early stages of the coup attempt. There was one incident of overt censorship in 2006 when the prosecutor general had a judge ban the media from reporting some aspects of the Danilo Anderson case. There have been some cases of journalists being briefly imprisoned (for example, Gustavo Azocar in the state of Tachira). Investigations into the death by shooting of several journalists have not led to any convictions. Personal communication, Phil Gunson, January 2007.

²⁵ Teodoro Petkoff quoted in Dinges, "Soul Search".

²⁶ Peter Beaumont, "The new kid in the barrio", *The Observer*, 7 May 2006.

Beyond his own personal appearances, Chávez purchased or increased state investment in five TV channels, eight federal and regional radio stations, a government news agency with a special media monitoring unit, community TV and radio, and of course Telesur. Plans were afoot for a new communications satellite with help from China. It amounted to an 'alternative media empire' in the words of leading critic Teodoro Petkoff, who saw it as part of Chávez becoming a 'Caribbean Gramsci' and occupying 'the intermediary bodies in society' such as sports institutions, educational establishments and the media.²⁷

Official figures are not available for the levels of investment but some put it as high as US\$56m.²⁸ Nor indeed are market figures available for the number of Venezuelans now watching or listening to state and community media. But it would be surprising if this had not risen to significantly more than the five per cent of the population which historically had been the state's market share. Community radio and TV in particular is seen as a vibrant growth area, not least because the government realised the importance of alternative sources of information at the time of the April 2002 coup when the centralised state TV network, VTV, was ordered to be closed down by the *golpistas*.²⁹ Vive TV is an important state-funded experiment in community television, which does not always toe the government line.³⁰

The main state TV station (VTV – *Venezolana de Televisión*), or *canal ocho* as it is commonly known, is more of a personalist propaganda outlet for Chávez than for the government. It carries several hours of Chávez's speeches, visits, social projects and activities including a softball game he was playing at a military barracks in the run-up to the December 2006 elections, which was also transmitted by all the government channels. In addition, the president can and does insist that all media outlets take long chunks of his political messages (the so-called '*cadena*'), a legal right granted to any Venezuelan president since 1961 (although they were originally intended as public interest announcements).

More significant for the opposition than these moves to level the playing field was the climate Chávez had engendered. They cited his strident rhetoric against the media, including the threat of revoking broadcast licenses, and the passing of new legislation. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) had joined other international press watchdog organisations in their strong criticism of the 2004 Law of social responsibility in radio and TV (*ley resorte*) for restricting freedom of the press.³¹ Practising journalists, both foreign and national, complain of the difficulty of access to government sources if they are perceived as hostile reporters.

²⁷ Quoted in "Chávez heading towards 'totalitarianism lite'", *El País* website, 26 December 2006, translated by BBC Monitoring.

²⁸ Nikolas Kozloff, "Chávez Launches Hemispheric, "Anti-Hegemonic" Media Campaign in Response to local TV Networks' Anti-Government Bias", *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, 28 April 2005.

²⁹ Gregory Wispert, "Community Airwaves in Venezuela", *NACLA*, January/February 2004. VTV had already been abandoned by its staff.

³⁰ Kozloff, "Chávez Launches Hemispheric, "Anti-Hegemonic" Media Campaign".

³¹ For a summary of recent criticisms, see Gunson, "Venezuela's media in a Bolivarian storm".

An international furore broke out on 28 December 2006 when Chávez announced he would not be renewing the broadcasting licence of RCTV when it expired in May 2007.³² It was the first time he had made such a move. He reminded the world of the station's support for the April 2002 coup, while his government officials denounced 'an untouchable dictatorship of a few oligarchic families over large television and radio media'. Andrés Izarra, Telesur's president and the former Information Minister, who also used to work at RCTV, said that at the time of the coup RCTV had broadcast 64 days of propaganda exclusively against the government. Some observers saw Chávez's move against RCTV as a political vendetta; others saw it as evidence of Chávez's 'totalitarianism light', while some supporters thought it was long overdue. Few were surprised.

Various press watchdog organisations including the Inter-American Press Association, RSF, and the International Association of Broadcasting denounced the move for limiting editorial pluralism. Most damagingly for Chávez, the OAS's general secretary, José Miguel Insulza added his voice of condemnation. He said it was a very uncommon occurrence in Latin America, a violation of freedom of expression and a warning to others. The government dismissed the OAS as 'meddling', while Chávez called Insulza an 'idiot' and a 'viceroy of the empire'. At the time of writing it seemed clear Chávez was not going to back down or subject RCTV to the proper legal procedures.

There is no doubt that Chávez's electoral victory represented a new departure. In the days that followed, he announced several measures, including the nationalisation of the telecommunications and electricity industries, and the implementation of the unification of the various parties that supported him, which were widely seen as deepening the socialist revolution.³³ Izarra confirmed what he called a 'new strategic plan' for the media, which included the non-renewal of RCTV's licence and the purchase of a Venezuelan television frequency (previously owned by Caracas Metropolitan Television) for Telesur.³⁴ In the interview, Izarra said the aim was to 'construct a communications and information hegemony that will allow an ideological and cultural battle to promote Socialism'. At a practical level, this included the integration of public media systems, the 'orientation' of the public media and the creation of a national system of community and alternative media.

It is hard not to interpret such statements as a major departure in Chávez's policy towards the media. Prior to December 2006, the media environment (into which Telesur was born) was one generally free for open disagreement, but one in which journalistic standards of balance, impartiality and independence had been eclipsed by partisan coverage – all this during what is arguably Venezuela's most turbulent period in its

³² RCTV's terrestrial frequency was to be given to a new national public service television. RCTV was told it would be allowed to broadcast as a cable channel.

³³ Nathalie Malinarich, "Chávez accelerates on path to socialism", *BBC news website*, 10 January 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6246219.stm>.

³⁴ 'TV president outlines Venezuelan government's media strategy', *El Nacional website*, 8 January 2007, translated by BBC Monitoring.

modern history. The Venezuelan press freedom watchdog, *Observatorio*, which carries out lengthy studies of media coverage of elections, had concluded that the overwhelming majority of the broadcast and print media continued to exhibit strong or moderate bias in 2005.³⁵ It was hard to see how this state of affairs was going to change in 2007.

The 'air mile' president

President Chávez loves travelling. He is calculated to have spent the equivalent of one year of his eight years in power on the road, prompting complaints from his detractors that the 'air miles president' is at times more concerned with his image abroad than tackling Venezuela's internal problems. The reasons for his peregrinations are various, but at root they are an attempt to create a common ideological front against President Bush and to project his international standing as the leader of the anti-Bush forces. His aggressive stance is rooted in a genuine sense of outrage at what he sees as international injustice such as the war in Iraq, the political and economic domination of US interests, an unjust world order and the situation of the Palestinians.

Within Latin America, he wants to cast himself as the spokesman for a region more integrated economically through Mercosur and, more importantly, united politically against Washington's influence. His highly-publicised invectives against President Bush have given Venezuela an influence and status way beyond its historical international profile. As such, Telesur is in part an exercise in projecting elements of an active and muscular foreign policy that is anti-Bush, pro-integration and anti-free trade.

Chávez's trips outside Latin America have taken in most parts of the world, including China, Russia, India, the Middle East and several African countries. In part, his motives are to diversify Venezuela's historical dependence on the US for oil markets, arms sales, trade and investment. But he is also keen to cock a snook at Washington by parading close relationships with regimes that are anathema to the Bush administration. President Ahmadinejad's Iran and President Lukashenko's Belarus formed part of his July 2006 tour. North Korea was taken off the itinerary at a late stage. Previously he was one of only a handful of presidents to visit Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Most notably, Venezuela has been one of the very few countries to consistently vote in favour of Iran's nuclear energy programme at UN fora. Many of the countries Chávez visited in 2006 were chosen as potential support for Venezuela's (eventually unsuccessful) campaign to win a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.³⁶

³⁵ See the Observatorio website, <http://www.observatoriodemedios.org.ve>. The daily newspaper, *Ultimas Noticias*, is often regarded as the least partisan. In the run-up to the December 2006 elections, Observatorio concluded that RCTV was biased but VTV was worse. The Guardian correspondent sent to cover the December 2006 presidential elections was scathing. He watched Globovisión and *canal ocho*. The one portrayed Chávez as a 'communist demagogue who steals elections', the other as a 'democratic saviour of the poor'. 'Welcome to Venezuelan magic realism', he concluded. Rory Carroll, "Charisma and petro-dollars mean the show will go on for Chávez", *The Guardian*, 2 December 2006.

³⁶ Chávez's September 2006 speech at the UN General Assembly where he spoke of 'still smelling the sulphur' a day after President Bush's speech to the same Assembly is widely regarded as losing him key votes. Panama was eventually chosen as Latin America's representative on the Security Council.

Within Latin America he has used his windfall oil revenues to try to spread his ideas and bolster his leadership amongst the various left-wing governments that have been sweeping much of the region in the last two years. The term 'left-wing' hides a multiplicity of regime types, which have varied in their desire to stand up publicly to Washington, their approach towards foreign investment, and the radicalism of their rhetoric.³⁷ Chávez's '21st century socialism' has counted on strong support from President Evo Morales in Bolivia and Fidel Castro in Cuba (and the recently-elected Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua) in what Chávez calls 'an axis of good', but other left-leaning governments have been reluctant to accept Chávez as the continent's leader. By early 2007, only Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia had signed up for ALBA, Chávez's alternative to the US-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas. His campaign to support certain candidates in elections in other Latin American countries has at times backfired.³⁸

Within this context Chávez has distributed largesse to buy influence abroad. One study estimated that he had spent as much as US\$25bn abroad since taking office in 1999, although this figure seems very high and the exact figures are hard to pin down.³⁹ One estimate is that thirty countries have received some form of aid or preferential deals.⁴⁰ His government has dispensed several million dollars on various 'good causes' which have included buying Argentinian and Ecuadorean public debt, offering subsidised oil to several Central American and Caribbean countries or local authorities, and even financing a samba school in Brazil. A regional oil company, Petrosur, and a regional network of gas distribution, are just two of his energy initiatives. Outside of Latin America, he has spent millions of dollars on arms deals with Russia, subsidised cheap heating oil to poor communities in cities in the USA, and offered modest amounts of aid to four African countries. In January 2007 Chavez and President Ahmadinejad of Iran announced a joint US\$2bn fund to help development projects mainly in Latin America and Africa to 'allow governments to free themselves from the imperialist yoke of the United States'.

On the first anniversary of Telesur, President Chávez proposed to the 53 members of the African Union that they should join the Telesur network to improve integration between Latin America and Africa. It was symbolic of the meshing of his media and foreign policy aims. Telesur fits the pattern of Chávez using his petrodollars to spread his message and influence beyond Venezuela. It is in part an exercise in international relations, not dissimilar to President Putin's funding of Russia Today or President

³⁷ An influential, but anti-Chávez, exposition of 'the two lefts' in Latin America has been made by the former Mexican foreign minister and academic Jorge Castañeda. He makes the distinction between an 'open-minded and modern left' (which would include Brazil's President Lula and Chile's Michelle Bachelet), and the 'close-minded and stridently populist' left of President Kirchner of Argentina, Chávez and Morales. Others see the need for a much wider classification. Jorge G. Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2006.

³⁸ Juan Forero, "Seeking United Latin America, Venezuela's Chávez Is a Divider", *New York Times*, 20 May 2006

³⁹ The study by the Caracas-based Center for Economic Investigations is quoted in Juan Forero, "Chávez using oil money to buy influence abroad", *International Herald Tribune*, 5 April 2006.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Chirac's strong financial backing for France 24. The issue for all three stations is whether journalistically and editorially, they are more than just a projection of a president's view of the world.

Telesur's birth: 'Our north is the south'

In all the press attention given to the birth of Telesur during 2005, its directors spoke with one voice. Telesur was not going to be Telechávez. It was not going to be a propaganda station. It was not anti-American. Rather, it was going to be a 'public service not dissimilar to the BBC' which offered balanced and pluralistic coverage in its news. But most significant of all it was heralded as a regional channel, with important participation from different left-wing governments in Latin America. The Venezuelan government had the largest stake at 51%, but other governments also had a presence (Argentina 20%, Cuba 14%, Uruguay 10% and Bolivia 5%).⁴¹

The Cuban and Argentinian authorities provide some in-country logistical support for correspondents, but the actual funding comes from the Venezuelan government, the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA and the Venezuelan Mining Ministry. The budget is widely reported to be US\$2.5m in start-up costs and about US\$10m for initial annual running costs. Telesur's president, Andrés Izarra, says he needs an annual budget of US\$15-20m.⁴²

Even in the early days, there was plenty of fodder for those who wanted to dismiss the new channel as left-wing propaganda. Its advertisements were not commercials but a mixture of self-publicity, public service announcements and spots stressing the success of the Venezuelan and Cuban governments' social programmes. Its profile of documentaries seemed to be replete with rather nostalgic treatments of left-wing leaders, while its international advisory board consisted of several high-profile left-wing intellectuals like the British Pakistani, Tariq Ali, and the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano.⁴³ Editions of its round table discussion programme, *Mesa Redonda*, seemed to be populated by like-minded pundits. Critics also pointed to the Izarra's appointment as president of the channel when he had previously been Chávez's minister of information, and to Telesur's location in the same grounds as Venezuela's state-run TV station, channel 8.⁴⁴

However, Telesur's stated aims were reinforced by published interviews with its directors who stressed what is loosely called a 'Latin American integrationist' view and one which 'reflected Latin America's diversity'. This meant in practice an emphasis on detailed Latin American news so 'Latin Americans can know themselves better'.⁴⁵ One of the first publicity spots depicted several people being asked to name the capital of France. All of

⁴¹ There is some doubt about the Uruguayan participation. The Uruguayan Congress still has to ratify it.

⁴² Author interview, Andrés Izarra, 30 October 2006.

⁴³ For a fuller description of its documentaries and members of the board, see Kozloff, *Hugo Chavez*, pp.126-7.

⁴⁴ Gary Marx, "Will truth go south on Telesur news?", *Chicago Tribune*, 17 July 2005.

⁴⁵ Interview with Andrés Izarra, "Telesur es una ventana al acontecer latinoamericano" published in *Causa Popular*, Buenos Aires, 21 January 2006 (www.causapopular.com.ar/article794.html).

them get it right, but when they are asked to name the capital of Honduras, only one knows the answer (Tegucigalpa). ‘Let’s get to know each other’, ends the slot.

Its emphasis on offering more range of Latin American stories was underpinned logistically and financially by its newsgathering efforts. It enjoys an extensive newsgathering capacity – probably the most comprehensive of any Latin American media group working in the region. It has ten bureaux (Caracas, La Paz, Buenos Aires, Washington, Havana, Managua, Bogota, Brasilia, Mexico City, and Port-au-Prince) with plans for three more in Latin America (Lima, Quito, and Montevideo), and possibly for their first one outside the Americas somewhere in Europe.⁴⁶ Moreover it can call on a large Caracas-based staff of which more than a hundred are journalists. There is no doubt that the range of stories it covers compares favourably with any of its television competitors. Its main newscast, *Telesur Noticias*, is broadcast several times throughout every 24-hour cycle and lasts 60 minutes. At least 25 minutes of the programme is usually dedicated to a wide number of stories from Latin America. This means that it can and does offer themes that are not often seen on other channels in such depth. These include the situation in Haiti and Bolivia, live coverage of regional summits, detailed (and often live) coverage of elections in Latin America, social conflicts such as those in the Mexican city of Oaxaca and the peace talks in Colombia.

In the months that followed its launch, it consolidated its multi-media offer. Telesur’s priority is clearly the 24x7 TV operation, but it boasts a website (<http://www.telesurtv.net/>) regularly updated with news in text, and on demand and live video features. In September 2006 it announced a new press agency to compete with Reuters and Associated Press, and early in 2007 a multinational network of state radio stations, Radiosur, as ‘an alternative to the large radio stations owned by big corporations’.⁴⁷

Telesur set itself up to be counter-hegemonic in the sense of offering a different vision or news content to the main Western media like CNN and the BBC. Its directors in public expressed their respect for CNN but were keen to stress the differences. CNN was described as being ‘shaped by US interests, US culture and a US view of the world’. CNN en español, as will be discussed below, is by some margin the market leader in international TV news in the region for those who want to find an alternative to the news coverage provided by national TV stations. It should be no surprise then that a key element of Telesur’s rationale is to compete with CNN, although not necessarily aiming for the same target audience.

Telesur’s pithy slogan, ‘our north is the south’, embodies its counter-hegemonic approach. It sees itself as an alternative voice to CNN providing news from the south (Latin America) seen through Latin American eyes, in contrast to CNN’s base in Atlanta in the north (the USA). Its directors are fond of portraying it as an antidote to the

⁴⁶ CNN en español have staff correspondents in Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Jerusalem, and a freelancer in each Latin American capital city. They also rely on material from CNN International which has 36 bureaux around the world.

⁴⁷ Matilde Sosa, “Nacerá la hermana radial de Telesur”, *Argenpress*, 4 January 2007.

'information imperialism' of Western media and big corporations, whereby the dominant news flow is from the 'West to the rest'. Articles lauding Telesur stressed how Latin American television has long been dominated by TV programming, films and music originating outside of the region and in particular from the USA.⁴⁸ Finally it sees itself as 'alternative' by providing air time to those voices (particularly from social movements) and themes which are usually not covered in the mainstream media.

A detailed analysis of the extent to which Telesur met its stated objectives will be given in chapters 4 and 5. But even before it had time to bed down, its very existence provoked strong reactions from Republican Congressmen in the United States. Soon after its launch, Connie Mack, a pugnacious Florida Republican, described Chávez as an 'enemy of freedom' who wanted to use Telesur to 'poison the mind of people longing to be free', while Richard Lugar, the chair of the US Senate's foreign relations committee, said it was a vehicle to spread Chávez's authoritarian message around Latin America. Mack was instrumental in convincing the United States' House of Representatives to approve an amendment to the Foreign Appropriations Act calling for rival broadcasts by a US government-funded station. The Senate is yet to endorse the call.

Telesur's formal association with Al-Jazeera announced in January 2006 (mostly in the exchange of pictures, training, resources and technological support) was part of the reason for the opposition from the Republican right. A close relationship with Al-Jazeera, which they view as having an anti-American agenda, confirmed their suspicions of a channel funded by another of their bugbears, Hugo Chávez. But for Telesur's president, Andrés Izarra, Al-Jazeera was an inspirational model for Telesur because of 'its different point of view, different voice, its closeness to the people, and its closer view of the Arab world with all its diversity and contradictions'.⁴⁹

A comparison with Al-Jazeera is not an idle one. Both are targeted by the Republican right, both are funded by oil money, both have had senior staff working in mainstream media before changing allegiance (Izarra in CNN, various Al-Jazeera journalists in the BBC World Service), both are counter-hegemonic news projects, both are accused of having a political agenda, and both have had correspondents arrested on charges of close links with armed groups.⁵⁰ The markets in which they operate are very different, but it is

⁴⁸ The best expression of this can be found in Florencia Copley, "Telesur is Constructing Another View", *venezuela.analysis.com*, 14 December 2005, and Renaud Lambert, "Telesur: el Sur se arma para acabar con el monopolio mediatico del Norte", www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=24440, 20 December 2005. Aram Aharonian, Telesur's general director, talks of reversing the information flow from South to North in a manner recommended by the 1980 MacBride UNESCO report. See his article at www.telesurtv.net/v3/secciones/notasdeopinion.

⁴⁹ Author interview, 30 October 2006. It is significant that Telesur has formal or informal links not just with Al-Jazeera but with Russia Today, France 24 and the BBC (mostly at the level of exchanging TV pictures to reduce their dependency on the two main providers, APTN and Reuters).

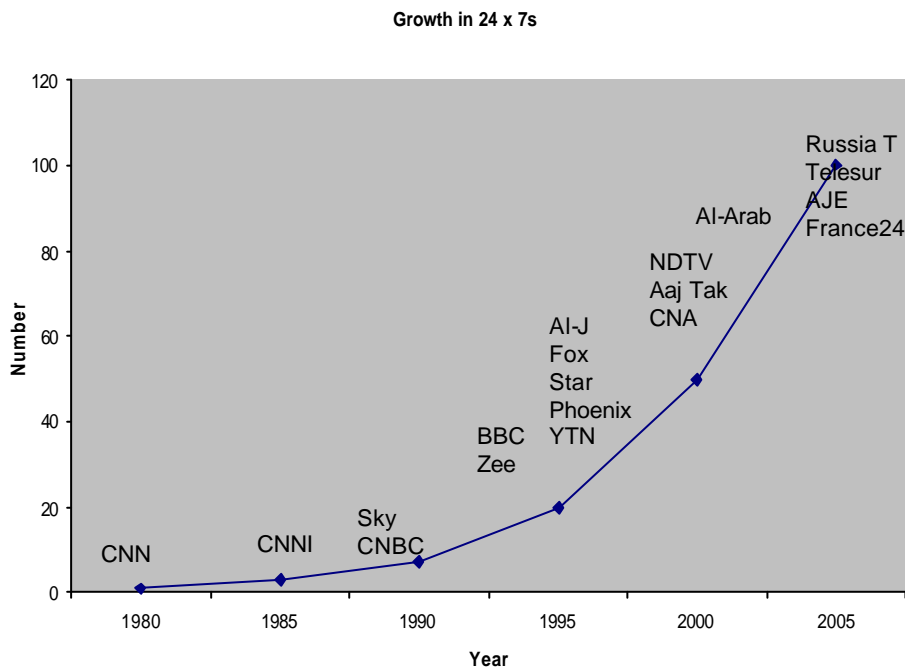
⁵⁰ The most publicised of several cases of Al-Jazeera staff being imprisoned is that of Taysir Allouni who was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in Spain in 2005 for links with a terrorist group. Telesur's correspondent in Colombia, Freddy Muñoz, was arrested in November 2006 and charged with having links with the left-wing rebel group, the FARC. He was released in January 2007.

worth pursuing comparisons with Al-Jazeera and other state-funded channels to help an evaluation of Telesur's chances of success. In short, will anyone watch it?

Chapter 3: A Latin American Al-Jazeera?

Telesur's emergence has important parallels with news channels in other parts of the world. It is worth speculating if the station would even have been conceived without the example of Al-Jazeera. There is less doubt about the extraordinary boom in 24-hour news channels over the last few years. Since CNN started in 1980, the number of regional or international channels which are predominately news stations has grown to more than 100. (this does not include the many 24-hour channels which run news bulletins in their programme offer) Much of the boom is recent, and has taken place in South and East Asia. (see chart) Most noticeably there are now more than thirty, virtually all commercial, stations in India, and six in Taiwan alone. While Asia and Europe are well-populated, Oceania has only one and Africa none.⁵¹ In Latin America, in addition to Telesur, there are only three others all owned by private capital (Globovisión in Caracas, Todo Noticias in Buenos Aires and Globonews in Brazil). They do have some reach outside their country base, but this is mostly restricted to diaspora communities.

Chart 3.1 The growth in 24x7 news channels, 1980-2006



Source: Adapted from Table 1 in Rai and Cottle, "Global Mediations". The numbers of channels are approximate.

It is important to have a variegated categorisation when analysing the boom. The new channels are very different in terms of reach (global, regional or local), finance base (state, private or mixed), type of ownership, range of languages, aims, market profile,

⁵¹ Rai and Cottle, "Global Mediations".

target audience, content (type of news genre, programme offer, production values, format, presentation style, localised versus international), multi-media offer (including methods of engaging with the audience), newsgathering capacity, international affiliation, standards of journalism, and technological framework. For established international channels entering regional markets, the different types of 'localisation' are also important (local advertising, local dubbing or sub-titling, local programming and opt-outs).⁵² There are probably more ways to distinguish them, but for the purposes of this study, the most interesting stations for comparison with Telesur are non-Western ones which aim to have significant regional or international presence.

The reasons for the boom are diverse. There are some features common to different markets to do with aspects of globalisation, the falling costs of communication satellites, the spread of digital technology, the deregulation of many broadcasting and telecommunications sectors, and the desire for influence and prestige on the part of some governments who have become cash-rich due to the high price of oil and gas (Venezuela, Qatar and Russia). The steady increase in the number of households with satellite or cable television is another factor, as are the changing viewing patterns which require news on demand. It is also interesting to note the extent of worldwide migration which according to the UN reached 200 million people in 2005. Of these the higher income groups can form a natural market for some channels. Indeed, the Phoenix news channel in Mandarin and Zee TV in Hindi target the diaspora Mandarin- and Hindi-speaking communities (there are thought to be 35 million Indians and 25 million Chinese living outside their home countries).⁵³

The growth in news channels in Europe largely took place in the 1990s as result of commercial, technological and regulatory changes. Very few have a regional presence (Euronews is an exception), partly for linguistic reasons. The Indian market in contrast has a remarkably broad range of channels, segmented by language, geography and genre (current affairs or business news). A market survey commissioned by the BBC World Service in 2006 estimated there were 31 players across various languages offering mostly India-centric news.⁵⁴ Other studies put the number higher. The boom has largely been driven by private investors taking advantage of deregulation in the Indian media market. But there are other factors such as the rapid increase in the number of middle income Indians and the number of households with cable TV, the high advertising revenue per viewer in the news genre, falling start-up costs, and in some cases, the financial support of local politicians. It is interesting to note that for most of 2006 two Indian stations were the market leaders (Aaj Tak in Hindi and NDTV in English). CNNI and BBC World had been relegated to being minor players, although CNN's local partnership with IBN had given it a strong market presence (in second place to NDTV in 2006).

The boom in Asia is largely commercially-driven. But in several markets state-funded channels have made a remarkable come back, given that many analysts had predicted

⁵² Jean Chalaby, "Transnational Television in Europe".

⁵³ Thussu, *Media on the Move*, chapter 1.

⁵⁴ Eleven are national stations in Hindi (nine current affairs, two business news), six are national stations in English (four current affairs, two business news), while fourteen are regional.

their slow decline or irrelevance. Part of the reason is the high price of oil. Gas or oil revenues are in effect funding Russia Today, Al-Jazeera and Telesur. As already described, President Chávez is reported to have a US\$20bn surplus fund for overseas projects, President Putin enjoyed a current account surplus of more than US\$80bn at the end of 2005, while Qatar's was US\$12.5bn. A budget of US\$50m, or even US\$100m, a year to run a station represents a small fraction of these surpluses.

Russia Today launched its English operation in December 2005. Its start-up and annual running costs of around US\$30m were nominally provided 50 per cent by state money and 50 per cent by commercial banks, but in reality it was the Kremlin who was funding it. It was part of a process by which banks and companies friendly to the government are encouraged to invest in 'national projects'. Several Western journalists were employed alongside Russian colleagues with the main aim of giving the news, particularly to foreign visitors, from a Russian perspective and in a style more palatable to an international audience.

No independent studies have been made of its content or reach, but those who have worked there or watched the station say its coverage of international affairs, and particularly of Iran, Iraq and the rest of the Middle East gives a Russian slant to the news.⁵⁵ It is clearly designed to promote Putin's and Russia's view of the world, and in a sense it can be seen as an instrument of foreign policy. Coverage of Russian news includes little criticism of Putin or Russia's actions in Chechnya, and so mirrors most domestic TV coverage which avoids thorough analysis of 'difficult' subjects such as racial tension or media freedom.

Like Russia Today, France 24 (launched in December 2006) is also seen as offering a different perspective to the news to be distinguished from the 'Anglo-Saxon channels, such as CNN, the BBC, Fox News or to the one of Al-Jazeera.'⁵⁶ Unlike Russia Today, its financing is partly private as ownership is to be shared 50/50 by the commercial network TF1 and the state-funded company France Télévisions. Its genesis was in part due to President Chirac's anger at the way the French government's policy was misrepresented or under-reported in the run-up to the second Gulf war. Journalists are reported to have to sign the station's charter pledging to give a specifically French view of the news based on the 'fundamental values of France', but this apparently does not entail government interference in editorial matters.⁵⁷ Cynics noted that for a station promoting all things French, it was odd that its second channel was broadcasting 75 per cent in English. Other channels in Arabic and Spanish are to be launched later. But the multi-lingual profile was partly to have influence in various markets and certainly to ensure strong dissemination of French foreign policy.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Russia has closer relationships with Hamas, Iran and Syria than Washington would like. Roula Khalaf and Arkady Ostrovsky, "Russia targets Middle East with Arabic TV channel", *Financial Times*, 15 June 2006.

⁵⁶ Leigh Holmwood, "Chirac takes on CNN", *The Guardian*, 16 October 2006.

⁵⁷ "International TV news channel set to be on air by end of 2006", *Le Monde* website, 15 September 2006.

⁵⁸ Angelique Chrisafis, "The news through French eyes: Chirac TV takes on 'Anglo-Saxon imperialism' ", *The Guardian*, 6 December 2006.

France 24, Telesur, Russia Today and CNA all see themselves as ‘counter-hegemonic’, in the sense of offering a different vision or news content to the main Western media like CNN and the BBC. It is ironic that France 24 added the name of Al-Jazeera to the list. Al-Jazeera International also clearly aims to be counter-hegemonic in the above sense, although it was not a priority for Al-Jazeera (Arabic) when it was launched in 1996.⁵⁹ The station’s early emphasis was on pluralistic reporting and (purported) editorial independence from its Sandhurst-educated benefactor, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, the emir of Qatar.

Al-Jazeera’s rise to prominence has been well-documented. It has a measured audience of 40-50 million viewers mostly in the Arab world. One advertising industry website has said it is the world’s fifth most recognised brand. There is no doubt it has completely revolutionised the Arab TV market and opened up a media public sphere in the sense Jürgen Habermas meant it, by creating an unprecedented space for pan-Arabic public discussion.⁶⁰ There are now estimated to be more than 260 satellite channels in the Arab world available on Nilesat and Arabsat, of which about 20 are all-news. Of these, the most important have significant funding from governments or businessmen close to governments: Al-Arabiya (Al-Jazeera’s most serious rival backed by a group of Arab businessmen including Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia), Al-Alam (financed by the Iranian government), Al-Manar (a pro-Hezbollah station based in Beirut but financed indirectly by Iran), Al-Ekhbariya (financed by the Saudi government) and Al-Hurra (the US-funded station, which lags far behind its rivals). Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya receive an undisclosed but important revenue flow from advertising but it is doubtful any of the above would survive as commercial operations without state or quasi-state funding.

The main issue for all the state-funded channels in different parts of the world is whether they have any real impact in the market, or end up as at best exercises in international relations or at worst ‘vanity projects’ for their government funders. Most aspire, of course, to replicate Al Jazeera’s success. But there were particular reasons for this success, only some of which can be repeated in other markets. One can argue about the relative weight of the different factors but they include the following. Secure funding was a necessary but not sufficient condition, as was an enhanced newsgathering capacity in such trouble spots as Iraq, Afghanistan and the Occupied Territories at crucial moments. A common language spoken across a large number of countries also helped. High production values from news staff trained at the BBC was also significant.

But there is almost universal agreement amongst analysts that a huge, if not the overriding, factor behind Al-Jazeera’s success was the state of the Arab media market before it arrived. With some minor exceptions, there was little space for criticism of governments or public debate. Much of Al-Jazeera’s popularity stems from its talk shows where ‘opinion and counter-opinions’ are freely debated in a loud, plebiscitary manner. It broke the mould and offered a voice to a large sector of the population that did not have one. In many ways it plugged into, but did not create, the anger many viewers felt at the

⁵⁹ Sakr, “Challenger or Lackey?”, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Sakr, *ibid.*, and Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*.

political situation they found in the region. Its frequent irreverence towards many Arab governments was a radical departure from the pattern of state-controlled and policed television. It did not matter too much that its funder, the Qatari government, was seldom criticised or scrutinised, as Qatar seldom generated news of regional, let alone international, importance.

So how much of this is relevant to an analysis of Telesur’s potential impact? Even though the Latin American TV market bears little resemblance to that of the Arab market, it is worth asking if there is a gap in Latin America for ‘something different’.

The Latin American TV market

As in the Arab media market, it is still the case that in Latin America, despite the advance of new media, television and radio remain the dominant ways in which most people get their news. TV household penetration is above 90 per cent, and has reached virtual saturation point in some countries. Radio receivers are equally if not more prevalent. Figures for Pay TV usage, internet users and newspaper circulation are notoriously hard to pin down and vary greatly from country to country, but probably the best overall estimates are that around 20% of Latin Americans have Pay TV, 15 % are Internet users, and 7% read newspapers.(see table 3.1)

Table 3.1: Media Access in Latin America

Media Category	Percentage of Population
TV households	90%
Pay TV	20%
Internet	15%
Newspapers	7%

Sources: Figures for TV households and pay TV (2005) are taken from Pyramid Research report (June 2006) commissioned by the BBC World Service; internet figures (2006) come from the Internet World Statistics site (www.internetworldstats.com/stats2.htm); newspapers (2001) from the State of Latin American Information Society Indicators, ITU (<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/papers/2003>)

A 2004 BBC survey carried out in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador showed that TV is the most important source for news with radio second and newspapers third. The survey showed that TV is used daily to find out about current events by four out of five people surveyed versus two-thirds turning to radio. Newspapers are relatively far behind the other two media as a daily news source: as low as 14% in Colombia and 20% in Ecuador although it is significantly higher in Venezuela at 42%. Another BBC survey, this time in 2005, showed that in Mexico domestic TV is the dominant medium for news consumption, with 67% mentioning Mexican TV channels as the preferred medium for international news.

It can be argued that newspapers have more of an impact because of their higher consumption amongst influential elites, but it remains a fact that TV is the main way

most audiences receive information about politics, albeit in many cases in a passive way. Newspaper reading and Internet use are still elite activities.

Most of the recent literature on the television sector in Latin America has stressed the concentration of ownership in duopolies or oligopolies (often family-owned), which is more exaggerated in television than in other media.⁶¹ One recent study described Brazil and Mexico as having in TV Globo and Televisa ‘the two largest, most monopolistic, and politically powerful broadcasting industries in the Western hemisphere’.⁶² Research into the degree of concentration of ownership suggests that in addition to Brazil and Mexico, it is particularly acute in Venezuela, though less so in Chile and Argentina.⁶³

Studies show that privately-owned TV, however concentrated in a few hands, can at times be a positive force for independent and critical news coverage, particularly in societies emerging from authoritarianism. Market forces were certainly a major factor in forcing Televisa in Mexico to be more even-handed in its coverage of elections after 1988.⁶⁴ However, those same forces are just as likely to have a dampening effect if the private owners of media develop a cosy relation with governments and restrict criticism of the state.

Defenders of a powerful private sector also argue that strong, financially secure commercial television is in a good position to resist intimidation, censorship or manipulation. However, many analysts have pointed out that the recent years of market liberalisation and private-sector dominance in most of Latin America have been more noteworthy for the declining trust in television, the collusion between TV owners and political elites often based on licence concessions and government advertising, and the trend towards ‘tabloidisation’ and entertainment driven by commercial concerns.⁶⁵

The state-owned TV sector has historically not offered much of an alternative. One recent study calculated that public broadcasting stations in Latin America represented 20 per cent of the broadcasting capacity in the region, but average audience shares of less than 5

⁶¹ Fox and Waisbord, eds., *Latin Politics, Global Media*. Sinclair, *Television in Latin America*. Lawson and Hughes, “Latin America’s Postauthoritarian Media”, pp. 175-9. Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the press in 2002* (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 2003), available online at www.cpj.org/attacks02/americas02/americas.html.

⁶² Fox and Waisbord eds., *Latin Politics, Global Media*, p. 4.

⁶³ Lawson and Hughes, “Latin America’s Postauthoritarian Media”, p. 179. However, it is worth pointing out that the four main terrestrial channels in Venezuela are owned by different family-based groups, and there is less cross-ownership of other media.

⁶⁴ Daniel Hallin, “Media, Political Power and Democratization in Mexico”, in *De-Westernising media studies*, Curran and Park eds.

⁶⁵ Lawson and Hughes, “Latin America’s Postauthoritarian Media”, 163. For declining trust in television between 1995 and 2005, see *Informe Latinobarómetro 2005*, Santiago, Chile, available at www.observatorioelectoral.org/documentos. However, 2006 saw some improvement perhaps due to it being an electoral year (“The democracy dividend”, *The Economist*, 7 December 2006). A 2005 BBC World Service survey of around 70 countries around the world, including ten in Latin America, suggested that even though Latin American journalists were among the most trusted sectors of society, they were the least trusted in the world alongside those in Western Europe.

per cent.⁶⁶ With the exception of Chile and possibly parts of Colombia, state-run TV is usually dull, a propaganda vehicle for the government or local politicians, rarely trusted and rarely watched. There is little or no public service tradition along the lines of some Western European countries.

Significant numbers of Latin Americans turn to regional or international TV companies for news. Market figures suggest that CNN en español is the only major 24-hour international news channel with a consistently high reach across various Latin American countries. In 2002 it had a weekly audience of 12.8 million in Latin America in Spanish (and 4.4 million in English for CNN International).⁶⁷ Most other international broadcasters, including the BBC, RAI, TVE, Deutsche Welle and Telemundo, are ‘niche players’ with usually between one and two million viewers each. All of these figures have probably increased since 2002 due to the continuing spread of Pay TV. However, given the relatively low penetration of cable TV in most households, it is still the case that most Latin Americans get their regional or international news from local broadcasters.

There is disagreement about how much improvement Latin America’s return to electoral democracy has brought to journalistic standards. Some academics have noted the recent rise in ‘watchdog’ or civic journalism which is assertive, independent and holds governments to account.⁶⁸ Much of this is found in print media rather than in television. However, the New York-based Freedom House stated in its 2005 annual report that Latin America had a less free press (which they measure by evaluating the legal environment, the political influence over the media, and economic pressures over content and dissemination) than it did in 1989 when many countries were embarking on the road to democracy. According to Freedom House, the number of Latin American countries with a free press was three in 2005 – Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay – compared to nine in 1989 and ten in 1994.⁶⁹

The evidence for the existence of more independent and assertive journalism in recent years is mixed. There have been some advances in covering corruption cases for example, although this is more prevalent in some countries than others. What is more certain is that there is undoubtedly plenty of room for more scrutiny of powerful actors. One recent study has pointed out that in Mexico a more autonomous press has put

⁶⁶ Valerio Fuenzalida, “The Reform of National Television in Chile” in Fox and Waisbord eds., *Latin Politics, Global Media*, 69.

⁶⁷ TGI Latina data for 2002. The same source gives the largest audience for a single channel to Discovery (21 million). CNN en español’s own figure for 2006 is 16 million including the US market.

⁶⁸ Sallie Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico* (Pittsburgh PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006). Silvio R. Waisbord, *Watchdog journalism in South America: News, accountability and democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ The organisation highlights the long-term pattern of decline in press freedom in Latin America as a key finding, saying that it is the most significant decline in any region. It emphasises three particular problem areas: Mexico, due to the continuing wave of violence against journalists and particularly those covering drugs issues; Venezuela, where President Chávez has continued his efforts to control the press; and Argentina, where the national and state governments have made widespread use of advertising to dominate the press. See Freedom House’s website for details: (www.freedomhouse.org)

politicians under investigation, but has not applied the same examination to the business sector and the Catholic Church.⁷⁰ Plurality of voices, particularly those of the 200 million-plus Latin Americans who live in poverty, is seldom a strong characteristic of the mainstream media. A leading academic commented recently that ‘what is alarming is the virtual absence of efforts to incorporate diversity of voices to counterbalance the dealings of market and government.’⁷¹

In summary, the Latin American media landscape is not that inimical to a new 24-hour TV station. To be sure, the market is crowded, and the history of state-owned television not conducive to trust from its viewers. CNN enjoys market dominance for regional and international news, but there is plenty of room to offer a different perspective. *Prima facie* there was certainly a space in the market for a well-funded, alternative TV station, and particularly one which was independent of political and economic pressures, could offer more diversity of voices and could hold powerful actors to account. Moreover, 2006 figures from the respected Chile-based polling analysis agency, Latinobarómetro, suggest that in most countries between 21 and 34 per cent of Latin Americans consider themselves ‘left-wing’.⁷² Unfortunately for the left, having a potentially captive audience is no guarantee of success.

Telesur – Assessing the (likely) Impact:

Different channels measure success in different ways. Commercial ones usually want to return a profit, whereas most state-owned channels want reach but not necessarily absolute numbers. It can be more important to reach a narrow, influential group of society, rather than a mass audience. In many developed markets for example, BBC World Service targets what it calls news followers and influencers, whereas CNN aims for the business sector and decision-makers. However, Telesur is clearly looking for a mass audience.

Distribution and reach is always difficult and expensive to measure accurately, and these are still early days for Telesur. No independent audience figures are yet available. However, press reports quoting official figures and interviews with Telesur directors suggest availability (though not necessarily viewership) has reached around 2.5-3 million cable or satellite homes in Latin America (compared to around 12 million for CNN en español). Figures are not available for its terrestrial reach.⁷³

As for geographical reach, the official account is that one year after its launch Telesur was available in 17 countries, via about 500 cable companies and nearly 60 terrestrial ones.⁷⁴ But in reality, performance is patchy and impact is limited. Unsurprisingly,

⁷⁰ Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict*, 90.

⁷¹ Silvio R. Waisbord, “Media in South America: Between the Rock of the State and Hard Place of the Market,” in *De-Westernising media studies*, Curran and Park eds.

⁷² Informe Latinobarómetro 2006, 82-5. The report suggests that left-wing candidates are better at attracting centre votes than the right.

⁷³ ‘Venezuela-Argentine TV network to compete against AP, Reuters in broadcast news.’ *Associated Press*, 14 September 2006.

⁷⁴ Interview with Andrés Izarra on VTV, 27 July 2006.

availability is better in countries where the governments are sponsoring the station: Argentina (via the state channel 7), Bolivia (via cable and on state and university stations), Cuba, and Venezuela (cable and some terrestrial). It has only a limited presence in Brazil (through community TV stations), Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay and Central America, but virtually none in Peru and Mexico (where Televisa has a virtual monopoly on distribution). Within Venezuela, a couple of Telesur newscasts can be seen on terrestrial television on the state channel VTV although this will change with the recent purchase of a small domestic TV channel's frequency (CMT – Canal Metropolitano de Televisión). Plans are well-advanced to make it available on other regional terrestrial stations. Telesur's website carries both live and some on-demand programming.

In short, it is too early to say if Telesur is a mass channel or just a niche channel broadcasting to left-wing sympathisers (or '*nostálgicos*' as its opponents would describe them). But what about assessing the future? It is beyond the scope of this paper to do an exhaustive analysis of the reasons for the success or failure of 24-hour news channels. The process is complex, and largely to do with the sort of channel it is (applying all the categories mentioned above) and the state of the market it is operating in. Successful distribution (which shows advertisers a channel's reach) and content quality or distinctiveness which viewers trust and enjoy are often considered the most important of all the factors.

However, it is not unhelpful to make some comparisons with the factors behind Al-Jazeera's success. By that score at least, Telesur has certain aspects in its favour: President Chávez's re-election in December 2006 for another six years would seem to guarantee its funding (although a sustained drop in the oil price would cause problems); with the exception of Brazil, Latin America has a common language; Telesur has one of the best newsgathering capacities in the region; production values are probably good enough (though there is room for improvement); there is a gap in the market for something different; as in the Arab market, television is the right medium to be in for disseminating news to a mass audience, and the number of homes in Latin America with satellite and cable TV is set to grow. In addition, the political climate in Latin America is broadly in its favour after the recent victories of Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua which increased the number of left-leaning governments in the region.

However, several obstacles will persist, and particularly the political and regulatory barriers to distribution in some markets like Mexico and Peru. Another is the limited demand for regional, let alone international news – news outside one's own country in most markets of the world is not a universal concern. The market is already crowded with regional providers of news (two commercial news channels specialising in regional and international news have collapsed in the last decade⁷⁵). But perhaps the biggest obstacle will be the historical lack of trust in Latin American state-funded channels, and

⁷⁵ Telenoticias, launched in 1994, and ECO (owned by Televisa) were both Spanish language 24-hour international news channels which faded away.

particularly in those which are seen to have an obvious bias or to be mouthpieces for governments.

Chapter 4: Telesur or Telechávez?

So does Telesur have an obvious bias? What is its editorial distinctiveness or profile? As already mentioned, *prima facie* its advertisements, documentaries and round-table discussions plus Izarra's background suggest a strong left-wing orientation, but its directors deny it is a propaganda station. Telesur has no published editorial guidelines (as yet), but it is noteworthy that the official description of its news casts on its website includes the words 'accurate... contextualised and balanced'.⁷⁶ Some initial press reports suggested that Telesur editors were concerned with balance.⁷⁷ However, widely-quoted comments by one of its directors describing the station as 'independent yes, neutral never' cast doubt on such aspirations.⁷⁸

It is not within the scope of this paper to enter into the long and important debate about the differences between lack of bias, balance, neutrality and impartiality, and whether any broadcast or print medium can ever achieve one or all of them. Given Telesur's stated aims, it is not unreasonable to consider the guidelines of the BBC, a state-funded public service broadcaster, which it applies when addressing the issue of impartiality. The BBC aims '<.> to provide a properly balanced service consisting of a wide range of subject matter and views broadcast over an appropriate time scale, <and> to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.'⁷⁹

With this in mind, one way to test whether Telesur is clearly aspiring to be impartial and avoid bias is to assess the following four hypotheses through content analysis of its news programmes:

- 1) Telesur in general selects information favourable to a pro-Chávez or leftist agenda (and in particular in favour of the Bolivian and Cuban governments, and against President Bush).
- 2) In its coverage of elections in the Americas, Telesur favours pro-Chávez, anti-Bush or left-wing candidates.
- 3) Telesur in its coverage of Venezuela has a pro-Chávez bias.
- 4) Telesur uses a preponderance of left-wing analysts and commentators.

⁷⁶ www.telesurtv.net

⁷⁷ See for example Vinod Sreeharsha, "Telesur tested by Chávez video", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22 November 2005.

⁷⁸ Jorge Botero, director of information, quoted in Iain Bruce, "Chavez sets up CNN rival", *BBC news website*, 28 June 2005, (news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4620411.stm)

⁷⁹ See the BBC editorial guidelines available online at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/impartiality/index.shtml>. Historically the BBC has aimed to follow the concept of 'due impartiality' when covering news, although Peter Horrocks, the head of BBC Television News prefers the concept of 'radical impartiality' which includes 'the need to hear the widest range of views'. See his lecture given at Oxford University on 28 November 2006 reproduced at reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/opinion/tv_news.htm.

The programmes chosen for analysis were Telesur's and CNN en español's flagship evening news programmes at 2000 Caracas-time (0000GMT) on three nights in November 2006 (5th, 7th and 8th). They were selected in part because they included coverage of the presidential elections in Nicaragua (on the 5th November) and the mid-term Congressional elections in the USA (on the 7th). The same programmes were examined on four nights in December (2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th) to permit a detailed analysis of the coverage of the Venezuelan elections.

Testing Hypothesis 1)

One way of testing hypothesis 1) is to assess what CNN and Telesur regarded as newsworthy over a number of nights.

If you had been in Caracas on Tuesday 7th November and turned on your TV at 2000 Venezuela time to CNN en español, you would have seen the following: 29 minutes of a special programme dedicated to the results of the mid-term Congressional elections in the USA, and in the last minute of the programme a brief mention of Daniel Ortega winning the Nicaraguan elections.

If you had tuned into Telesur on the same night at the same time, you would have watched in the first 30 minutes of the programme, 27 minutes of live and recorded coverage of the election results in Nicaragua, followed by 3 minutes of coverage of the US mid-term elections.

This could be considered an unfair comparison, as both channels were trailing and promoting special coverage of the respective elections which would obviously involve an extensive amount of time given over to one event. But the message about news priorities is clear.

On the following night, the 8th November, you would have seen:

On CNN, the whole 30-minute programme was dedicated to analysis of the results of the US elections, reactions in Latin America and the possible impact on free trade agreements and other aspects of US-Latin American relations. On Telesur, in contrast, the first 7 minutes was on the vote at the UN on the US blockade of Cuba, plus analysis of its impact on Cuba; 7 minutes of analysis of, and reactions to the US elections; 4 minutes on reaction to Ortega's win in Nicaragua; 2 minutes on alliances being formed prior to the elections in Ecuador, and 2 minutes on the new agrarian bill in Bolivia.

Again there is evidence of different news priorities. Too detailed a comparison may again be questioned as CNN broadcasts a programme called *Directo desde los EEUU* ('Live from the United States') at that time (0000 GMT), and not its programme with more of a Latin American flavour, *Las Noticias*, which is screened an hour later. However, the running order of CNN's *Las Noticias* programme at 0100 GMT shows that at least half of the programme was still focused on analysis of, and reactions to, the US mid-term elections.

A better comparison is at weekends when CNN's programme *Mirador Mundial* is broadcast at the same time as Telesur's *Noticias*. Sunday 5th November was a busy news night with four stories dominating: the Nicaraguan presidential elections, a large demonstration by left-wing groups in the Mexican city of Oaxaca, the end of the Ibero-American summit in Montevideo, and the death sentence passed on Saddam Hussein. Table 4.1 shows what was broadcast at 2000 Caracas time:

Table 4.1 CNN compared to Telesur on 5 November 2006 (allocation)

	CNN:			Telesur:		
Headlines:	Nicaragua elections, Oaxaca demonstration, Saddam condemned			Nicaraguan elections, Oaxaca demonstration, Ibero summit, Saddam condemned		
Topic:	Minutes	% programme	% of minutes available	Minutes	% programme	% of minutes available
Nicaragua	5.40"	19%	41%	32.00"	53%	68%
Ibero summit	2.50"	9%	20%	4.30"	8%	10%
Oaxaca	1.40"	6%	12%	3.30"	6%	8%
Saddam Hussein	3.50"	13%	27%	6.50"	11%	15%
Other*	16.00"	53%	----	13.10"	22%	----
Totals	30.00"	100%	100%	60.00"	100%	100%

* This includes headlines, advertisements, trails, football coverage (CNN) and Venezuelan elections (Telesur).

The news agenda is remarkably similar. The same four stories are featured strongly, and in the same order. The Nicaraguan elections receive stronger coverage in Telesur compared to CNN, but as a percentage of the number of minutes actually available for news coverage, the overall picture is quite similar. The high profile of coverage of the Nicaraguan elections by Telesur might be ascribed to the strong possibility of a pro-Chávez candidate winning, but an overview of their coverage of recent elections in other Latin American countries (particularly in Ecuador and Brazil) suggests that they assign considerable newsgathering and editorial energies to all Latin American elections.

Telesur's president, Andrés Izarra, argues his station has a clear competitive edge over CNN in this area.⁸⁰

More interesting is **how** the two stations covered the four themes:

Table 4.2 CNN compared to Telesur 5 November 2006 (treatment)

	CNN	Telesur
Percentage of Coverage		
Nicaragua:		
How voting went, irregularities:	100%	15%
Foreign Interference		6%
Legacy of former president		8%
Candidate profiles		27%
Socio-economic context*		42%
Other		2%
Total	100%	100%

* This includes the situation of young people, illiteracy, malnutrition, electricity shortages, remittances and inequality

Ibero-American Summit:	CNN	Telesur
Presenter's introduction:	King of Spain's participation in Argentina-Uruguay dispute; migration	Rejection of US Mexico wall, Migration
Themes covered:		
Immigration (main issue)	Yes	Yes
Rejection of US-Mexican wall	Yes	Yes
King of Spain participation	Yes	No
Chile-Bolivia dispute	Yes	No
Absence of 8 presidents	Yes	Yes
US blockade of Cuba	No	Yes+
Falklands/Malvinas dispute	No	Yes
Bolivia-Paraguay dispute	No	Yes

+ This included the studio presenter reading out the text of the resolution as it scrolled down on the screen.

⁸⁰ Author interview, 30 October 2006.

Oaxaca march:

Large presence of marchers	Yes	Yes
March peaceful	Yes	Yes
Shooting incident at University	Yes	Yes
Demands of marchers	Yes	Yes
More radical elements in march	Yes	No

Saddam Hussein:

Presenter's introduction:	Saddam condemned to death	Saddam condemned to death; Amnesty International criticism
Details of sentence	Yes	Yes
Saddam Hussein's reaction	Yes	Yes
Details of massacre	Yes	No
Others condemned	Yes	No
Mixed reaction in Iraq (Shiite/Sunni)	Yes	Yes
Reactions:	Yes	Yes
Iraqi Prime Minister	Yes	Yes
President Bush	Yes	Yes
Amnesty International	No	Yes
Spanish prime minister	No	Yes
Venezuela's vice-president	No	Yes

An analysis of coverage based on Tables 4.1 and 4.2 would suggest the following:

Nicaragua: Telesur had a much more comprehensive coverage of the elections than CNN. They gave more context and weight to the political, social and economic background⁸¹, whereas CNN concentrated exclusively on the details of the day's voting which included a lengthy interview with one of the election observers and former president of Peru, Alejandro Toledo. Telesur included some mention of foreign interference in the elections (and specifically the comments by the US ambassador to Managua), whereas CNN did not touch on this (of course, it may well have done in other newscasts).

Oaxaca: similar coverage

Ibero-American summit: Both stations included several of the same elements of the discussions at the summit, but the focus was clearly different. CNN gave a lot of prominence to the proposed participation by the King of Spain in the dispute between Argentina and Uruguay over the location of paper mills, which was not mentioned by

⁸¹ It could be argued that the emphasis on the socio-economic context shows a left-wing bias. However, the right-wing candidates in the Nicaraguan elections, as in other recent elections in Latin America, also spoke frequently of the need to tackle poverty and income distribution.

Telesur. Telesur on the other hand gave a considerable amount of time to the resolution condemning the US economic blockade on Cuba including the text appearing verbatim on screen. The resolution on Cuba was not mentioned by CNN.⁸²

Saddam Hussein: Many elements of the coverage were similar. However, Telesur included critical reactions to the sentence from Amnesty International (both on the death sentence and the way the trial had been conducted), and more general criticism of the situation in Iraq and of President Bush from the Spanish prime minister and the Venezuelan foreign minister. It is also noteworthy that whereas CNN used the phrase ‘dictator’ to describe Saddam Hussein, Telesur did not. The latter also referred to the US ‘invasion’ of, rather than say ‘intervention’ in, Iraq.

It is possible to make some conclusions based on the analysis of three nights’ coverage on 5th, 7th and 8th November:

- i) Neither station is falsifying news, but merely choosing items to include according to different news criteria.
- ii) CNN and Telesur have at times very different news priorities, and a different sense of what is newsworthy. CNN put more emphasis on the coverage of US elections at a time when Telesur was concentrating much more on the Nicaraguan elections and other stories in Latin America. Telesur provided a wider breadth of coverage of the Nicaraguan election, which included the political, social and economic context. CNN did not offer the same breadth of regional stories that Telesur provided, but provided considerably more information on events in the USA.
- iii) At times they covered similar themes, and there was a large degree of overlap of similar material and angles to the stories. However, when they did cover the same topics, there is evidence at times to suggest that Telesur favours information that is pro-Cuba and either openly or by implication critical of the Bush administration. In contrast, at least in the newscasts studied, CNN ran no material that could be seen to be pro-Cuba and little that was critical of the Bush administration’s foreign policy towards Iraq or Cuba.

So an analysis of what Telesur decides to cover and how it covers it would seem to confirm hypothesis 1). What other evidence is there to support this view? An examination of BBC Monitoring’s summaries of the content of Telesur’s main news bulletin at 0000 GMT⁸³ (on the twenty weekdays between 30 October and 24 November 2006) suggests very little criticism of Cuba, nor of two of Telesur’s other sponsor governments,

⁸² It is interesting to compare coverage of the summit by other international media. The BBC led on the absence of several presidents, and mentioned the immigration debate and the King of Spain’s role in the dispute (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6119560.stm>); Reuters, Efe and Associated Press gave strong coverage to the wall and the wider immigration issue, and also mentioned the absence of presidents. None of them mentioned the resolution on Cuba. Efe, “16th Ibero-American Summit ends in Uruguay”, Reuters, “Latin leaders criticize U.S. border fence plan”, Associated Press, “European and Latin American countries vow to curb illegal migration, rebuke U.S. border fence plan”, 5 November 2006.

⁸³ BBC Monitoring provide itemised and detailed summaries on weekdays of Telesur’s output at 0000 GMT. This includes summaries of all the items of the programme, including a brief resume of the content, time allocation, details of the source of the footage, the names of correspondents and the main participants in each item.

Venezuela and Bolivia.⁸⁴ There were several items criticising the US blockade of Cuba, usually illustrated by interviews with Cuban officials, but none criticising any aspect of Cuba. On Bolivia, virtually all of the stories were mainly from the point of the view of the government of President Evo Morales, using predominately pictures of the president, his ministers or his supporters. On Venezuela, there were several items stressing a government point of view on an issue or mentioning the achievements of President Chávez. There was one item showing the main opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales, but the overwhelming weight of the coverage included pictures of Hugo Chávez, government ministers or other supporters.

Such an examination of programme summaries should not of course be considered infallible, but it does corroborate a preliminary view that Telesur is not showing its editorial independence from three of the main governments that fund or sponsor it by subjecting them to any serious critical coverage.⁸⁵ On the contrary, it broadcasts plenty of material which puts them in a good light.

Testing Hypothesis 2)

The coverage of the Nicaraguan presidential elections on Sunday 5 November was chosen to test hypothesis 2). The fact that Daniel Ortega, candidate for the left-wing Sandinistas and a political ally of President Chávez, was running against two pro-US candidates makes it a good choice to test bias.

There are various ways of measuring bias in election coverage, but they broadly fall into two categories: quantitative and qualitative. The former includes, for example, the simple method of measuring the amount of time ascribed to each candidate in the media's coverage of an election. Such studies have shown for example that Televisa's coverage of Mexican election until 1988 strongly favoured the ruling party, the PRI. Similar conclusions have been reached in the case of TV Globo's coverage of Fernando de Collor in his victory in Brazil in 1989, and of the TV coverage of President Fujimori of Peru in the 2000 elections.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ A fuller picture would be achieved by analysing Telesur's coverage of Argentina, another sponsor government of the station. However, in the period in question, there was little coverage of Argentina. Also, Argentina does not form part of the 'axis of good' (Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba) which Chávez champions.

⁸⁵ Izarra is aware of this shortcoming and has identified it as a priority to improve (along with some of the station's technical defects). He bemoans the general lack of professional standards of balance and impartiality amongst Latin American journalists (and particularly in Venezuela), which makes such a task difficult. Telesur's detractors would of course see it as a smokescreen for what is a pro-Chávez agenda. Author interview, 30 October 2006.

⁸⁶ For TV bias in covering elections see S. Hughes and C. Lawson, "Propaganda and crony capitalism: Partisan bias in Mexican television news", *Latin American Research Review* 39 (3): 81-105 and T. Boas, "Television and neopopulism in Latin America: Media effects in Brazil and Peru", *Latin American Research Review* 40 (2): 27-49.

Quantitative analysis can be a good indicator, although it is normally insufficient. It will not for example capture negative coverage of candidates. A more complete picture can include such considerations as the use of images, and the priming and framing of reports. The absence of certain type of information about candidates can also be important.

A quantitative analysis of Telesur’s coverage on the night of 5th November (starting at 0000 GMT) yields the following results. The four main candidates were all given profiles with the amount of minutes assigned as shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Times allocated to candidate profiles in Nicaraguan elections

Profile:

Eduardo Montealegre (Liberal Alliance):	1.45”
José Rizo (Constitutionalist Liberal Party):	1.39”
Edmundo Jarquín (Sandinista Renewal Movement):	1.39”*
Daniel Ortega (FSLN - Sandinistas):	1.50”

 * This included a 15-second mention of Eden Pastora, candidate for Alternative for Change.

This treatment is even-handed, at least by the standards of the stopwatch.⁸⁷ But clearly a more complete way of judging bias is to assess the positive/empathetic, neutral and negative/critical coverage of each candidate. Table 4.4 shows a breakdown of the same candidate profiles using qualitative criteria (in this case the use of positive/negative images, the balance between time allocated to the candidate and his supporters as opposed to their critics, the mention of recent opinion polls, the use of clips from campaign spots, and the language used).

Table 4.4 Treatment in candidate profiles in Nicaraguan elections

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Montealegre	32%	19%	58%
Rizo	17%	37%	45%
Jarquín	38%	49%	13%
Ortega	31%	28%	40%

⁸⁷ Coverage that gives an equal amount of available time for each political party is not necessarily impartial as it can be seen as accepting the political status quo. It is interesting to note that the BBC in its editorial guidelines follows the concept of ‘due impartiality’ which ‘does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view’. www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/impartiality/acheivingimpart.shtml

The application of how, and which, qualitative criteria are chosen is always debatable, but in the above chart the same criteria were consistently applied. If anything, there was bias in favour of Edmundo Jarquín, the dissident candidate of the Sandinista Renewal Movement, whom some on the international left regard as the true bearers of the Sandinista legacy. Daniel Ortega was criticised by one opponent (the same Edmundo Jarquín) for only being interested in power, a view which is echoed by some of his former supporters.⁸⁸ There was also mention of his political transformation, most noticeably symbolised by his alliance with a former right-wing contra rebel as a running mate and his reconciliation with the Catholic Church. However, it was also made clear that Mr Jarquín had little chance of electoral success. Given President Chávez's open support for Mr Ortega, it would not have been unreasonable to have predicted an overwhelming bias in favour of his candidate. But this was clearly not the case.

A preliminary examination of Telesur's coverage of the Nicaraguan elections would therefore suggest some degree of balance. Moreover, an examination of BBC Monitoring's programme summaries of Telesur's Noticias programme on weekdays (at 0000 GMT) in the three weeks before the elections would suggest at least a degree of pluralism in the coverage. The reports on Nicaragua included video clips of all the candidates, the closing rallies of Ortega, Rizo and Montealegre, and criticism of Venezuela's oil supplies to Sandinista-controlled local governments.

The Nicaraguan government did not at the time of the coverage of the elections make any financial or other contribution to Telesur, so it could be argued there was more room for editorial independence. Such observations may well be germane to any analysis of the coverage of elections in Brazil and Ecuador in which there is some evidence of pluralism. For example, Telesur covered the live televised debate between President Lula and his challenger, Geraldo Alckmin, on 8 October. In its coverage of the second round of Ecuadorean presidential elections on 26 November, it included several minutes of an interview with Gustavo Noboa, the defeated right-wing opposition candidate, complaining of fraud. More qualitative research would be needed to give a definitive picture of the overall balance, but a negative answer to hypothesis 2) would not be an unreasonable one.

Any conclusion of 'selective bias' (i.e. bias on some issues but not on others) would need to be corroborated by a wider study of Telesur's coverage of countries more allied to the United States government like Colombia, Peru and Mexico. But there is initial evidence to suggest that the channel exhibits some pluralism in its coverage of non-sponsoring countries, but is largely uncritical of those with a stake in it.

⁸⁸ The international coverage, including by British newspapers with a left-liberal profile like The Guardian and The Observer, was far more critical of Ortega, in particular for his pact in 2001 with the corrupt former Nicaraguan president, Arnoldo Aleman, which resulted in his gaining immunity from prosecution for the alleged sexual abuse of his step daughter. For a particularly damning appraisal of Ortega by a left-liberal US think tank, see *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, "Nicaragua elections: Ortega appeals to a higher power" (www.coha.org/2006/11/02/nicaragua-elections-ortega-appeals-to-a-higher-power).

Chapter 5: Telesur's coverage of Venezuela

Hypotheses 3) and 4) ('Telesur in its coverage of Venezuela has a pro-Chávez bias' and 'Telesur uses a preponderance of left-wing analysts and commentators') can both be tested by analysing the coverage of Venezuela's presidential elections held on 3rd December 2006, and in particular the 0000 GMT or 0100 GMT edition of Telesur Noticias on four consecutive nights (2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th December). Some comparisons will be made both with CNN en español's coverage on the same nights and with the coverage of some of the mainstream Western media.

The background to the elections

In the months running up to the elections, there were fears from the *chavistas* that the opposition parties would boycott the elections in the same way that they had decided at a late stage not to take part in the National Assembly elections of December 2005 (and thereby deny them legitimacy). In the event, most of the opposition united around the candidature of Manuel Rosales, the governor of the western state of Zulia. Most opinion polls gave Chávez a 20-point lead over Rosales. Despite the polls, some of the opposition feared that Chávez would win by fraud and mistrusted the independence of the government-dominated electoral authority, the CNE. In particular, there were concerns expressed by the opposition over the fingerprint machines (used in conjunction with the electronic voting), which they said could be used to perpetrate fraud or to identify political sympathies in the future. Their official purpose was to prevent double-voting, but opposition voters suspected the machines would be used to register how individuals had voted to deny Rosales supporters jobs or welfare benefits in the future.⁸⁹

The government dismissed the allegations of possible fraud. They said robust technological and administrative procedures were in place to prevent software manipulation or other security failures.⁹⁰ They also pointed to the fact that the elections were one of the most observed anywhere in the world with a huge presence of international observers including those from the OAS, the Carter Centre and the European Union. In addition, observers from the parties taking part in the elections were entitled to observe the 33,000 polling stations throughout the country.

The issue of possible fraud dominated the national coverage of the elections. Many privately-owned media outlets focused on the possibility of fraud and what form it might take, whereas the pro-government media carried reports of what they said was evidence of the opposition planning for post-electoral violence and/or demonstrations. This allegedly included plans for a coup and lists of people plotting to assassinate the president, including opposition figures and the Bush administration. Considerable attention was paid to the allegations that the Rosales camp had already prepared

⁸⁹ The grounds for their fears was the so-called Tascon list, which had identified people who added their signatures to a call for the 2004 referendum and was reported to have led some to being barred from government jobs and access to some public services.

⁹⁰ A good summary of this can be found in the briefing document distributed prior to the elections by the London-based, pro-Chávez *Venezuela Information Centre*, "Venezuela: Democracy and Social Progress", available at http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=156&Itemid=30.

campaign leaflets, banners and T-shirts for a massive campaign soon after the elections to denounce fraud.

The international media did not give as much coverage to the accusations and counter-accusations. Rather, their focus was on the overwhelming support for Chávez from the poorer sectors of society as a result of his social programmes, and in particular the so-called Misiones. These consist of free health care, popular education and subsidised supermarkets, all of which the large oil revenues had helped to fund. Even the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*, which are not known for their pro-Chávez sentiments, stressed the wide appeal of the Misiones. But they also included criticisms of poor crime figures, ongoing corruption and increasing authoritarianism, all of which were also mentioned by correspondents from other Western media less opposed to Chávez.⁹¹ Manuel Rosales was not given much chance of success, although he was praised for broadening the support of the opposition and making the opposition more unified. Some coverage was given to his proposals to help the poor through a debit card scheme called 'Mi Negra', which literally means 'My Black' and refers to the oil income which would be used to pay for the programme. 'Mi Negra' was designed to complement but not replace the Misiones.

In the event, Chávez won an overwhelming majority with 62.9% of the vote while Rosales won just under 40%. Soon after the vote, Rosales accepted that it was free of fraud.

Telesur's coverage:

2nd December 0000 GMT (2000 Caracas time).

On the evening prior to the elections, Telesur offered comprehensive coverage of the elections by dedicating around 34 minutes of the 47 minutes available, equivalent to 72% of the programme. The programme led with the joint celebrations in Cuba of Fidel Castro's 80th birthday and of the 50th anniversary of the Granma landing. The ongoing hunger strike in Bolivia by some opposition figures and the demonstrations in Lebanon were also covered. The edition of CNN en español's *Mirador Mundial* at the same time covered the same stories (Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, and Lebanon) but also included a report from Mexico. CNN's Venezuela coverage led the programme, but represented only about 15% of the content. The fact that Telesur chose to dedicate a much larger amount of the programme to Venezuela fitted the general pattern of its offering extensive coverage of all the elections in Latin America (but not the USA), and should not be seen as representative of any pro-Chávez inclinations.

⁹¹ "The Chávez machine rolls on", *The Economist*, 30 November 2006. Richard Lapper, "Petro-populism: a third term beckons for Venezuela's firebrand president", *Financial Times*, 1 December 2006. Rory Carroll, "Charisma and petro-dollars mean the show will go on for Chávez", *The Guardian*, 2 December 2006. Simon Romero, "Crime is top concern for Venezuela voters", *International Herald Tribune*, 2 December 2006. Nathalie Malinarich, "Venezuela: a nation divided", *BBC news website*, 27 November 2006 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6179612.stm>)

Table 5.1 gives a breakdown of the content of Telesur's programme.

Table 5.1 Telesur's coverage of Venezuelan elections at 0000 GMT on 2 December

Correspondent's report on general background to elections	1.40"
Profile of Hugo Chávez	2.50"
Report on Chávez's social programmes, the Misiones	2.20"
Interview by presenter with Mr Carrasquero from Rosales' election team	2.20"
Profile of Manuel Rosales	3.40"
Second part of interview by presenter with Carrasquero	5.30"
Report on discovery of opposition propaganda against possible fraud	1.50"
Clip of Jesse Chacón, Interior Minister	1.00"
Clips from visiting delegations from Nicaragua and the EU	1:20"
Interview by presenter with Mr Vivas from Chávez's election team	7:30"
Clip of Mercosur representative	1:10"
Clip of OAS representative	0:50"
Other (presenters' links etc)	2.00"
Total:	34.00"

The programme offers several good opportunities to measure bias, and in particular the profiles of the two candidates, the interviews with two representatives of the different campaign teams, and a special report on the Misiones. As Table 5.1 shows, quantitatively, Rosales' profile was longer by 1.20" than that of Chávez, but if the report on the Misiones is included then Chávez gets more than Rosales (by 1.30"). The two representatives of the campaign teams get approximately the same amount of air time: 7:50" for José Vicente Carrasquero from Rosales' election campaign team as against 7:30" for Dario Rivas from the 'Comando Miranda', Chávez's electoral command organisation. However, it is more illuminating to carry out a qualitative analysis of the three elements of the programmes mentioned above.

Table 5.2 shows the difference between the profile of Chávez and that of Rosales:

Table 5.2 Profiles of Chávez and Rosales

Content:	Chávez	Rosales
1) Presenter's Introduction:	Positive	Negative
2) Characteristics mentioned	Positive	Neutral/Negative
3) Facts mentioned	Positive/Neutral	Positive/Neutral/Negative
4) Vox pops	None	Positive/Negative
5) Analysts	None	Negative
6) Images used	Positive/Neutral/Neg	Positive/Neutral/Negative

The six criteria chosen to assess the profiles are by no means exhaustive, but they are sufficient to suggest a strong tendency in the portrayals of the respective candidates.

1) The introduction given by the presenter to the Chávez profile was textually: ‘and now let’s find out who’s leading the polls in the Venezuelan elections’. For Rosales, it was ‘...Rosales, who<se candidature> has been seriously questioned by some sectors of the government for his participation in the April 2002 coup in Venezuela.’

2) The personal qualities mentioned to describe Chávez were ‘charismatic, spontaneous, skilled at reaching the masses’. No personal skills were ascribed to Rosales, but he was described as the ‘candidate of the empire’ (the United States administration).

3) For Chávez, the key facts mentioned were his successful social programmes and his winning various elections in the past. The profile of Rosales began with a mention of his participation in the April 2002 coup attempt and in the oil stoppage which began later that year. However, he was also described as having won the governorship of Zulia on two occasions.

4) There were no vox pops used in the profile of Chávez, but in the case of Rosales there was one praising his ‘Mi Negra’ proposal, lasting about 5 seconds, and a second one criticising it, lasting 15 seconds.

5) There were no analysts used in the profile of Chávez, but in the case of Rosales, there was an interview with a university professor criticising the ‘Mi Negra’ proposal (for being inflationary and not empowering poor people) and lasting about 40 seconds. There was also a commentary in the text of the reporter saying that according to a recent opinion poll, 59 per cent of Venezuelans rejected the ‘MiNegra’ initiative.

6) Pictures of *chavista* rallies or meetings were used 5 times, giving a total of 36 seconds. Chávez himself appeared (usually speaking) for at least 90 seconds of the report, which included images for about six seconds of him smiling with President Lula of Brazil and President Kirchner of Argentina. The only negative image was that of Chávez’s involvement in the February 1992 coup, although it can be argued this was not necessarily negative as it carried over 20 seconds of Chávez’s famous ‘*por ahora*’ speech (see chapter 2), which was widely seen as garnering him support. Rosales’ rallies also got a strong showing with over 60 seconds. However, the report also included pictures of him participating in the April 2002 coup attempt and in the oil stoppage.⁹²

In conclusion, Table 5.2 suggests that the only negative aspect of the Chávez profile was the mention of his attempted coup in February 1992, but even that could be seen as neutral or even positive. The portrayal of Rosales on the other hand included only a few positive aspects, and a predominance of negative ones.

The treatment of Rosales’ ‘Mi Negra’ proposal stands in stark contrast to the treatment of the government’s Misiones in the report which followed the Chávez profile. The

⁹² Rosales insisted his participation in the 2002 coup was an honest mistake in the confusion that followed the announcement of the president's resignation. He likes to point out that he did not organise a coup like the one Chávez led in February 1992.

reporter's script stressed the positive achievements of the health clinics and the popular supermarkets (the *Mercales* which sell subsidised basic products); two vox pops of Venezuelans who said they had benefited from the programmes; a clip of a paediatrician in favour; and a clip of an economist offering general praise. The script included in the words of the reporter the criticism of the opposition that these are 'populist measures' (in a derogatory sense), but the report ended with the commentary that the opposition used to be opposed to the Misiones, but now said they would continue with them in the event of an election victory.

Many observers and reporters are in agreement that there is plenty to praise about the Misiones. But it would have been entirely possible and editorially legitimate to make a brief mention of some of the concerns as to their long-term fiscal sustainability, the inflationary pressures they may cause, the transparency of their implementation, and their availability to poor people who are not Chávez supporters. After all, the treatment of Rosales' 'Mi Negra' proposal included an interview with an analyst critical of their chances of working.

The different treatment given to the two representatives of the campaign teams is also illustrative. As Table 5.1 shows, they were given roughly the same time. They were also interviewed by the same presenter from the main studio while they are sitting elsewhere. However, José Vicente Carrasquero, the representative of Rosales, has his interview interrupted by the (largely negative) profile of his candidate to which he is asked to respond. Dario Rivas has no such interruption. Secondly, Carrasquero receives several (legitimate but) unsympathetic questions, whereas Rivas gets a much easier ride. Table 5.3 shows the respective questions asked:

Table 5.3 Questions asked to Rosales and Chávez representatives*

Q1 Carrasquero: How do you feel about the elections on Sunday?

Rivas: Are the Venezuelan people motivated to vote in the elections?

Q2 Carrasquero: What would happen to Chavismo if Rosales wins?

Rivas: So you have detected a good response from the people on the street?

Q3 Carrasquero: What is your position about the questions raised by government officials about Rosales' participation in the April 2002 coup, a participation denied by Rosales even though there are pictures to prove it?

Rivas: What will be the work of your election team during the elections tomorrow?

Q4 Carrasquero: This week there have been reports of T-shirts printed with the words 'fraud'. Military officials in Zulia have found propaganda calling for a big march this Tuesday. How do you assess these facts?

Rivas: How can people think of possible fraud when there is an observer for each candidate at each of the polling stations, and even more when the correct functioning of the machines has been shown in the presence of technicians from the parties?

Q5 Carrasquero: What will Rosales' future be if the current president wins?

Rivas: I want to ask about the reports today of propaganda material being found in the state of Zulia, from where Rosales comes, calling for a march next Tuesday, two days after tomorrow's elections to protest against a fraud that would supposedly take place during the vote. What do you think of this situation, and Mr Carrasquero on this edition has just told us that they are not behind it?

Q6 Carrasquero: Will you recognise the new president (if President Chávez wins)?

Q7 Carrasquero: It is the same voting system as in December 2005. Why are you participating now but you didn't before?

* The questions are not transcribed verbatim, but are a close approximation to maintain the sense.

Table 5.3 shows that there was a lack of parity between the questions addressed to the two interviewees. In neither case was the presenter's style of questioning hostile as there were very few interruptions and both interviewees were allowed plenty of time to answer and give their point of view. However, the content of the questions was far more searching in the case of Mr Carrasquero than in the case of Mr Rivas. In the former, Q1, Q2, and Q6 could be described as open and neutral, while Q3, Q4, Q5 and Q7 were phrased in such a way that the interviewee was confronted with evidence and asked to make a defence. In case of Mr Rivas, Q1, Q2 and Q3 were open and neutral, while Q4 and Q5 were phrased in such a way that a certain way of answering (favourable to

Chávez) was anticipated. Clearly, Mr Rivas was not subject to the same level of scrutiny as Mr Carrasquero.

In summary, the programme showed token balance by offering profiles of roughly equal length of both candidates and by running interviews (again of roughly equal length) with representatives of both of their campaign teams. But content analysis shows the essentially partisan nature of the coverage. Could it have been otherwise? As with the portrayal of the Misiones, criticism of Chávez could easily have been included. The international media had included several problem areas of Chávez's time in office including housing shortages, rising violent crime, corruption, and authoritarian elements to his style of government, any one of which could have been mentioned. The profile of Rosales could have included some positive comments such as his success in making the opposition more unified.⁹³ Likewise, Mr Rivas could have been subject to some tougher questioning as to whether the government had launched serious investigations into the various allegations of plots against them (a point made by Mr Carrasquero).

3rd December 0000 GMT (2000 Caracas time).

In many ways on the night of the elections, Telesur showed its true colours. It responded to a political, and not a journalistic, imperative. Its editors on the night took the highly controversial decision to 'jump the gun' and broadcast preliminary unofficial results based on exit polls, despite a call from the CNE, backed up by the OAS, insisting all media should wait until the official results were given. Telesur Noticias at 0000 GMT (broadcast just as the polls were closing) opened with the news in the mouth of the presenter that the exit polls gave Chávez a lead over Rosales of 67-33 per cent. This was illustrated with a graphic. The presenter announced that the Venezuelan people had given another six years to the incumbent president, Hugo Chávez. The same message was repeated twice more in the first section of the programme, first by the station's reporter reporting live from the CNE headquarters in Caracas, and then again by the presenter. Each time the phrase was used that the next president of Venezuela would be Hugo Chávez. In short, about 6 minutes of the first 11 minutes of the programme was designed to announce and then reinforce the message that Chávez had won.

The calls not to publish exit polls had been given considerable publicity. The night before, CNN en español headlined the words of the OAS secretary general, José Miguel Inzulza, who had reminded media and parties alike not to disseminate unofficial results as they could 'provoke undesired reactions'. Ironically, Telesur itself had broadcast on the same night a similar message from the OAS representative at the elections, Juan Fischer. In the week before, the OAS observer mission had met representatives of the media

⁹³ In the profiles of the two candidates on the BBC news website, for example, the one on Chávez includes the view of the opposition that he is autocratic, and that despite the oil wealth, there is chronic poverty and widespread unemployment (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3517106.stm>). The profile of Rosales includes the view that he has been able to 'energise a demoralised and divided opposition', and also mentions the accusation of his involvement in the April 2002 coup (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6180358.stm>)

precisely to agree that no-one should provide any results until the first bulletin of the CNE. Globovision's director, Alberto Federico Ravell, had praised the agreement and declared that his station was 'not crazy enough to disclose electoral results ahead of time.'

So why did Telesur take the decision it did? Both prior to and after the elections, Izarra maintained that the station was an international one, and therefore not bound by the same rules as a domestic station. In a statement issued on Telesur's website soon after the elections, Telesur stressed this point and added that its mission was to 'offer balanced and truthful information about events which the large news channels omit or distort'. It added that various agencies opted to publish the exit polls, and others did not, and that it belonged to the former group.

The argument that it was international channel and not bound by the rules is insubstantial. The BBC Global News Division was advised by the CNE that it had to follow the rules governing domestic media as it can be seen by viewers within Venezuela, and so was regarded as a domestic broadcaster. Likewise, Telesur can be seen via VTV in Venezuela. Both the BBC and CNN did not broadcast the exit polls, but waited for the first bulletin giving the official results (which came shortly afterwards at 0110 GMT (2110 Venezuela time). Izarra said that Reuters and 'Argentina and Spain' had reported the results internationally.⁹⁴ But the Reuters cable came with a clear disclaimer at the top saying it was illegal to publish it within Venezuela.

Telesur's decision to broadcast the exit polls was certainly known widely within Venezuela. Globovision in its live coverage from 0030 GMT (2030 Venezuela time) was already broadcasting live statements by incandescent opposition representatives saying the figures were absolutely false and denouncing Telesur's action as a serious abuse of the electoral rules. They said all the other media had respected the agreement to wait for the official results and that Telesur was not exempt as it was 80% owned by the Venezuelan government. Telesur itself ran several minutes of a live impromptu press conference given at 0045 GMT by Willian Lara, the communications minister, within its programme. Lara was bombarded with questions from a mass of journalists about Telesur's decision, which he declined to answer, saying he would comment on the elections results once they were official. International viewers must have wondered what all the fuss was about, but within Venezuela it was obvious that Telesur's action and the figures it was broadcasting were widely known.

So what did cause Telesur to broadcast the exit polls? The most likely explanation is to be found within the tense pre- and post-electoral climate and rumours of what the opposition would do in the event of a Chávez victory. Telesur directors probably calculated that some of the opposition was going to cry fraud and start anti-Chávez mobilisations if it thought it was losing. So broadcasting exit polls showing Chávez with a big majority would help to pre-empt such an attempt. Some evidence for this explanation is to be found in an article published by *El Nacional*, in which sources

⁹⁴ Interview with Izarra, "TV president outlines Venezuelan government's media strategy", *El Nacional* website, 8 January 2007, translated by BBC Monitoring.

consulted by the paper said Izarra had interpreted a comment by a leading member of the Rosales campaign Teodoro Petkoff as the key for the opposition to take to the streets and protest alleged fraud. ‘<Izarra> acted on his own’, the paper said quoting the sources, ‘as he sought to neutralise any opposition attempt to cause uncertainty’.⁹⁵

Whatever the reason, Telesur clearly took an editorial decision, not shared by most international media, to report information which was both highly controversial and clearly intended to have a political impact in Venezuela in favour of the Chávez government. In a sense, Telesur had viewed the issue through the prism of a national state broadcaster responding to political and not journalistic considerations. Speculation was rife after the elections that the government had been so embarrassed by Telesur’s decision that Willian Lara was going to have to resign. In fact Lara was reconfirmed as Information Minister in the cabinet reshuffle in early 2007, but an investigation was set in motion by the CNE with the possibility of Telesur receiving penalties or fines. The results are not yet known.

4th/5th December 0100 GMT (2100 Caracas time)

By the following night, with more than 90% of the votes counted, official results were giving Chávez around 62% of the vote compared to about 37% for Rosales. Unsurprisingly at 0100 GMT CNN en español and Telesur led with the news of Chávez’s victory and allocated a good part of their respective programmes to reactions and analysis. CNN dedicated around 6 minutes of its 30-minute programme (20%), while Telesur had about 13 minutes of its 60-minute programme (22%).

Table 5.4 shows the similarities and differences in the respective focus of the coverage:

Table 5.4 CNN and Telesur’s coverage of elections, 4 December 2006

	CNN	Telesur
Content:		
Chávez crowds celebrating	Yes	Yes
Elections free of fraud	Yes	Yes
Easy victory for Chávez	Yes	Yes
Analysis of opposition	Yes	No
Reactions:		
USA	Yes	No
Bolivia	No	Yes
Colombia	No	Yes
Other	No	Yes
Analysis of election result	Yes	Yes

⁹⁵ “Willian Lara dismissed from the Communications Industry”, *El Nacional* website, 5 December 2006, translated by BBC Monitoring.

As Table 5.4 shows, Telesur decided to include the congratulations for Chávez from around Latin America, including President Evo Morales of Bolivia, two from Colombia (the government and a Liberal Party senator), President Kirchner of Argentina, president-elect Rafael Correa of Ecuador (and the Spanish foreign minister). In contrast, CNN just ran that of the US government. Telesur had no analysis of what the results meant either for Chávez or the opposition whereas CNN ran a clip of an analyst saying Chávez needed to be more tolerant in the future, and a commentary in the words of one of their reporters saying that despite their defeat, the opposition felt optimistic about their new-found unity. Finally, the analyst used by Telesur was the first secretary of the Communist Party of Uruguay (an observer of the elections) who interpreted the elections results in Venezuela (and Ecuador) as two major blows for US imperialism.

In short, the Telesur programme left the viewer with the impression of a Chávez victory celebrated across Latin America, but representing a defeat for the Bush administration. It offered no mention or analysis of where the elections left the opposition.

5th/6th December 0100 GMT (2100 Caracas time).

By the following night, Venezuela had dropped out of the headlines of CNN's programme, whereas it led Telesur's programme. The latter's coverage lasted more than 6 minutes, and included Chávez's press conference where he stressed that Venezuela would travel further down the road towards 21st century socialism, and that he was willing to hold dialogue with the United States (although he saw difficulties). The sequence also included clips of Chávez supporters; congratulations from Fidel Castro and Cubans (part of Castro's letter read out by the presenter plus video footage), President Ahmadinejad of Iran (archive video) and three other leaders of Libya, Chile and Italy (read out by presenter); and Rosales' press conference in which he accepted the results of the elections as clean. CNN on the other hand only included only a short piece of 1.20" as fourth item in their programme, which included clips of Chávez's press conference mentioning the possibility of dialogue with the USA, and one of the presenters reading out the letter of congratulation from Fidel Castro.

Telesur clearly thought that the Chávez victory was still the top Latin American story of the day in contrast to CNN. Moreover, the emphasis of its coverage was again on the positive reactions from around the world. Rosales was included but only in so far his statements lent credence to Chávez's victory.

The use of analysts and commentators : testing Hypothesis 4)

One final way of testing bias is to review the political profile of the analysts and commentators used in a station's coverage. This gives insights into the interpretation of events rather than the recounting of events. If only one or a restricted number of viewpoints are being given air, then obviously it is not unnatural to conclude that a station, either consciously or not, is promoting a particular interpretation of what is going on. It is also important to 'label' analysts correctly so as to give viewers an idea of what sort of opinions or understanding of events the interviewees are likely to be offering. If

editors are interested in avoiding bias, then the norm is to make it clear when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint.

Table 5.5 gives a list of the analysts used by Telesur in the course of the coverage of the same four nights, and the on-screen labels they were given:

Table 5.5 Telesur’s use of analysts in its coverage of Venezuela

Programme	Analyst	Label
2 Dec	Rómulo Henríquez	Economist
2 Dec	Tibisay Hung	Teacher at Central University of Venezuela
3 Dec	Eva Golinger	Lawyer and author
3 Dec	Vladimir Acosta	International Analyst
4 Dec	Piedad Córdoba*	Senator, Liberal Party
4 Dec	Eduardo Lorier*	First secretary, Communist Party Uruguay

* It could be argued that Ms Córdoba and Mr Lorier were not strictly analysts as they had political party affiliation, but they are included in this table because they were asked to analyse Chávez’s victory. Commentators may be a better description.

All of the six analysts gave a pro-Chávez interpretation of what they were being asked to analyse.⁹⁶ There was no analysis from a more independent stand point. Moreover, some of the on-screen labelling was disingenuous. Of the analysts used, Ms Hung is a known government supporter, Ms Golinger has written a book very critical of US operations in Venezuela, Mr Acosta is a left-wing academic who has his own pro-Chávez radio programme on state radio, Ms Córdoba is a Colombian senator on the left-wing of the Liberal Party and is very critical of US actions in her country. All of these analysts are legitimate interviewees, but it is not unreasonable to ask for more description of their background, at least in the words of the presenter.⁹⁷ When such descriptions are not forthcoming, the viewer could legitimately complain that the analysts are being presented as offering more independent or objective analysis than knowledge of their background would suggest.

Conclusions

So what can be concluded from the analysis of Telesur’s coverage of the Venezuelan elections? The evidence would confirm the two hypotheses posed at the beginning of the chapter. There can be no doubt the coverage was strongly partisan. The depiction of the two candidates and their respective electoral programmes or achievements was not even-

⁹⁶They were asked to comment on the following subjects: Henríquez: the Misiones programme; Hung: Rosales’ ‘Mi Negra’ proposal; Golinger: the likely US reaction to a Chávez win; Acosta: the Chávez electoral victory from an international perspective; Córdoba: the significance of the Chávez victory; Lorier: the international significance of the Chávez victory.

⁹⁷ This need only be short, for example ‘Eva Holinger, author of a book critical of US intervention in Venezuela’.

handed. There was virtually no criticism of Chávez and little positive aspects ascribed to Rosales. In interviews, their respective spokesmen were not given the same treatment. After the elections, there was a prolonged emphasis on Chávez's victory and the international reaction to it (which was all favourable). The tone of the coverage was often celebratory. In the choice of analysts to be interviewed, there was a strong, if not total propensity, to offer a pro-Chávez, anti-Bush perspective. And finally, in making the decision to broadcast exit polls on the night of the elections, the station responded to a perceived political response in favour of the government. For a time that night, its decision became the news of the moment. It behaved more like a state television channel than a 'public service' international broadcaster.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The testing of the four hypotheses outlined in chapters 4 and 5 leaves little doubt that Telesur in its news coverage follows a pro-Chávez and anti-Bush agenda, and as such is in effect paying homage to its financial and political master. Moreover, it broadcasts little or no criticism of two of its other sponsor governments, Cuba and Bolivia, and does not hold them to account. There is evidence for some pluralism in its treatment of news and events taking place in countries whose governments are not sponsoring the station, but this would need to be corroborated by further study of its coverage of such countries as Peru, Mexico and Colombia whose governments are more well-disposed towards the Bush Administration. Venezuela's political and media environment described in chapter 2 into which Telesur was born would have suggested the unlikelihood of the station being anything else, but initial statements and press coverage of the station's aims suggested that it might have followed a less partisan approach. As mentioned in chapter 2, the statements made in January 2007 by the station's president, Andrés Izarra, would indicate that in the future Telesur will form part of a major government step-change in its media policy in an effort, as Izarra explained it, to occupy the media terrain and create a 'socialist hegemony'.

There are however, some other interesting conclusions to be drawn about the station. Even though it has not broken with the tradition in Latin America of government-owned television stations functioning as official megaphones, it is worth stressing that this is not the crude style of old-fashioned propaganda. This has historically been characterised by long-winded speeches from political leaders, extreme deference to those leaders, an emphasis on government achievements, negative news being kept to a minimum, few critical voices of the government, extensive coverage of visiting heads of state and an abundance of ordinary people being portrayed as benefiting from the state. This was the template, for example, of Mexico's Televisa before 1990, and remains that of CCTV in China, Radio Havana in Cuba and the state Venezuelan station VTV. At times Telesur in its coverage of Venezuela begins to lapse into this style, but it is usually sufficiently distinct in its treatment of stories not to be labeled as old-style propaganda.

Nor is Telesur consistently falsifying or excessively distorting the news. Rather it chooses news and information which on the whole favours its sponsor governments. Perhaps the best way of describing Telesur is that it is a station with an agenda (some would want to call this 'an attitude' or 'propaganda light' but these have derogatory overtones). In this sense, it is not that different to other new state-funded international news channels, although there is a clear difference between those that have a hard or soft agenda. Telesur is more akin to Russia Today as having a hard agenda: Telesur in part is an extension of Chavez's oil diplomacy abroad; Russia Today promotes President Putin's foreign policy and a Russian view of the world while including few, often 'tokenistic', dissenting voices. There are other similarities. For example, both Telesur and Russia Today adopt many of the same formats and presentation styles of established international media like CNN, to enable them to compete more effectively and to make

the content more palatable to international viewers than the old-style propaganda of state media.⁹⁸

Time will tell whether France-24 follows a French government line in its coverage of events, or includes critical voices and a plurality of opinion. Al-Jazeera (Arabic) aims to be pluralistic, uses the slogan 'opinion and counter-opinion' to describe itself, and includes regular interviews with Israeli and US government officials. But despite the pluralism of voices, some observers would characterise it as having a soft agenda: pro-intifada, anti-Israel, anti-Bush, pan-regional, and Islamic (not Islamist) over secular. Moreover, studies of coverage of the Iraq war suggest older state-funded channels like the BBC are not always the bastions of balanced reporting their supporters would assume.⁹⁹

If there is evidence of a soft or hard agenda in a station's coverage, it can of course be debated if this is a result of a conscious agenda, or rather as a product of an unconscious 'attitudinal' set of values. It would be hard to argue that Telesur's agenda was unconscious, particularly given its role in reporting the results of the presidential elections in Venezuela as described in chapter 5. The station can be seen as another example of a more general trend observed in different parts of the world, namely the growing phenomenon of 'news with views'. The abundance of new 24x7 channels and news web sites makes it more possible to choose a source of information which confirms a news consumer's particular point of view. Fox News is the classic example of this, but there are plenty of others.

The defenders of such a trend argue that a TV channel having an agenda is little different to most newspapers holding a political point of view. Indeed, the fact that a news medium has an agenda or a certain point of view hardly makes it illegitimate. Given the hostile media climate that Chávez has faced within Venezuela, it could be argued that he is justified in investing large amounts of money in state TV and other media in order to 'correct the information balance'. Indeed government officials often describe this investment as 'democratising the air waves' when according to official figures, 80 per cent of television frequencies, 77 per cent of AM radio stations and 68 per cent of FM stations are in private hands.¹⁰⁰ One of the problems with such reasoning is whether it is legitimate to use public money to replace one set of bias with another.

⁹⁸ A paradigm describing this new form of state-funded 'propaganda light' or 'agenda-driven news' could be: similar presentation styles and production values to Western channels like CNN; shorter, punchier news items than the old-style state-financed channels; token balance; but little on-air criticism of sponsoring or financing governments, and avoidance of issues that would put them in a bad light.

⁹⁹ A 2006 report carried out by three universities in the UK suggested that anti-war and humanitarian voices found themselves sidelined. Vicky Frost. "The press toe the line on the Iraq war", *The Guardian*, 13 November 2006. CNN too has been widely criticised for its coverage of the war. See for example the report by the US group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). Steve Rendall and Tara Broughel, "Amplifying officials, squelching dissent", *Extra!* 16 (3):12-14.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in "Analysis: Venezuela plans to turn private TV channel into public broadcaster", *BBC Monitoring*, 31 January 2007.

Outside Venezuela, there are at times egregious examples of unbalanced reporting by international media, for example by Fox News.¹⁰¹ It could be argued that it is perfectly legitimate for any government to fund an international channel as part of a wider foreign policy objective. But it is clearly a more honest approach to viewers and consumers to state more openly what the essential aims and editorial guidelines of a station are. More importantly, no state-funded channel should pretend it is following a public service remit broadcasting for all Venezuelans, and representing all views, when it is clearly a state-funded channel following an editorial line.

The discussion of the Latin American television market in chapter 3 suggested that there was a space for an alternative TV station with a regional news perspective. In its defence, there is some evidence to suggest that Telesur does bring to the screens more coverage of some countries, issues and voices that viewers in Latin America cannot easily see elsewhere. In-depth analysis of the social and economic situation of Nicaragua formed part of the news coverage of the Nicaraguan elections. Bolivia and Haiti receive far more coverage than they do on other international channels. Live coverage of important regional summits is an important addition, although it is worth asking if Telesur would pay as much attention to blanket coverage of summits not attended by Chávez. Left-wing rebel groups in Colombia also receive more airtime than they would in other international media. Regional government responses to events in Latin America get far more attention for example than on CNN en español, which shows a greater propensity to include the perspective from Washington. There are some grounds for arguing that Telesur is bringing something new to the Latin American market and adding to its plurality, but this would have to be tested by more content analysis of both its news coverage and of its documentaries.

Telesur is undoubtedly an additional voice in a crowded Latin American market. It is not sensationalistic or driven by commercial concerns. But nor is it pursuing a public service role. It is not for example deepening democratic debate by giving air to a wide range of views within its programmes so that consumers can find it easier to decide for themselves on any particular issue. Nor is it an assertive, independent news medium carrying out investigative or watchdog journalism holding governments to account or reflecting critically on society – all of which are important ingredients for the healthy functioning of democracy at a time when Latin America's return to democracy is far from consolidated. Only time and the market will tell if Telesur's 'agenda-based' approach to news will overcome the traditional mistrust in Latin America of state media, and attract significant numbers of viewers. But for the moment, the evidence is that Telesur is missing what could have been an interesting opportunity in the history of Latin American media to break the pattern of state-funded media being an instrument of government and thereby to strengthen public sector broadcasting.

¹⁰¹ Nikolas Kozloff, *Fox News Venezuela Coverage: "Fair and Balanced"*, Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 29 April 2005.