

Alan MacLeod, **Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, 158 pp., \$60.00 (hardcover).

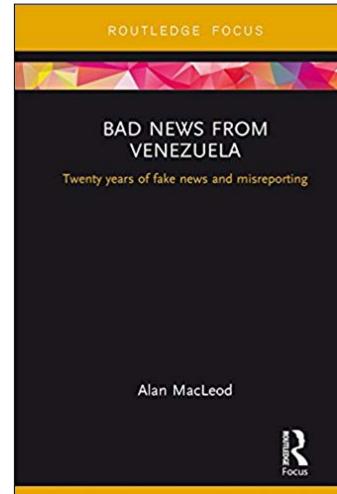
Reviewed by

Noah Zweig

Universidad de las Américas, Ecuador

The Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela's experiment in petro populism that began under late president Hugo Chávez (1998–2013) and has continued until the present with tragic and disastrous results under his less charismatic successor Nicolás Maduro (2013–), has inspired a diverse array of scholarship in what might be termed Chavismo media studies. Insofar as Chávez would consolidate power through image and spectacle, it is not surprising that considerable academic inquiry would result from it.

Broadly speaking, Chavismo media studies could be divided into three subgroups. 1) There are scholars who reach sanguine conclusions about the ways in which Chavismo's transformation of state–society relations have reshaped the media ecology, arguing that this in turn has inspired an upsurge in grassroots barrio media (Fernandes, 2010; Schiller, 2018). 2) In another hopeful camp (Britto García, 2014; Serrano, 2016) are academics who use a political economy, anti-imperialism lens to argue that Chavista media are a result of a communication siege waged by North American and European conglomerates and backed by Venezuelan elites. 3) Finally, on the other pole, are experts (Waisbord, 2013; Cañizález, 2016) who see the Venezuelan media ecosystem as a bloated, censorious, top-down apparatus that gobbles up and Bolivarianizes outlets critical of Chavismo, while creating its own clientelistic parastate television and radio stations and newspapers.



Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting, by Alan MacLeod, falls in category 2, as the author uses the propaganda model of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (2002) to argue that Western print and broadcast media have a vested interest in the business and political power that subsidizes them, and thus, "corporate journalists" have an inherent bias toward what the author claims are anti-neoliberal initiatives of the Chavismadurista regimes. The book will be relevant not only to scholars of Chavismo media studies, but anyone for whom the media imperialism thesis is of interest.

Methodologically, MacLeod uses the qualitative approach of content analysis, scrutinizing reports on Venezuela during the Chavismadurista era from seven major American and British newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent*. Quantitatively, he draws on the sociological model of the Glasgow University Media Group, whose method toward media analysis involves dissecting media texts to see how social actors fare. In the book's first part (chapters 1–4), MacLeod discusses some of the key historical events during the Chavista era and how the English-language press reported on them. The second part (chapters 6–8)

consists of the voices of twenty-seven journalists and academics, some of them sympathetic toward Chavismo and others less so, who write on Venezuela. These interviewees weigh in on the difficulties of reporting on Bolivarian Venezuela, which MacLeod then rejoins.

Chapter 1 studies Western newspapers' coverage of Chávez's rise to power in 1998. MacLeod claims that media outlets since the beginning had a preponderantly hostile attitude toward Chavismo, consistently displaying nostalgia for the pre-Bolivarian Revolution era. He writes,

There was no positive discussion of the radical experiment in participatory democracy in Venezuela, which had drawn great interest from academics [...] and where the government claimed it was attempting to empower its own citizens to take control over decisions to do with their own lives. (p. 23)

Although there is validity to the claim that Western media outlets remained for the most part uniformly skeptical toward Chavismo, it would have been profitable to compare this coverage of the early years with that of Venezuelan newspapers. In much of Latin America, there is a historical appreciation of populism and authoritarianism, as many countries in the region have experienced rule by both. Thus, journalistic approaches in Latin America toward a phenomenon such as Chavismo, which has both populist and authoritarian tendencies, would be quantitatively different from what one sees in the Anglo-American press. Another shortcoming is that with few exceptions (such as Chávez biographers Alberto Barrera Tyszka and Cristina Marcano, cultural studies scholar Luis Duno-Gottberg, political economist Michael Penfold, historian Miguel Tinker-Salas, some local reporters, and others), MacLeod does not cite many Venezuelan writers. Instead, his analysis of the Venezuelan panorama is largely informed sociologically and historically by Anglo-American Venezuelanists.

In chapters 2 and 3, MacLeod analyzes the media reporting of two signal events in the history of Bolivarian Venezuela: respectively, the incidents of early 2002, in which Chávez was briefly overthrown by opposition forces, and the death of the former Venezuelan president in 2013. In his investigation of coup coverage, MacLeod studies the divide in framing: for Western outlets, it was largely a popular uprising; for Chavista outlets, it was another U.S.-backed rightwing overthrow of a leftwing government. While MacLeod does painstaking investigation, his characterization of the media ecology at times seems reductionist. For example, he claims "[t]he Venezuelan media is characterized by its extreme concentration and its strong opposition to Chavez" (p. 31). In point of fact, the ecosystem is more nuanced. Some Venezuelan commercial media initially supported Chávez, as many media and political elites had conceived of him as a controllable populist (Wertz & Winkens, 2007, p. 302).

According to MacLeod's study, Western press's obituaries of Chávez, with some exceptions, overlooked the reduction of poverty and other objectives of the Bolivarian Revolution and instead attacked Chávez's legacy, presenting him as a caudillo. Citing empirical data from the United Nations and the World Bank, MacLeod concludes that Chavismo ameliorated socioeconomically Venezuelan society, which he claims corporate media largely ignored. While these figures are unimpeachable, it seems a bit surprising that the author does not mention the current humanitarian and migration crisis

currently plaguing Venezuela. Many of the achievements cited by MacLeod have been reversed, as Venezuela at the time of writing has lost its middle class, as many as 3 million of its 32 million citizens have fled the country, and it suffers from an inflation rate as high as 1,000,000%.

In chapter 4, MacLeod analyzes the 2013 elections in which Maduro won. Here, he comes to the conclusion that Western papers, for the most part, "portrayed the [elections] as, at best, hotly disputed and at worst 'a grossly one-sided' sham presided over by a dictatorship" (p. 76). To counter this narrative, MacLeod cites the Carter Center, which has monitored multiple elections during the Chavista years and has sung the praises of Venezuela's electoral system. Thus, there is a disconnect between findings by a former U.S. president's organization and many British and American newspapers. While MacLeod is correct to note the transparency of Venezuela's election system, it is important to highlight that both the National Electoral Council and the Supreme Tribunal of Justice are both controlled by *oficialismo chavista*.

In chapter 5, MacLeod explores the phenomenon of the *guarimba*, a Spanish word that roughly translates to "violent street protest." Guarimbas were common during the unrest of 2014—and became the focus of much media attention—following the controversial presidential elections and Maduro's subsequent unpopular rule. While some demonstrations were peaceful, others turned violent, as marchers would barricade streets and attack Chavistas. There was intense violence on both sides. MacLeod notes that, not surprisingly, while Chavista media emphasized the guarimbas, Western media underscored the peaceful protests. Here the depiction of the conflict between the Chavistas ("leftwing") and the opposition protesters ("rightwing") seems like an imprecise characterization of the complex realities of present-day Venezuela, when as authors such as essayist Gisela Kovak Rovero (2015) have observed, "the opposition" is a patchwork, and includes LGBT activists, feminists, and environmentalists.

In Part II (chapters 6–8), MacLeod quotes from those twenty-seven interviewees—journalists and academics who write on Venezuela—he spoke with in preparation for his case. He and his subjects raise some important points on the difficulties of reporting on Bolivarian Venezuela for English-language outlets. Questions of safety are key inasmuch as its hyperinflationary levels at present have rendered the country into a warzone. Moreover, in recent years, newspapers have significantly cut their international bureaus, relying instead on newswires for world coverage.

Here MacLeod returns to his thesis that Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model remains a viable model for understanding Western press's coverage of Chavismo, inasmuch as commercial news outlets represent transnational capitalism and thus have a default antagonism toward the goals of the Bolivarian Revolution. Some might challenge MacLeod's argument insofar as the above-mentioned catastrophic results of Chavismo have problematized the notion that this species of petro-populism is a sustainable alternative to liberal democracy. However, to MacLeod's credit, he provides a cross-section of voices reflecting on how to report on late-Chavista Venezuela. Thus, for example, he refers to both prominent opposition blogger Francisco Toro and veteran anti-imperialism journalist John Pilger. This is a virtue of the book—that in this era of reality shopping, one can see a diversity of opinion.

In the final analysis, MacLeod's book is worth reading for academics interested in the practicality of the media imperialism thesis, a product of the Cold War, well into the 21st century. It is well researched, containing multiple journalistic and academic sources.

References

- Britto Garcia, L. (2014). *Dictadura mediática: Investigación de unos medios por encima de toda sospecha* [Media dictatorship: Investigation of media above suspicion]. Caracas, Venezuela: Correo del Orinoco.
- Cañizález, A. (2016). Hugo Chávez: *La presidencia mediática* [Hugo Chávez: The media presidency]. Caracas, Venezuela: Alfa.
- Chomsky, N., & Herman, E. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Fernandes, S. (2010). *Who can stop the drums? Urban social movements in Chávez's Venezuela*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kozak Rovero, G. (2015, March 25). Los 8 mitos de la izquierda venezolana [Eight myths of the Venezuelan Left]. *Prodavinci*. Retrieved from <http://historico.prodavinci.com/blogs/los-8-mitos-de-la-izquierda-venezolana-por-gisela-kozak-rovero/>
- Schiller, N. (2018). *Channeling the state: Community media and popular politics in Venezuela*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Serrano, P. (2016). *Medios democráticos: Una revolución pendiente en la comunicación* [Democratic media: A pending revolution in communication]. Madrid, Spain: Foca Ediciones.
- Waisbord, S. (2013). *Vox populista: medios, periodismo, democracia* [Vox populist: Media, journalism, democracy]. Barcelona, Spain: Gedisa.
- Werz, N., & Winkens, S. (2007). El populismo de Chávez y el rol de los medios [The populism of Chávez and the role of the media]. In G. Maihold (Ed.), *Venezuela en retrospectiva. Los pasos hacia el régimen chavista* [Venezuela in retrospect: The steps toward the Chávez regime] (pp. 297–312). Madrid and Frankfurt: Biblioteca Ibero-Americana.