¿Por qué no les callan?
Hugo Chávez’s Re-election in Venezuela and the Decline of Western Hegemony in the Americas*

FORTHCOMING IN LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES IN 2016

ABSTRACT:
On October 7, 2012, Hugo Chávez was comfortably re-elected president of Venezuela. Just days before the vote the impression given by major international print media was that the vote was a close-run thing, an assessment which proved to be at best optimistic. We argue that Western media coverage of the election in Venezuela was designed to skew the result towards the opposition and that these efforts singularly failed. The conclusions of our analysis are, first, that the “propaganda” model advanced by Chomsky is now faltering in the Americas and, second, that the region is acting in manner that is increasingly free of influence from the US. Venezuela thus stands as a case of the citizenry of a country actively and independently asserting its political agency despite clear attempts to redirect its thinking and decision-making.

Corresponding author:

Dr Sean W Burges is author of Brazilian Foreign Policy After the Cold War (Florida, 2009). At the Australian National University he is Lecturer in International Relations and Senior Associate of the Australian National Centre for Latin American Studies. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs. Sean.burges@anu.edu.au; Tel. +61 (0)2 6125 7569; Fax: +61 (0)2 6125 2222
Institutional mailing address for the corresponding author: School of Politics and International Relations, Haydon-Allen Building, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.

Dr Tom Chodor is a Lecturer in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University. His research interests include International Relations, International Political Economy, regionalism, the Pink Tide and globalisation. He is currently working on a book about the Pink Tide and globalisation.
Tom.chodor@anu.edu.au; Tel. +61 (0)2 6125 1600; Fax +61 (0)2 6125 2222
Mailing address: School of Sociology, Haydon-Allen Building #22, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia

Dr R. Guy Emerson is Profesor de Tiempo Completo in the Departamento de las Relaciones Internacionales y Ciencia Política at the Universidad de las Américas, Puebla. He has recently published in New Political Economy, Contemporary Politics, Social Identities, Alternatives, and Humanities Research.
guy.emerson@udlap.mx

*The authors would like to thank Steve Ellner and Barry Carr for their invaluable suggestions and critical comments.
If you rely on mainstream English-language media for Latin American news coverage then Hugo Chávez’s 7 October 2012 re-election as president may have been a shock. Just days before the vote Western media trumpeted the surge of opposition candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, calling the contest a dead-heat with cancer-stricken Chávez on verge of defeat. In a sense, this was nothing new; Western media reports of Chávez’s Venezuela have maintained a narrative of looming economic collapse, crisis of governance, endemic violence, corruption, and democratic diminution. Meanwhile Chávez has triumphed in successive elections (Boykoff, 2009; Young, 2013). In the lead up to the October 2012 poll, the Western media narrative was re-energised by Capriles’ emergence as a credible alternative, with the consistent theme of “this time it would be different”. This was all wishful thinking. Despite the emergence of the first credible opposition candidate in fourteen years, there was never any doubt that Chávez would win. Rather, the question was by how much. Although the result was closer than expected, it was still a ringing endorsement for Chávez, who took home 55.07 per cent of the vote to Capriles’ 44.31 per cent.

We argue that Chávez’s comfortable 2012 re-election stands as a strong indicator of the Western media’s limited power to influence democratic outcomes in Latin America. Chávez’s victory came despite continued attempts to construct and disseminate a narrative consonant with the tenets of Western hegemony. In demonstrating this limit, we first survey criticisms on the role of the media in democratic society, focusing on path-breaking work by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. Here, we reveal how Western media has historically shifted the focus of political debate in Latin America so as to influence and occasionally direct electoral outcomes. We next characterise Western media coverage of the 2012 Venezuelan presidential election. By focusing on feature pieces from opinion-forming English and Spanish-language international print news outlets we highlight how the Western establishment sought to create a Capriles victory narrative and thus make it fact, providing an alternate narrative to sustain the Venezuelan opposition.¹ Our goal is not to contest the accuracy of the reporting, but rather demonstrate the consistency of narratives and how individual news stories combine to create a strong implicit editorial line. Drawing on William I. Robinson, we argue that this narrative serves as an important tool of regional U.S. hegemony promotion, creating “feedback loops” that reinforce the positions of transnationally-oriented “agents of influence” waging ideological struggles in civil society to secure consent for the U.S.-led neoliberal world order. The crucial lesson of the October 2012 election is that this feedback loop has broken down, making Western hegemony promotion a less straightforward prospect. In the penultimate section we explore the causes of this breakdown, arguing that they have local and regional aspects. Locally, the breakdown of the feedback loop results from the democratisation of civil society in Venezuela as a result of the Bolivarian Revolution. From a Gramscian perspective, this means that subaltern actors are no longer beholden to dominant ‘common sense’ narratives promoted in civil society by transnationally-oriented elites as the Revolution has opened new spaces to contest this common sense. Likewise, regionally, the growing pan-Latin
American *auto-estima* has had a similar effect, with Latin American states following a more autonomous relationship with Washington.

Before beginning the discussion we wish to clarify two issues. First, we are not assessing Chávez or his project; the three authors have very different appraisals of the government and leadership in Venezuela. Where we agree is that there was a definite and consistent anti-Chávez media narrative before the October 2012 election. The extent to which this effort failed stands as a sign of larger changes in Latin America’s insertion into hemispheric and global affairs. Second, our founding assumption is that the Western establishment viewed Chávez negatively, as damaging to both Venezuela and regional order and stability: Former U.S. President George W. Bush (2010: 358) dubbed Chávez an “anti-U.S. dictator”, Barack Obama (2008) labelled Venezuela a “rogue state”, and former Secretaries of State and Defence, Condoleezza Rice (2007) and Donald Rumsfeld (cited in Jones, 2007), respectively described Chávez’s presidency as “an assault on democracy” and likened it to Hitler’s Third Reich. While we lack the space to fully document this line of analysis, casual reference to journals such as *Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, The Journal of Democracy* or *Americas Quarterly* provides ample academic opinion example. More anecdotally, the authors have had Chávez described to them as a “buffoon” by a former senior Mexican foreign affairs official, a figure to be marginalised by North American hemispheric delegation advisors and a substantial managerial challenge by Mercosur diplomats. Indeed, our title comes from an infamous instance of Chávez “management” at the 2007 Iberoamerican Summit when Spanish King Juan Carlos quipped to the Venezuelan president “*por qué no te callas* [why don’t you shut up]?” The authors feel comfortable claiming that the Western establishment wanted Chávez to “shut up”, long wanted him out of office, and certainly wanted him to lose the 2012 election.

**Manufacturing Results**

The affinity between the State and the media has long been established. Several scholars have challenged the centrality of the media to the democratic process, acting as caretaker of the public interest and/or regulator of State power. Far from a “fourth estate”, or as fulcrum between the State and its citizenry, the media for Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) is founded on mass deception. The “culture industry” – of which the news media functions as an integral component – does not hold power to account, but allows the dominant system to reproduce itself as the citizenry become oblivious to their “real” social, political, and/or economic interests. Characteristics of monopoly, mass production and technology thus result in not only an increasingly homogenized message of reproduction, but also calls forth a passive audience inculcated into this very system. Herbert Marcuse (1964), while less explicitly concerned with the culture industry, explored these ideological structures to suggest the media was ultimately a mechanism of social control to ensure cohesion. The viewing public became “administered individuals” both manipulated and indoctrinated into a system predicated on production and consumption.

While many on the left shared this critical view, some were more circumspect over the degree of deception and spoke to the dangers of reifying any particular ideology as
dominant. Although the diffusion of dominant values and beliefs undoubtedly assists the reproduction of society, that this diffusion could be read as an explicit project of the State, let alone that it could automatically resonate amongst the citizenry became important points of conjecture. Terry Eagleton (1991: 46-8, 128) maintains that there was no “seamless monolith of a dominant ideology” devoid of contradictions; ideology is far more mixed and even self-contradictory. Moreover, even if such an ideology indeed exists, others maintained that it is unwise to assume it could simply cascade down through society. As Raymond Williams (1991: 140) asserted, “no dominant social order...[or] culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention.” Thus, although the media is undoubtedly a purveyor of ideas and beliefs, this does not mean audiences are consequently inculcated into the values of the ruling classes.

Seeking to move beyond a focus on media effect to an analysis of its behaviour – a movement integral to our analysis – Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) also understand the media as part of an ideological arena for the communication of particular messages to the general populace. In examining the mechanics of the media system, Herman and Chomsky provide insights not only into the North American media system, but also establish links between print journalism – object of our investigation – and State and corporate interests. To this extent, our study into the portrayal of the 2012 presidential election offers insight into the parameters of North American and Western European thinking, and more importantly for our purposes, allows an exploration of the extent to which this thinking was absorbed and used domestically to bolster opposition to Chávez.

Developed through an analysis of newspaper coverage, Chomsky and Herman’s ‘propaganda model’ reveals how the news passes through five filters, each interacting with and reinforcing one another. In practice, this involves the raw material of the news passing through these successive filters, “leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988: 2). Specifically, these filters concern (1) the capitalist bases of the media, including its concentrated ownership and profit orientation; (2) the importance of advertising revenues; (3) the provision of news from State and corporate sources; (4) criticism of powerful interest groups that disciplines the media; and (5) an ideology of anti-communism or dangerous “Other” that limits what can and cannot be written on particular issues.

Important here is the State’s capacity to configure debate around particular issues. In this setting the spectrum of opinion allowed expression largely conforms to the agendas and frames of reference of government officials, with coverage indexed to the dynamics of debate at the executive and legislative levels. Thus, contra the liberal-pluralist standpoint, the State holds the media to account and not vice versa. This is not to suggest that the propaganda model is somehow premised on a totalitarian politics, but rather that media behaviour is configured by the five filters, resulting in consensus (Chomsky, 1989:59, 149). Accordingly, censorship is better conceived as,
self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and organizational media requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and government centers of power (Herman & Chomsky, 1988:xii).

Returning to the October 7th poll, we now investigate the international coverage of events to demonstrate an affinity – tacit or otherwise – between the hostile, official U.S. view of the Chávez administration and its representation in major Western print media.

**Making the Pitch**

Early in 2012 Western opinion-makers appeared resigned to another Chávez victory. This near-despair began to dissipate after the opposition held a successful presidential primary in February, uniting behind a single candidate, Miranda state governor Henrique Capriles Radonski. The *New York Times* quickly boarded the Capriles train, highlighting the sense of optimism the opposition candidate brought: “The energy generated by Mr. Capriles is evident at his campaign stops, which can seem like a cross between rugby scrum and rock star frenzy…Not even the firecrackers thrown at the crowd by menacing Chávez supporters on motorcycles could dampen the spirit” (Neuman, 2012:12) Writing in Spain’s *El País*, the influential *Miami Herald* columnist Andrés Oppenheimer captured the changed narrative: “Suddenly Chávez seems vulnerable. Venezuelan political analysts are no longer discussing whether he will be in power beyond 2019…but whether he will still be president at year’s end” (Oppenheimer, 2012: 2).

Starting from this hopeful position, the Western media constructed a narrative of Chávez as a tired, ill politician who had failed to achieve his goals over fourteen years in office. The idea unifying these articles in the months before the vote was of a president simply mouthing slogans and becoming increasingly Orwellian with declarations that better things were coming without specifying when. None of these attempts to reframe perceptions of Chávez was direct, but rather a gathering sensation that slowly accumulated through the weight of repetition. Three main phases emerged in the news coverage, going from a period of reframing the narrative, through a period of establishing the possibility of a Capriles victory with a targeted discussion of polling numbers, to a final period of maintaining hope of a Chávez defeat, buttressed with reminders of his past failures. Throughout these phases four themes appeared consistently: looming economic collapse, a crisis of governance demonstrated by endemic violence and corruption, democratic diminution, and hope for a better tomorrow without Chávez.

One central strut of the narrative framing phase asked whether the cancer-stricken Chávez would survive the campaign, let alone be healthy enough to rule. *The Washington Post* led with the pointed headline: “Chavez weeps at Mass, asks God, ‘Do not take me yet’” (Wallis, 2012: A8). An editorial published a few weeks later developed this theme: “Venezuela’s markets are being moved by a strange but powerful force: the absence of reliable information about the health of President Hugo Chavez and the growing speculation that his condition is rapidly deteriorating” (Washington Post, 2012: A18).
While this editorial line would ultimately prove prescient, at the time it set the groundwork for penetrating critiques of the country’s government.

*The Washington Post* used the above editorial to link Chávez’s sickness to the larger malaise of presidential misrule afflicting Venezuela. References to governance failures in Venezuela were direct: “a country wracked by double-digit inflation, shortages of water, power and staple foods, and a dearth of investment – not to mention one of the world’s highest murder rates” (Washington Post, 2012a: A18). Emphasis on violence and insecurity in *The Washington Post* reflected coverage from *El País*, which highlighted public insecurity in Caracas. An April 8th OpEd undercut strong poverty reduction numbers: “the number of homicides in metropolitan Caracas is one of the highest in the Americas” (Goytisolo, 2012: 28). Four days later an article entitled “Violence hits diplomats in Venezuela” emphasised that nobody was safe in Caracas and that Chávez’s government was failing dramatically to provide public security (Primera, 2012a: 5). Subsequent steps by Chávez’s administration to address the violence were dismissed. A June 7th article about a ban on private citizen firearm ownership was spun to suggest citizens were being deprived of the means of self-protection in the face of deficient policing (Primera, 2012b: 5). The *Financial Times* further developed this theme, positioning violence as an electoral issue that could undermine Chávez. It zeroed in on accounts blaming Chávez’s brother Adan, the Barinas state governor, for the lawlessness. While a riposte from the Chavista camp was prominently included, it was quickly followed by a recitation of murder and violent crime statistics and an analysis linking Chávez’s support to persistent poverty and the politicisation of social programs (Mander, 2012a: 6).

As the election drew closer, discussion of violence and criminality in Venezuela was joined by the themes of corruption and economic mismanagement. An end of August *Financial Times* report delved into the emergence of the “‘boligarch’…a new breed of business magnates that are said to enjoy close relations with Mr Chavez’s “Bolivarian” government” (Mander, 2012b:8). Specific mention was made of funds Chávez was sending abroad and how an elite around the president was siphoning off the country’s petro-bonanza. Interestingly, the argument the *Financial Times* built through subsequent stories was not one of personal corruption, but rather of massive economic and governance mismanagement by Chávez that was squandering a unique national development opportunity. The August 25th Amuay refinery explosion dramatically fed this argument; the *Financial Times* all-but attributed the disaster to presidential mismanagement and politicised administrative incompetence that had gutted state oil company PdVSA’s capacity to not only operate safely, but also continue producing oil to fund the Bolivarian Revolution: “A decade ago, PdVSA was considered one of the best run oil companies in the Americas. Today, inefficiency and incompetence have led to a string of accidents…The company’s annual report admits a lack of funds that has hurt maintenance” (Mander 2012c: 9).

Capriles campaign statements reproduced by the Associated Press followed the economic mismanagement theme. The wire service repeatedly paraphrased the opposition candidate, in one case noting: “he has accused Chavez of lying about the government’s
achievements and neglecting the Country’s oil industry, infrastructure and agriculture” (Sanchez 2012a). By the end of September more fuel was being thrown on the critical economic fire. El País built a story around a Reuters report that the IMF had confirmed Chávez was selling Venezuela’s gold reserves. The head of the National Assembly Finance Commission was cited as confirming the report, noting the sale was to address a shortage of dollars needed to finance the Country’s rising imports (Primera 2012c: 3). Just days before the ballot El País expanded the critique, first labelling the Chavista state a white elephant dependent upon oil royalties, then noting Venezuela now exported less oil than it had fourteen years earlier when Chávez was elected president (Primera & Prado 2012:6). On the day before the ballot the Financial Times strongly suggested that only Capriles had the credibility necessary to restart the oil industry and hit the production targets he shared with Chávez (Blas 2012:23). An El País OpEd by Mario Vargas Llosa on election day summarized the Western view with Nobel laureate literary allusions redolent of his novels on racism and prejudice to remind Venezuelans that their country had “replaced Zimbabwe at last place on the index of liberal economies in the world” (Llosa 2012:33).

This trenchant economic critique was paralleled by attacks on Venezuela’s democratic credentials and Chávez’s perceived personal role in dismantling representative rule. The Financial Times cited a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report that Chavez’s centralised personalistic regime was disempowering Venezuelans through “the weakening of democratic institutions and human rights guarantees” (Mander, 2012d: 10). Less than a week later The Washington Post turned to the HRW report, arguing that the region’s “democratically elected authoritarians” do not steal votes, but manipulate political and judicial systems to eliminate opposition and dissent (Forero, 2012: A10). Any ambiguity in The Washington Post’s stance vanished two days later when an editorial referencing HRW concluded: “Mr Chavez certainly has had an impact on democratic freedoms in his country and in the hemisphere. While he lives, the United States should be doing what it can to preserve and protect Venezuela’s democrats; they will be needed for…a long and painful rebuilding process” (Washington Post, 2012b: A20).

Editorials in the Financial Times repeated this dictatorial message several days later, citing the diminution of democratic procedures and Chávez’s seizure of broadcast time for hours-long discourses: “Although [the broadcasts] likely break electoral rules that limit candidates promo spots to three minutes, Mr Chavez says they are part of the government’s information strategy” (Financial Times 2012:8). Just days before the ballot Enrique Krauze revived this theme in El País, comparing Chávez’s conduct to classic Latin American dictators such as Dr José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia y Velasco of nineteenth century Paraguay, and turn of the century Venezuelan dictator Juan Vicente Gómez.

Assailing Chávez’s democratic credentials allowed the media portrayal to move into its second phase of focusing on polling results. While several outlets ran stories highlighting methodological issues with the polls – and the so-called “war of the polls” between Chávez and Capriles – the issue here is where the stories ran and how discrepancies in polling data were handled by editorial boards. The Associated Press was clear there were
serious problems with how polling data was compiled which might lead to an artificial sense that Capriles was closing the gap and maybe even taking the lead (Sanchez, 2012b). But this was a wire story and something apparently taken more as internal newsroom background than an item worthy of print. A similar story was drafted for The Wall Street Journal, but consigned to its online edition, which shelters behind a pay wall without the prominence of being in print (Luhnow, 2012).

Burying stories critically examining polling practices in Venezuela matters for the larger agenda of supporting the anti-Chávez campaign because it built credence around pro-Capriles survey data portraying Chávez as vulnerable. From mid-September there was an accelerating rhythm of stories about a surge in Capriles’ support. The Miami Herald started an interview with Capriles by acknowledging the Chávez lead, but suggested that pro-government support was waning (Wyss, 2012). A few days later Bloomberg was more direct, running the headline “Rival tops Hugo Chavez in Venezuela Poll” for a story on a Consultores 21 poll rather than results from long-established groups such as Datanalisis that showed a strong Chávez lead (Bloomberg, 2012). In the game of selective poll citation that emerged attention was given to divergent survey results, but emphasis was consistently placed on results showing Capriles ahead or narrowing the gap. Polling data diverging from the desired narrative was critiqued as distorted by the “fear factor” (Reuters, 2012), not adequately addressing non-declared voter intentions (sometimes as high as 15.5 per cent) (Mander, 2012e), part of a process biased by fear of a Chávez defeat (Primera, 2012d: 2), or indicative of a trend line in selected polls highlighting growing opposition support (Henry, 2012). When polling data failed to adequately make the case, some outlets sought guiding commentary from New York-based financial analysts or outright assertions Capriles was pulling into the lead and should win (Minaya & Luhnow, 2012; Investor Daily Business, 2012).

More measured analysis still focused on the possibility of a Capriles victory, but modified the message with explicit recognition it was still very uncertain (Moya-Ocampo, 2012). In Venezuela indications were that Capriles was gaining ground, making the “undeclared” voters key to victory on election day. This supposed momentum pointed towards the third phase of external coverage: maintaining hope and supporting undecided Venezuelans in their final push for regime change.

Coverage from El País was most prominent, with a near-daily message of change over the last week of the campaign. October started with an OpEd entitled “President Capriles?” and an article “The Opposition to Chávez Takes Caracas” (Martínez, 2012; Prados & Primera, 2012). Articles with titles like “The Hope of Venezuela”, “More than a vote”, “The tranquil power of the opposition”, and most tellingly, the election-day piece by Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa: “Capriles’ Hour” continued the pressure (Krauze, 2012b: 33; El País, 2012: 32; Primera, 2012c: 5; Llosa, 2012: 33). The tone in all of these news, opinion and editorial pieces was consistent, beginning with a reminder of Chávez’s failures before highlighting prospects for a new future if Venezuelans followed the ‘polling trends’ and voted for Capriles. Quiet support for this narrative came from the international English-language media, which reiterated the uncertainty of the result and
that, as the *Financial Times* put it, the David of Capriles could reasonably be expected to defeat the Goliath Chávez (Mander, 2012f: 6; Mander & Rathbone, 2012: 8).

When read post-facto in a linear fashion Western media coverage suggests a remarkable degree of coordination and division of labour. This is more likely reflective of the extent to which media outlets read each other’s product and responded to it with renewed coverage. The affinity of perspectives on the likelihood of a Capriles victory also points to the deeper factors behind Herman and Chomsky’s ‘propaganda model’. Construction of a unified vision of Venezuela by otherwise independent media organisations is the result not only of the five filters corresponding with corporate interest, but also largely parrots – tacitly or otherwise – official debate about Chávez in Washington. Given the low regard for Chávez in Washington it is little surprise that narratives of inefficacy, negligence and outright authoritarianism resonated within the media. Where the propaganda model is less useful, however, is in explaining how this portrayal actually works on the ground in helping to secure the necessary electoral outcomes. It is crucial, therefore, to shift our attention away from the behaviour of the globalised media to its local impact and appropriation by domestic “agents of influence.”

**Glocalised Media?**

Clearly the globalised media supported opposition groups in the 2012 Venezuelan presidential election. To explore the on-the-ground impact this had in Venezuela, it is necessary to move beyond the confines of the propaganda model. While Herman and Chomsky demonstrate how large sections of the U.S. media aligned itself with its foreign policy positions, less attention is given to how this corresponds with local corporate interests. Indeed, building on the above insights, we argue events in Venezuela reveal a “feedback loop” wherein local opposition forces and the globalised media interact with and reinforce one another in a manner suggestive of William I. Robinson’s work on “democracy promotion.”

For Robinson, democracy promotion has become a central U.S. strategy for upholding its hegemonic position over the global South and Latin America in particular. He argues that the democracy promoted by Washington is more accurately described as “polyarchy”, wherein “a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites” (Robinson, 1996: 624). In contrast to conceptions of democracy where political power is a means of transforming unjust socioeconomic structures and democratising social and cultural life, polyarchy explicitly isolates the political from the socio-economic (Robinson, 2006: 100). Issues of poverty alleviation are left to an individual’s relationship with the market rather than their engagement with the political system. Democracy thus becomes part of a wider neoliberal discourse within which democratisation is the political corollary to economic liberalisation and internationalisation (Gill, Rocamora, & Wilson, 1993). Polyarchy, Robinson contends, is the political system of choice because it facilitates the neoliberal world order by promoting intra–elite conciliation. Significantly, it also relieves pressure on this elite by giving the popular masses a sense of inclusion in a political system that is by definition limited. This facilitates consent from below for elite rule, making polyarchy a more
durable form of social control than authoritarian models which rely primarily on coercion (Robinson, 2006: 100).

Our interest is not in documenting Washington’s promotion of polyarchy, but rather in the cultivation of local “agents of influence” and how they fit within the media system. The suggestion is that absent a favourable local state, the media system aligns itself with what Robinson describes as a transnationally-orientated elite; an elite which shares the corporatist vision found in Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model. Indeed, for Robinson, a transnationally-orientated elite is not external and/or above civil society but operates predominately within it in order to construct consent via ideological co-optation and the political incorporation of subaltern classes. Since the 1980s this has resulted in U.S. democracy promotion initiatives seeking to actively engage and support transnationally-orientated elites in Latin America and elsewhere. The objective is creation of “agents of influence” in civil societies who can prevail in social struggles with both regressive and radical forces and thus advance a position consistent with the U.S.-led neoliberal order (Robinson 2006: 106-7).

For Venezuela, this is significant as local agents of influence used the media to further their political objectives. The foreign media here is a crucial “external” contributor to the polyarchic democracy promotion campaign. The media’s neoliberal worldview and its characterisation of Chávez as a dangerous authoritarian acts as a “feedback loop” reinforcing the arguments of local agents of influence, fortifying their position in social struggles for hegemony. For the local opposition, the media’s portrayal of Venezuela’s situation is validated by the fact that it accords with its views, both speaking the same language and sharing the same concerns. The result is an echo chamber, creating a symbiotic relationship between foreign media and local agents of influence, legitimising the position of each to form a ‘common sense’ ideological worldview supportive of the neoliberal order and critical of Chavismo.

This relationship was clearly evident during the October election, as Capriles received coverage and access to Western media as the preferred candidate. Themes like inefficacy, negligence and authoritarianism were recurrent in Capriles’ campaign, while he and prominent opposition figures were granted access to international OpEd pages not afforded to Chavistas. Closely mirroring media renditions, Capriles described Chávez’s presidency as moribund, “out of gasoline”, leaving only the opposition able to promote a “better future of progress” (Ellsworth, 2012: A9). Central to this “better future” was the overcoming of violence and social division. Committing to the path of “light and not darkness, that of love and not hatred”, Capriles promised he would “defeat violence”, in victory “burying the period of hatred” (Mander & Rathbone, 2012: 8; Prados & Primera, 2012). Messages of inefficacy were buttressed by claims of governmental neglect. Promising to restore business confidence, Capriles talked of moving beyond ideology to better manage the Venezuelan state: “I don’t care about [the colour of] the shirt you want to wear, what I care about is progress” (Mander, 2012g: 5). Central to this message was the oil sector: “The problem is that [the government] is only bothered with solving problems in other countries, it doesn’t care about what happens here” (Mander, 2012c: 9).
Contrasting himself with Chávez, Capriles promised better management and that “not a single free barrel of oil will leave to other countries” (Mander, 2012b: 8).

Capriles drove these themes home in an OpEd for El País. Promising to re-open the country to foreign capital, he committed to “no more expropriation, no more confiscation”, adding that he would “restore the confidence…that has been excessively abused over the last 14 years”. In place of uncertainty and violence he offered a government of transparency, wherein “citizens, institutions, social and economic factors all [operate] within clearly established rights and obligations” (Capriles, 2012: 29). His privileged access to the international press came in addition to an earlier interview conducted with prominent opposition candidate María Corina Machado. In a piece titled “Hugo Chávez has destroyed our democratic society”, Machado (2012: 4) spoke of the authoritarian tendencies inherent to the Chávez presidency, suggesting that a return to democracy depended upon new leadership.

Whether emanating from the international media or from local opposition groups, there existed a strong affinity of message. Far from being attributable to one actor or another, this anti-Chávez narrative created a feedback loop wherein both the message and the messenger became mutually reinforcing, irrespective of geographical locale. With direct U.S. influence absent from the corridors the Venezuelan state the media became a crucial pillar of the democracy promotion network, and one whose importance is magnified by its supposed objectivity and commitment to liberal norms.

Such a role for the Western media in electoral contests is nothing remarkable in Latin America. By some accounts this strategy has been repeatedly deployed to successfully deny electoral victory to candidates considered threats to U.S. interests. What is remarkable in the Venezuelan case is that these efforts failed. Arguably, Capriles did outperform expectations, but Chávez still comfortably defeated him in the October 7th ballot. As the next section sets out, this points to a series of profound changes in both Venezuelan politics and inter-American affairs.

What Does the Western Media’s Failure Mean?
There are a number of implications that can be drawn from the failure of the Western media to push electoral results as it once may have done. The first is internal to Venezuela. While we disagree in our assessment of Chávez’s government, we do agree there was a healthy broadening of political space during his tenure, which has led to a more independently minded populace. Even the most vocal of Chávez’s critics concede that his presidency has led to the political inclusion of previously marginalised sections of society. Whether through attending rallies, marches and protests, or participating in elections, referenda and other political activities, large section of the population have become politically conscious and mobilised. This is demonstrated in large electoral turnouts – as high as 80 per cent in presidential ballots – and some of the highest satisfaction rates with democracy in the region. Moreover, mobilisation, has been institutionalised through a number of grassroots institutions like the Communal Councils, Communes or electoral organisations. Together with the explosion of community media, education missions, study groups and online discussion fora like Aporrea, these
institutions broaden the Country’s political space, providing previously marginalised voices platforms from which to contribute to public discourse.

Understood in Robinson’s Gramscian terms, the Bolivarian Revolution has cultivated spaces in Venezuelan civil society where formerly excluded social forces can interact and wage social and ideological struggles against the transnationally-oriented elites. These elites, therefore, no longer have a monopoly on the institutions of civil society from which to secure consent for the neoliberal order. Instead, they are faced with an organised and energised backlash from those wishing to take the Country in a different direction. This unquestionably has led to greater polarisation of the country, as neither side retreats during these confrontations. This became abundantly clear after the whisker-thin victory of Chávez’s anointed successor, Nicolás Maduro, over Capriles in the 14 April 2013 presidential election. The tense stand off between the two sides crystalized the degree of polarisation in political and civil society that continues after Chávez’s death. While the resultant conflict has alarmed Venezuela’s neighbours (El Comercio, 2013), it also represents the emergence of a more autonomously minded popular consciousness resistant to external actors attempting to shape political discourse in the country. Indeed, Maduro’s – albeit narrow – victory, secured in the face of effectively a re-run of the October 2012 narrative by the Western media, highlights the potentially enduring nature of the changes described here, even with Chávez out of the picture. Thus, while the Capriles campaign undoubtedly enjoyed the support of the international media – creating a feedback loop which reinforced the Western narrative about Chávez – this loop fractured when viewed against local election coverage. To test this proposition, we ran a series of Boolean searches on the Factiva media database system as well as Google news and newspaper web pages to see to what extent the Western media sources examined in this paper were cited within Venezuela as well as the degree to which external stories were “re-broken” in Venezuela. The results were exceedingly slim; the only substantive instance was a 26 July 2012 Nelson Bocaranda Sardi column in El Universal referring to the Washington Post’s article on the Human Rights Watch report. More significantly, we found that Western coverage tended to lag behind Venezuelan coverage of the same issues. For example, the series of April El País articles on violence in Caracas were covered in the Venezuelan press during March (El Universal, 2012a). While the Venezuelan press revisited the story in May, it was in the context of Mexican requests for security guarantees, not reporting from the Spanish daily (El Universal, 2012b). Questions about polling validity followed a similar pattern. Western polling coverage started in September, months after the issue had been addressed by Venezuelan journalists (Vásquez, 2012; Lepage, 2012; Conde, 2012). Acidic, anti-Chávez OpEds in newspapers such as El País were not reproduced or referenced in Venezuela. More tellingly, some of the same authors wrote equally pointed pieces specifically for Venezuelan publications or were interviewed by them, with Enrique Krauze (2012a) going so far as to explain why a Mexican would be commenting on a foreign election (El Universal, 2012c).

In short, Venezuelans wrote their own commentary and did their own reporting and analysis of the election without relying on external validation or guidance for presentation of what was an equally pointed, but more nuanced journalistic endeavor than
that sketched out in our survey of Western print reporting. The point is that the mechanisms of hegemony promotion that enable the transnationally-oriented agents of influence and their allies in the international media to monopolize public discourse have been undermined, creating a more autonomous civil society not so easily swayed by external discourses. This growing autonomy, we believe, is a good thing for the Venezuela’s democracy over the long-term.

Although a subject for further research, we suggest that this sense of reclaimed agency is in many ways a reflection of wider changes taking place throughout the Americas and not unique to Venezuela. The arguments by Herman and Chomsky as well as by Robinson are predicated on a clear, hierarchical relationship involving either implicit or explicit U.S. domination as a near-permanent fixture in Latin American politics. While this may have appeared to be the case historically, the underlying reality has always been that direct U.S. power over the region – particularly in the South American countries – has been less overwhelming than assumed. Cooperation and assistance from the U.S. has mattered, but it has not been the deciding factor in the region’s internal political decisions. Ultimately, the decision to topple a democratic government was made by domestic elites who would look for benediction from the U.S. to validate their actions, not a deciding factor on whether or not they should proceed. In a sense this is what Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto captured in the late 1960s with their presentation of transnational capitalist class coalitions, implying that domestic elites were just as important as external pressures for the sorts of political and economic decisions governing developing countries (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Again, it is a feedback loop that we see as the principal characteristic of this relationship rather than one of unidirectional influence.

In this vein, Robinson (2008) has recently noted that Latin American entrepreneurs and firms are increasingly engaging with the international economy on even terms, pointing to growth in the size and diversity of the transnational capitalist enclaves in the region discussed decades ago by Cardoso and Faletto. In Venezuela the Chavista push for social inclusion and endogenous, bottom-up development (ironically driven from the top) fed what Brazilian president Lula da Silva called the region’s rising auto-estima (Burges, 2005: 1133-1151), or growing self-confidence. On a hemispheric level, these same processes are most evident in a realignment of economic policy formulation. Countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru are actively reinterpreting liberal economic theory through lenses appropriate to their domestic contexts (Reid, 2007; Weitzman, 2012). As Robinson might argue, the core precepts of a liberal world economy are being accepted, indicating continued pre-eminence of the hegemony constructed by the U.S., but the nature of relational power has changed to allow regional countries considerably more policy autonomy and economic independence. The neoliberal hegemonic model promoted by the U.S. persists, even as the U.S. itself is no longer hegemonic.

In foreign policy terms this relegates the U.S. to being just one option as potentially more immediate sub-regional relationships and pan-Southern linkages arise. While space considerations preclude a more in-depth analysis of this change, preliminary evidence can
be found in the inter-American system where the Bolivarian group of has sought to
denude the efficacy of the Organisation of American States and its hemispheric justice
and democracy monitoring systems. Likewise, political disruptions and border
transgressions such as those seen in Bolivia, Honduras, Paraguay and between Colombia
and Ecuador have been resolved within Latin America to the active exclusion of the U.S.
(Legler, 2012; Garcia, 2009-2010; 2013). Further indicators come from the mushrooming
of regional institutions – i.e., UNASUR, CELAC, BancoSur – which bypass the U.S. and
confine the regional political and economic agenda setting to the region itself (Chodor,
2015). As Thomas Legler notes, the nature of inter-American organisations is shifting,
and the position of the U.S. within them – not to mention its ability to manoeuvre them –
is eroding to the point of it becoming an increasingly marginal actor (Legler, 2013).

Conclusion
This article presents two significant conclusions for democracy in Latin America and the
study of the region’s domestic and foreign affairs. The first is that the “propaganda model”
of Herman and Chomsky needs to be re-examined to take into account the rise of
competing agency in Venezuela and the wider impact of dissident voices in the region.
While the model itself concerns the North American press, its international applicability
requires that greater attention is given to local, competing factors; a focus that becomes
all the more important in a country like Venezuela where the media is highly polarised.
This points to the second element, which is that the traditional leftist view of Latin
America struggling under the thumb of U.S. hegemony is outmoded and in need of a
serious rethink. Indeed, we might go so far as to argue that a persistent focus on the need
to “protect” Latin America from U.S. domination has itself become a pernicious form of
imperialism that threatens to infantilise actors across the region. If anything, the failure of
the international media to influence electoral outcomes in Venezuela points to a vibrant
domestic political awareness capable of filtering competing messages and making its own
decisions for its own reasons. On a regional level this same phenomenon translates into
an increasingly plural domestic political debate and a foreign policy ambience in which
interaction with Washington is better understood on the basis of equality and partnership
(optimistically) rather than a region subordinate to U.S. domination.

This is not to suggest that traditional concerns about media distortion of political
outcomes or patterns of economic hegemony have faded away. For example, there is
ample space for a critical engagement with how state regulation and control of the media
in Latin America are impacting political outcomes, even if this does currently appear to
be working against liberal economic hegemonies rather than for them. Venezuela is
clearly a case study worthy of attention. Likewise, the continued dominance of private
media conglomerates like Clarín in Argentina or O Globo in Brazil, which often
monopolise public discourse in the region in favour of corporate interests, suggest that
the pluralisation of political spaces is still a nascent phenomenon. The point to
acknowledge, then, is that theory should not be used to predetermine the conclusions, but
rather it should be deployed as an analytical lens to understand processes and seek real
avenues of influence and pressure.
This brings us to our major conclusion. The failure of the mainstream international media to bend the electoral outcome in Venezuela points directly to a forceful expression of domestic agency in Latin America. It demonstrates the capacity for countries in the region to make their own democratic decisions and reflects broader sub-regional trends to collectively manage their relations in the absence of Washington. The most recent reminder of this can be seen in the wake of Nicolás Maduro’s election as Chávez’s successor in the April 2013. At the time of writing – August 2014 – the U.S. remains the only Country in the hemisphere that refuses to recognise Maduro as the legitimate president of the country. Meanwhile, the rest of the region has moved on, with Buenos Aires, Brasília and Montevideo welcoming Maduro on a regional tour and Venezuela taking over the rotating presidency of Mercosur in June 2013, and hosting the organization’s annual summit in July 2014. For the analyst or scholar this means that research has just become significantly more difficult, with the particularities of each country and the details of longer-running patterns of sub-regional foreign relations now crucial to understanding an increasingly complex region. Demonstrative of this complexity is that the lines of transnational capitalist class linkages are no longer reducible to a unidirectional U.S.-Latin America flow. Rather, intra-national, intra-regional and South-South lines are now in play and potentially more important (and difficult) to chart. Perhaps most significant, however, is that the passive acceptance of U.S. pressures in South America is gone and active engagement and modification by the South appears to be the pattern of the future.

Reference list
Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer

Barnes, Taylor

Blas, Javier.
2012 “The Venezuelan solution to high oil prices.” Financial Times. 4 October.

Bloomberg

Boykoff, Jules

Burges, Sean W.

Bush, George W.

Capriles, Henrique

Cardoso, Fernando Henrique and Enzo Faletto

Chodor, Tom

Chomsky, Noam

Conde, Petro

El Comercio
2013 “El Perú promueve una declaración de Unasur pidiendo tolerancia en Venezuela.” El Comercio. 3 May.

Duailibibe, Julia

Eagleton, Terry

Ellsworth, Brian

El Universal
2012a “Nueve Casos de Diplomáticos Víctimas.” El Universal 18 March.


Financial Times

Forero, Juan

Garcia, Marco Aurélio


Gill, Barry, Joel Rocamora, and Richard Wilson

Golan, Guy

Goytisolo, Juan
Disillusioned with Chavez, some Venezuelans switch sides to back his rival in election. **Associated Press** 28 September.


Jones, Bart 2007 *Hugo!: The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution*, Hanover, New Hampshire, Steerforth Press.


Lima, Mauricio 2013 “As Brazil”s Influence Expands, So Does a Campaign Strategist’s Success.” *New York Times*, 5 April.


Machado, María Corina 2012 “Hugo Chávez has destroyed our democratic society.” El País 12 July.


“Chavez turns to spin as Venezuela steels itself for post-election turbulence.” Financial Times 3 October.

“Rock star” challenger nips at Chavez’s heels.” Financial Times 29 September.


Primera, Maye 2012a “La violencia gopea a los diplomáticos en Venezuela.” El País 12 April.

“Venezuela bans the sale of all firearms to private citizens.” El País 7 April.

“El FMI revela que Caracas está vendiendo sus reservas de oro.” El País 28 September.

“Chávez teme una derrota electoral.” El País 28 September.

“La fuerza tranquila de la oposición.” El País 7 October.


Reid, Michael 2007 Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America’s Soul. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press.
Reuters
2012 “Chavez’s rival gains ground in Venezuela election push.” Reuters 25 September.

Rice, Condoleezza

Robinson, William I.


Sanchez, Fabiola
2012a “Hugo Chavez, challenger target youth, women voters with contrasting campaigns.” Associated Press 19 September.


Sardi, Nelson Bocaranda

Toro, Francisco

Vásquez, Alex

Wallis, Daniel

The Washington Post


Weitzman, Hal

Williams, Raymond

Wyss, Jim
2012 “Hugo Chávez’s challenger and why he’s so confident.” Miami Herald 15 September.

Young, Kevin
We focus on print media due to its continued agenda-setting capacity for national and international news cycles. For example, see (Golan 2006).