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Commentary

Down the Rabbit Hole: Searching for Native Scholarship to Better Understand Populism

—Charlotte Harris

There's gotta be more to the story.

It's a simple thought that has set many a researcher or investigative journalist on a trail toward the truth. It was a thought that occurred to me early in 2017 when, after reading several popular press pieces that compared the populism of newly-elected President Donald Trump with that of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, I had the nagging sense that such a comparison belied a much more complex relationship. My knowledge of media studies imparted by my communication major, and my cultural inquiry skills honed as a Spanish major and through study abroad in Spain, made me wary of accepting these think pieces as fact.

Applying analytical concepts I learned in a media and politics course I was taking at the time, I was unconvinced by the presumption offered by certain articles that Donald Trump was, somehow, "America's Hugo Chávez." To be sure, some similarities were clear: both employed forms of populist rhetoric that positioned a sector of the population against a corrupt elite, exhibited a brash and coarse sense of humor, and had a propensity for fiery tirades against journalists. Although I did find this trend toward political incivility concerning, I wondered if these behavioral similarities were enough to extrapolate a comparison between two presidents from countries with such disparate political contexts. The comparisons merited a more thorough investigation, one that considered the historical and sociocultural context of these countries' political situations.



The author working at Dimond Library. Photo by Jeremy Gasowski, UNH Communications and Public Affairs.

Planning a Deeper Investigation

I knew a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research would provide me the perfect venue to explore the validity of comparisons

between Trump and Chávez on a much deeper level than I could during the school year. I enlisted the help of my faculty mentor, Mike Soha, lecturer in the Department of Communication at UNH, and designed a research project that I believed would give me a well-rounded basis on which to explore the validity of these comparisons. I would study the historical and sociocultural context of Venezuela, where Hugo Chávez had been president from 1999 to 2013, in order to understand why he might be a point of comparison for Donald Trump. I supplemented my investigation by looking at another Latin American populist, Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador from 2007 to 2017. I wanted to go beyond the anecdotal, opinion-based musings of the popular press pieces that had initially caught my attention, and instead develop an informed understanding of Venezuela's and Ecuador's social and political contexts from which to judge a comparison with President Trump.

I spent the summer working my way through various texts in an effort to familiarize myself with Venezuela and Ecuador. Although I worked on my project while sitting in a variety of coffee shops around seacoast New Hampshire, my research led my mind on a wandering journey through Ecuador and Venezuela as I unlocked the trends and phenomena that brought the populists Chávez and Correa to power. I came to understand the implications of their controversial style of leadership. I knew that developing this knowledge would help me evaluate the validity of comparisons between Trump and these leaders. What I did not realize, however, was that the type of sources I consulted would turn out to be as valuable as the research findings themselves.

Going Beyond the Op-ed

When it came to examining popular press pieces from a critical perspective, I wondered who was drawing these comparisons. Was it outsiders, who saw Latin America as a politically fragile region in which democracy was still in its tender infancy? Or was it concerned Venezuelans wanting to raise a red flag to Americans about what a Chávez-style presidency could portend?

It turned out that both Latin Americans and non-Latin Americans had contributed to the op-ed pieces I had found in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Washington Post*. Rory Carroll, an Irish journalist who spent six years in Venezuela as a Latin American correspondent for *The Guardian*, acknowledged the "profound" ideological differences between Chávez and Trump, but also warned of the U.S. "unraveling to tragicomedy," if Trump's presidency played out the same as that of Chávez. Alberto Barrera Tyszka, a Venezuelan TV screenwriter, focused on Chávez's and Trump's similarities regarding their expert manipulation of the media, but failed to explain how this parallel equates to identical political outcomes. Carlos de la Torre, an Ecuadorian sociologist who has conducted extensive research of Andean politics, offered a more logical sequence of argumentation: Trump exhibits some of the same qualities as Chávez, including contempt for the news media, attacks on civil society, and disrespect of certain constitutional arrangements, and thus would perhaps exhibit tendencies of authoritarianism once in office, as Chávez did.

Still, my scholarly instinct told me that there was more to the story. Does the fact that Chávez once hosted a beauty pageant and Trump rose to pop culture prominence as the host of a reality television show *really* have any bearing on the potential outcomes of their presidencies? I wasn't convinced. I

knew the comparison merited more investigation. These popular press pieces were op-eds, written in a way that took some historical facts into consideration, but were mostly based on opinion. Some cases, such as the prediction in a *Washington Post* op-ed written by Venezuelan Andrés Miguel Rondón, seemed nothing more than fear mongering. Rondón wrote forebodingly of “neighbors [being] deported and friends of different creeds and sexual orientations living in fear and anxiety, [and] your country’s economic inequality deepening along the way.” And although I recognized the importance of a native Venezuelan perspective, I was wary of taking even their opinions to be unquestionable fact.

So, I kept digging.

Consulting a Native Scholarly Perspective

I wanted to approach these op-eds about Venezuela the same way I would approach one written about my native country: appreciating their viewpoint, while also factoring in an inherent understanding of historical and cultural context. I followed a winding path of journal articles, academic books, and other scholarly publications. As I read, I sought out the sources cited, and read those pieces too. A book by prominent Hugo Chávez scholar Elena Block, an Australian, led me to the work of Andrés Cañizález, a Venezuelan political communication and press freedom researcher. *Perfect!*, I thought, eager to hear things from a native but scholarly perspective.



Rafael Correa, like Chávez, was a leader at once popular and controversial. His presidency was characterized by an adept manipulation of the media. *Photo by Agencia de Noticias ANDES, 2017.*

Unlike the opinion-based arguments I found in popular press pieces which offered little more than broad generalizations based on anecdotal experience, Cañizález applied a quantitative approach. He analyzed Chávez’s media policy and legislation to draw conclusions about Chávez’s adept and powerful use of television (157-77). Venezuelan scholar Adriana Bolívar also used a scholarly approach to demonstrate how Chávez’s weekly television broadcast *Aló Presidente* sustained a strong connection between the president and his constituents for the duration of his 14 year presidency (85-108). Equipped with this knowledge, I was more inclined to accept the comparison of Chávez and Trump in terms of their shared mastery in using the media to generate and maintain electoral support.

Most of Cañizález and Bolívar's work were only available in Spanish, so I was glad I had my Spanish comprehension skills. My fluency came in handy as I worked through a 55-page document full of technical language providing statistical analysis of the media situation in Ecuador during the presidency of Rafael Correa, who enacted controversial laws that some criticized for undermining press freedom (Gehrke et al.). I took extensive notes throughout my research process, alternating between Spanish and English, sometimes without even realizing whether my brain was simultaneously translating the Spanish or simply internalizing and understanding it.

Down the Rabbit Hole

At one point, I confessed to my faculty mentor, Mike Soha, that it was hard to cut myself off from continuing "down the rabbit hole" of articles and references that kept coming up. He responded, "The 'rabbit hole' is often the best place to be."



Hugo Chávez often gave important speeches in front of Venezuelan independence hero Simón Bolívar. This helped to establish Chávez as a modern-day Bolívar, breaking Venezuela free from the grips of imperialist powers. *Photo by Karel Fuentes, 2010.*

When I came up for air, I noticed a trend from just a quick glance at my bibliography: most of the authors were Latin American. When I began this research project, I hadn't intended to consult primarily Latin American sources, but I found their perspective more authentic when compared with the work of outsiders. Whether they were native Venezuelans or Ecuadorians, or from neighboring countries, like Colombia, or were raised in countries that maintained close relations, like Cuba, these authors all had something to offer me that I could not get elsewhere: a native, culturally relative perspective that was also based in academic research. I quickly realized that this was invaluable.

When I positioned myself from the perspective of a Latin American applying a scholarly procedure, I saw that things weren't so simple. Both Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa rose to power by sidestepping liberal democratic norms and consolidating power in the executive branch. But both still made important headway in addressing the concerns of their largely working class electoral base. Hugo Chávez, for example, nationalized Venezuela's lucrative oil industry and funneled the revenues into social programs that reduced poverty. Similarly, the election of Rafael Correa, who is of *mestizo* (mixed) ethnicity himself, signaled the empowerment of Ecuador's historically excluded indigenous population.

Of course, there is value in looking to other countries and contexts to understand domestic political and social trends. But broad generalizations based solely on anecdotal experience, as I saw in the opened pieces that originally ignited my curiosity, may ultimately be more detrimental than they are useful. Although it is informative to compare the political phenomena we experience with similar occurrences in another country, we should be cautious not to conflate the political outcomes of historically and culturally unique countries with the potential results in our own.

Final Thoughts

Before I began my research project, I expected to develop a relatively straightforward assessment of the validity of the comparison between Donald Trump and Hugo Chávez. But I came to see that the value of my research didn't lie only in the ultimate conclusion of the process; instead, its value was embedded throughout the project, in the understanding I developed along the way. That's a lesson that I'll carry with me as I continue investigating the relationship between the media and politics throughout my future studies and career. The voices that truly helped me understand the contextual basis for evaluating the comparison were both native to the cultures they studied and academic in their evaluative approach. This perspective equipped me to draw my own conclusions, which were based in academic research and historical, political, and sociocultural understanding.

For an ever-curious researcher like me, the process of digging deeper, seeking out different sources and voices, and developing a more holistically informed understanding were the most satisfying and rewarding parts of the project. You could say that the most enjoyable part of my research was all that time I spent down the rabbit hole.

I would like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for their dedication to supporting undergraduate research through grants like the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), which was integral in making my project possible. I am particularly appreciative of the generosity of Mr. Dana Hamel and Dr. Adrian Kerrison for contributing to the SURF and to the Grand Challenges for the Liberal Arts Initiative for supporting the crucial role of the liberal arts in addressing today's issues. I am grateful to the amazing professors I have encountered while pursuing both my communication and Spanish majors, especially my faculty mentor, Mike Soha, for bringing his guidance and wealth of knowledge to the project.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Charlotte Harris is a communication and Spanish major from Newcastle, Maine. She is an accomplished student in the University Honors Program and will graduate with an Honors in Major distinction. Her research, conducted with the help of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) from the Hamel Center, will assist in the completion of her honors thesis. Charlotte was drawn to her research topic because it integrates her interests in media studies and Latin America. She was also eager to investigate these topics through a political lens in a deeper context than the classroom setting would allow. In her research, Charlotte came to appreciate the importance of critical analysis in gaining understanding. The rewarding experience of independent research motivated her to share her work in *Inquiry*. After graduating in May 2018, Charlotte hopes to work in the field of media policy research and advocacy. She also plans eventually to attend graduate school for communication.

Michael Soha is a lecturer of communication at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), where he has been teaching for five years. He specializes in media and politics, specifically the study of social media, news, and political coverage. Charlotte Harris has taken several classes with him, and they discovered that they both share interests in Latin America and comparative news media coverage. They have worked together for about a year on Charlotte's Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) project and on her honors thesis. Although Charlotte is his first *Inquiry* author mentee, he has a wealth of experience in mentorship, having worked with many students on thesis projects, Undergraduate Research Conference presentations, independent studies, and the like. He enjoys mentoring students who are independent and determined, such as Charlotte, and helping them delve deeply into the research process. He praises *Inquiry* for its ability to reach general audiences while challenging authors to write succinctly about their overall research processes.