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Rod Stoneman: Chavez – The Revolution will not be Televised. A Case Study of Politics and the Media

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**Rod Stoneman: Chavez – The Revolution will not be Televised.
A Case Study of Politics and the Media**

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One of the few pleasures of George W Bush's late presidency was listening to Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, baiting the Bush administration about its neoliberal economic policies and imperialist foreign adventures. Ironically, it was these same neoconservative missions which contributed to the higher oil prices which gave Chávez, the leader of one of the world's largest oil exporters, the economic and political power to co-opt his neighbours into his Bolivarian revolution and thumb his nose at the USA with seeming impunity. Chávez, a failed coup plotter in 1992, who has since been democratically elected three times, generates veneration and venom in equal measure. For the predominantly poor non-white Venezuelan underclass, he is a saviour. To the white middle class, he is a communist dictator in bed with Castro. So, an ideal subject for a documentary team co-financed by The Irish Film Board (BSÉ), BBC and various other European TV channels.

The team, consisting of Kim Bartley and Donnacha Ó Briain, were lucky enough to be given access to Chávez and his ministers and then coincidentally be present at the Presidential Palace Miraflores when an attempted coup took place. The nature of their documentary then changed from character study to

an eye-witness account of the lead up to and execution of the coup, and the role of the Venezuelan media, specifically the private TV channels, in the attempted take over. The 52-min TV version *Chávez: Inside the Coup* was screened on the Irish channel RTÉ in February 2003 provoking an over-whelming positive public reaction. A longer version, the 72-min *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* was circulated around the international film festival circuit in order to find a distributor for a theatrical release, picking up awards and prizes along the way.

In the longer version the film opens with Chávez touring the country areas, being received with popular enthusiasm. In voice-over the filmmakers explain the background to their project and some historical context to the country and their larger-than-life subject: Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías. At this time the issue of the disposition of the country's oil revenues (as well as other aspects of his Bolivarian socialist revolution) had polarised the country. On April 11 in 2002, crowds for and against him gather in the streets. Some snipers shoot at the anti-Chávez crowd who return fire. The private TV networks show these images claiming anti-government protestors are being shot. The military high-command withdraws its support from the government, threatens to shell the presidential palace, and Chávez is led away by army officers. The next morning Pedro Carmona is sworn in as president and the coup leaders explain about the planning on a television chat-show. However, pro-Chávez supporters from the barrios march on Miraflores Palace and the palace guard takes back the building in Chávez's name. In the absence of the President, the Vice President is constitutionally sworn in as acting president. Chávez returns by helicopter at night when the government regains full military control after an army general announces on television that the military respects the constitution. Chávez then speaks directly to the filmmakers, asking them for a copy of the finished film

It was only when the film was shown in Venezuela itself, did an organised backlash occur. Bartley gave a personal showing to Chávez who loved it and arranged for it to be shown in Caracas' biggest auditorium at the same time it was broadcast on the state-owned and government controlled, Venezolana de Televisión on the anniversary of the coup in April 2003. The political opposition assumed the film-makers, at best, had lost their objectivity or had been duped into inadvertently producing a pro-Chávez account of the coup, and at worst, had been paid by the government to produce political propaganda. An online petition was organised and editorials in print and broadcast media denounced the documentary as having significant factual errors. A detailed critique was published as part of the petition, and the BBC's Editorial Complaints Unit was forced to investigate complaints of bias which were eventually not upheld.

Rod Stoneman, Director of the Huston School of Film and Digital Media at the University of Ireland, who had worked as a Deputy Commissioning Editor at Channel 4 before becoming Chief Executive of the Irish Film Board at the time the project was initiated, appears to be the perfect person to write about the film's genesis, execution, editing and controversy. He gives a measured but personal

description of how film projects of this type are chosen and funded, as well as insider information about this one in particular.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers had made a fundamental mistake when choosing and arranging their material (200 hours had to be reduced to 72min). A central thesis of the film is that the private television stations, owned by successful, conservative businessmen, were not only non-partisan when covering any stories relating to the government but had played an active part in the coup itself by broadcasting only selective scenes of what was happening, as it was happening, in order to further the interests of the coup leaders. In particular, scenes of pro-Chávistas defending themselves from unidentified snipers (but probably the Metropolitan police) were edited so it seemed they were firing at unarmed, anti-government protestors, and scenes of thousands of poor, pro-Chávistas rallying in the streets in support of the government were not shown at all. Regrettably, the filmmakers showed some scenes out of chronological order, which seemed to boost Chávez's popularity with the Venezuelan people and vilify the opposition as rich racists. The USA's involvement in the coup was also disputed. The book deals with these allegations of factual error individually and concludes, as did the BBC, that there was no real material distortion of the truth.

However, the political documentary is a strange beast. The documentary genre is defined not by a formal strategy but by its claim to a certain relation to the truth. "It is entirely constructed; however, unlike other genres, a great deal more is at stake in the way in which this construction negotiates real events."(S.75) Stoneman reminds us that, although, a high degree of manipulation goes into the manufacture of a documentary, this fabrication does not necessarily mean that it is untrue. On the other hand, if the documentary alleges that the television coverage was manipulated to intentionally create a false representation, then its own reporting has to be beyond reproach. It is unfortunate the filmmakers undermined themselves during the editing process.

Another point Stonemann raises is the apparent hypocrisy when western media collude in critiquing world leaders who resist the neoliberal narrative. After the coup attempt, the owner of one of the most vehemently opposed private channels, RCTV, lost his licence to broadcast. This was seen inside and outside of Venezuela as another example of Chávez's anti-democratic principles. But how tolerant would we be in Western Europe if a television station agitated for an unconstitutional change of government? How much more concerned should we really be by Mr Berlusconi's dominance of the Italian media scene?

What sets this excellent case-study apart from others is the inclusion of a DVD of the documentary itself. You can watch it and come to your own conclusions, in addition to seeing exactly the points of contention listed in the online petition. Stoneman also summarises nicely the pitfalls in political filmmaking as well as giving a knowledgeable overview of the independent filmmaking process.

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