

Transcript for Episode 22: (Social) Media Representations of Venezuela Protests

Run Time: 24:37

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BK: Ben Kuebrich (host, co-executive producer)
JL: Jared Leto (news audio)
YR: Yanira Rodriguez (host)
GCM: George Cicariello-Maher (news audio)

Cue music: "As Colorful As Ever" by Broke for Free

AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

BK: Hi everyone. This Ben Kuebrich, and for this episode we're talking about Venezuela. Or, more specifically, representations of Venezuela and the recent anti-government student protests. If you were on social media in late February, or if you happened to catch the Oscars, you've probably heard something about it. Here's Jared Leto, accepting an Oscar for best supporting actor and giving a shout-out to the protesters.

JL: [*clapping*] To all the dreamers out there around the world watching this tonight in places like the Ukraine and Venezuela [*clapping and whistling*], I want to say we are here and as you struggle to make your dreams happen, to live the impossible, we're thinking of you tonight.

BK: The idea for this podcast came when Yanira Rodriguez—an incoming PhD student in Syracuse's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program—and I were having coffee. She shared some writing about Venezuela and about her discussion of Venezuela with friends over social media. I had experienced something similar on my Facebook page, and since This Rhetorical Life is interested in the connection of rhetoric and current events, we thought these discussions might make for an interesting episode.

Through looking at representations of Venezuela, we began asking some questions that I think apply to our work with students trying to understand complex texts and issues and also our own roles as participants in social networks and as citizens: Does social media necessarily turn complex issues into heated arguments? Is there something about the speed of social media that bends toward simplification and sound bites? Or is there possibility in social media for deeper discussions of complex problems--for learning together about complex events and histories?

We don't have the answers to these questions, but we hope to illustrate some of these issues through a look at recent events and representations of Venezuela.

Cue music: "Adventure, Darling" by Gillicuddy

BK: So Yanira, what brought you into thinking about this?

YR: So in mid to late February, we were seeing a lot of information circulating on social media in the form of videos, commentary on people's pages, and basically just information circulating on the protests that were taking place, which at the time were being represented as student protests. And I remember being on Facebook and seeing all this information sort of flashing on my screen and just popping up and feeling rather confused and just trying to seek out "good information," and so I wrote a comment asking friends for information, and the first piece that was shared by several friends was a blog [post] called, "The Game Changed."¹

BK: Right, so I was seeing the same thing on my social media--this blog post circulating, "The Game Changed in Venezuela Last Night and the International Media is Asleep at the Switch." Friends had been posting it. It got retweeted and shared about 10,000 times, so if your Facebook page was anything like mine at the time, you probably saw it. A lot of my friends who were liberal or left-leaning were sharing this particular post.

And for some context on it, there's been a strong opposition media in Venezuela since the election of Hugo Chávez, and then after his death the election of Maduro has actually increased these protests and opposition movements. This blog post was published in the *Caracas Chronicles*, which describes itself as "*the place for opposition-leaning-but-not-insane analysis of the Venezuelan political scene.*"²

And for some background about the writer of this particular blog post--Francisco Toro was once a writer for the *New York Times* and later for *The Financial Times*. He resigned from the *Times* after this dispute about his neutrality and whether or not he could be objective about reporting on Venezuela. In response, he wrote, "Too much of my lifestyle is bound up with opposition activism at the moment. ... My country's democracy is in

¹ Toro, Francisco. "The Game Changed in Venezuela Last Night - and the International Media is Asleep at the Switch." *Caracas Chronicles*. WordPress.com. 20 Feb. 2014. Web.

<http://caracaschronicles.com/2014/02/20/the-game-changed/>

² "About." *Caracas Chronicles*. WordPress.com. Web. <http://caracaschronicles.com/about/>

peril now, and I can't possibly be neutral about that."³ So that's some of the context of the blog post. Throughout the blog post, though, it's really filled with these images and videos.

YR: Right. The blog post links to these videos that were apparently reporting what had happened the night before. The videos were really tough to understand. [*Overlay of audio clip of people screaming and gunfire.*]⁴ There's obvious violence, explosions, tear gas, maybe some gunfire—it's really hard to tell. There's an image of a body, someone that seems to have been shot, but again it's very tough to sort of understand what's happening in the chaos. I mean there were some what appear to be paramilitary on motorcycles shooting at what appear to be civilians. At least what was clear from the blog in terms of how these videos were framed was that this was paramilitaries attacking civilians.

BK: That's the context that Toro gives it, right? And so in the blog post, he says, "Throughout last night, panicked people told their stories of state-sponsored paramilitaries on motorcycles roaming middle class neighborhoods, shooting at people and storming into apartment buildings, shooting at anyone who seemed like he might be protesting." And that claim is really evocative. After doing some background research, it seems to me to be misleading.

Reuters reported on the same day as the blog post that there had been six deaths, but that was since the start of the protest movement that had been going on for a couple weeks at that point, and it included government supporters who had been shot by protesters. The *Reuters* report really talks about a chaotic scene where there's protesters throwing molotov cocktails at police and military. There's military shooting tear gas. There are these pro-Maduro colectivos that are roaming around on motorcycles. So it's kind of a chaotic, complex scene—not the sort of very clear, right and wrong that this blog post presents it as.

And then much later—it was a month later, March 25th—the main opposition leader, Lepoldo Lopez wrote a *New York Times* editorial in which he named 30 deaths in all the protests. Originally, the *New York Times* published that number implying that they were all protesters, but then they ran a correction saying that it was a mix of protesters and military and paramilitary that had been killed. So this isn't to mistake me to say that *any* violence is justified. The only point is that it seems to be a lot more complex than

³ "Financial Times Reporter 'Can't Possibly Be Neutral.'" *FAIR: Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*. FAIR Blog. 6 June 2003. Web. <http://fair.org/take-action/action-alerts/financial-times-reporter-quotcant-possibly-be-neutralquot/>

⁴ Teixeira, Jonnathan. "Guardias Nacionales Hieren a Joven en Panteon." *YouTube*. YouTube, LLC. 19 Feb. 2014. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxbdzBYjAug>

government-supported bikers shooting protesters at will, and that's what this blog post had claimed.

YR: Yeah, and I think that that claim is in part why it was shared so widely. Definitely that appeal to our sympathies toward people that seem to be getting hurt was one reason I saw friends writing about the violence and condemning the violence. I shared the post to acknowledge that I had received it from a friend who is usually reticent by Facebook standards but who felt compelled to send me this information, so I wanted to make sure that, you know, I engaged my friend in conversation.

Another reason—at the time, I had just been at the beginning of my search for information, and here was a post claiming that there *was* no information available, so that was an immediate appeal for me. But I think the greater appeal that it had was the claim that the media wasn't even documenting this because if you're someone who realizes that media coverage on Venezuela hasn't been nuanced enough, then it would appeal to you to hear that there hasn't been enough media coverage.

BK: Right, and so that blog post included all of these screen captures of international sections of the *New York Times* and CNN and other western publications, and it was making the claim that this big event had happened in the protests in Venezuela the night before and it's not getting the coverage that it deserves.

I started to look around during the dates that this blog post ran, which was on February 20th and claiming that the game had changed the night before on the 19th, and so I looked at the *New York Times* specifically. So on February 17th, 18th, and 19th the *New York Times* published articles about the arrest of Leopoldo Lopez, the opposition leader. On February 18th and 19th, they published two different videos showing the anti-government protests—both of them from the protesters' perspective. On the 20th, so the same day as the blog post ran, [the *New York Times*] ran a piece titled, "Protests Swell in Venezuela as Places to Protest Disappear." On the 21st, they published a piece called, "Venezuela Battles Media, Social and Otherwise, to Restrict Protest Coverage." So all of these pieces rely primarily on the opposition's perspective, and they ran on the 19th and the two days before and after the 19th, which is the day that the blog claimed that the game had changed and that international media was asleep.

So clearly western media has been covering Venezuela and paying particular attention to the opposition's viewpoint. But even while the *New York Times*'s coverage and other western media covered the event and the opposition, there was something about the framing of this particular blog post that made it garner more attention than *New York Times* coverage of it had.

- YR: Part of it, and we're seeing that more recently...this claim of international media not covering protests and big events that are happening abroad is a really confusing premise these days. You can see sort of a pattern of this being used to get people incensed about something or to start the sort of frenzied information exchange about events that are happening abroad. We saw it more recently with the "Bring Back the Girls" campaign where that was also the premise used to sort of get people talking about what was happening in Nigeria, and again it's what took place with this situation in Venezuela.
- BK: It seems like something that maybe generates from the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. I was listening to this interview on *Democracy Now!* with George Cicariello-Maher, and he's the author of *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, and he's a professor of political science at Drexel University. He kind of brings some context about this and the way that we maybe uncritically share things.
- GCM: And I think there's a tendency—there's an unfortunate tendency, if you follow Twitter or if you're on the Internet, that, you know, in this sort of post-Occupy moment and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, every time we see—every time we see protesters in the streets, we start retweeting it, and we start to sort of, you know, feel sympathetic, without necessarily knowing what the backstory is. And I think we're obligated to do that here. And once we look into this backstory, what we see is yet another attempt in a long string of attempts of the Venezuelan opposition to oust a democratically elected government, this time taking advantage of student mobilizations against—you know, ostensibly against insecurity and against economic difficulties to do that.⁵
- YR: Cicariello-Maher alludes to something really important in terms of how visual rhetoric functions to appeal to our sympathies, and it's very nuanced. Because, for example in Venezuela, the protests were being represented in relation to the economic crisis that's taking place there, while here the blog post and the visuals were mainly focusing on the concept of violation of human rights, or it was focusing on how democracy wasn't being upheld because news outlets were being silenced. Those representations can be really strategic, and they actually create these extreme polarities, too, because imagine if someone gives you a concept like "democracy" or gives you a concept like "human rights," if you're not for democracy or human rights, then you are for the opposite of that. So it creates this sort of really extreme polarities in terms of aligning yourself with these issues.

⁵ Goodman, Amy, Juan González, and George Cicariello-Maher. "Venezuelan Protests: Another Attempt by U.S.-Backed Right-Wing Groups to Oust Elected Government?" *Democracy Now! A Daily Global Independent News Hour*. Democracy Now! 20 Feb. 2014. Web.
http://www.democracynow.org/2014/2/20/venezuelan_protests_another_attempt_by_us

BK: And it seems like that blog post that we've been talking about does that. It makes sense to me reading the background that he had worked for the *New York Times* because I think he's speaking in a way to the western audience that he knows. Talking about inflation in Venezuela isn't going to turn people on and share this blog post, but if it's about human rights and if it's about protesters being shot at and if it's about the international media not paying attention, those are all things that can really quickly kind of catch on and be shared. But then kind of what I'm curious about, and I think what a lot of our discussion about here is, does it matter? What interests are we serving? Say this blog post that we've been talking about is misleading. Whose interests does it serve anyway? Does it matter? Does it matter in the context of things? Does it matter to anyone in Venezuela whether or not we share that post?

YR: So to give some perspective on that issue, Nicolás Maduro was interviewed in *The Guardian* on April 8th, and he discusses the way the protests have been framed as what he claims is this unconventional warfare that the United States has been waging for quite some time—this way of destabilizing government in Latin America. He cites examples of how this has been taking place. They go into Latin American countries--not just Venezuela—and destabilize the government there, and I mean we could easily ask, well is this speculation? Is this just conspiracy theory on his part? But in a Wikileaks cable it was revealed what the U.S Ambassador to Venezuela outlined as a 5-point strategy on how to guide embassy activities in Venezuela from 2004-2006. The cable reads that part of the strategy is...

- 1) strengthening democratic institutions--and we can talk a little more about that,
- 2) penetrating Chavez's political base,
- 3) dividing chavismo,
- 4) protecting vital US business in Venezuela, and
- 5) isolating Chavez internationally.⁶

So we're seeing a strategy coming out of the USAID that is targeting the government—particular governments—and that part of it is destabilizing these governments. I wanted to talk about this idea of strengthening democratic institutions because, again, you're listening to something like “democratic institutions” and you're thinking, *Well that must be a good thing*. But then you hear something like protecting US business, and if you keep reading the Wikileaks cable, you start to see how this starts to take shape in terms of the USAID establishing civil society organizations where they have people working for NGOs that are making alliances with government officials with the intent, again, to either get the government on board with—or collaborating—or otherwise framing the government as uncooperative and undemocratic.

⁶ “Cable Reference ID: #06CARACAS3356.” *Secret US Embassy Cables*. Wikileaks. 1 Sept. 2011. Web. <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=06CARACAS3356&version=1314919461>

BK: One thing that I think Cicariello-Maher gets at and that becomes clear when we start looking into the background on Venezuela is that not all opposition movements are the same, and so when we get in the mindset of the Arab Spring or the Occupy movement and thinking about these populous social movements, we might forget that opposition movements can also be used against popularly elected governments that might have legitimate faults but that are also *better* than the opposition that is seeking to get them out. And in this case, the opposition is one that is very well supported by US interests.

YR: And I think that part of how this functions is due to the rapid exchange of information that takes place on social media, and there's also strong appeals to logic that takes place. So when I said that I shared the blog based on this idea that there hadn't been enough international coverage on Venezuela and hoping that what the blog was going to do was give us more nuanced information, it was making an appeal to me in terms of my particular interests.

What I'm saying is that there's appeals happening at various levels. There's an appeal with the visuals so that anyone who—I mean, I can't imagine anyone who wouldn't be moved by students being gassed or beaten or hurt because they're standing up for these ideals, such as democracy. And then someone who has a bit more of a critical perspective or who understands how sometimes visuals have been used in the past to make similar appeals without the agenda being *clear* that there's also appeals to that critical perspective or logic when you read a blog that makes this claim that traditional media hasn't taken care of this. They're not documenting what's actually going on. That's one of the reasons why I shared the blog, thinking, *Okay, this blog is going to go into a more nuanced analysis of what's happening in Venezuela—that it's not...that it's a democratically elected government, that the media has been asleep on Venezuela for quite some time.*

BK: So yeah, it is true, and I thought the same thing when I saw that blog post and when I saw the type of people—my friends who are mostly from activist and academic circles that I think maybe have some background on Venezuela. I thought the same thing when I first saw that post was, *Oh yeah, I agree. The media has been asleep on this. The media has only been giving the opposition perspective. They haven't been talking about this history of US intervention in Latin America and in Venezuela.*

But then when you read the post, it's exactly the opposite. The writer is saying, “The media is asleep because they should be even more in favor of the opposition. Or, they should be even more forceful in their claims about the crackdown that is happening,” which I found really interesting.

YR: Yeah, and you have a blog post that's critiquing traditional media, and I think that critique of traditional media has been happening for quite some time. So you can easily connect yourself to that critique. What it's all demanding is that we read a little bit more critically the information that we're being exposed to.

BK: I think that...I mean, at this point, it seems like we're kind of to that question, right? Does it matter? Should we expect that our Facebook friends or people on social media should be willing to engage in critical conversations, or is it a place to post your dinner and your workout routine? People don't want to interrupt their lives with maybe thinking critically about Venezuela or this thing they put up there.

YR: That goes back to the Jared Leto giving a shoutout to Venezuela during the Oscars and these ideas of slacktivism and how seriously should we take social media activism. But I think there's enough evidence to support the fact that it *does* matter—that there *is* political and intellectual exchange happening on social media. I mean elections are based on this premise of trying to sway public opinion in favor or against a certain agenda. And social media has an unprecedented circulation. There's no other media outlet that circulates as broadly. We do know that there are conversations happening. These videos had, I mean, 10,000 people commenting on this one blog. It speaks a little bit to that.

More recently, the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign and the fact that now suddenly the president of Nigeria is reacting to international pressure that started on social media also speaks to the potential outcomes of some of these exchanges.

BK: Yeah, right. There's plenty of examples where we can say that there is some agency and some sort of power behind maybe especially folks in the West talking on social media about these things. So maybe in that there's a responsibility to be critical about it and know what you're supporting when you start sharing something like this. And you know, in the case of Venezuela, it seems like folks who have values of democracy and social equity and things like that were sharing this blog post that I think that is inherently maybe against those same values.

YR: Yeah, a little bit of the danger of it is getting swept up when there's this frantic information exchange, and yeah you find yourself endorsing values and agendas that you would not normally agree with, and *that's* a little bit scary. But I think there's also potential there. This is not to demonize social media as a site of exchange—I think it has tremendous potential. The question here is how to have meaningful conversations. I mean it does this great job of creating *kairos* and a sense of immediacy around issues and getting people to read—or at least to start a conversation or to begin a dialogue around issues. It's sort of how do we then make that a productive space?

BK: It made me think in doing some of the background research for this episode and when I'd look through the *New York Times* and seeing okay, they published eight things when this blog post was saying the international media was asleep. They published eight things from the opposition's viewpoint. Later, they published an editorial from the opposition leader.

And it just made me think that if we aren't using social media for critical news coverage and for thinking more deeply and complexly about issues like this, then who's going to do this analysis for us? There aren't that many independent news sources. Mainstream sources have a particular ideological spectrum that they represent, and that spectrum doesn't include thinking critically about a socialist government like Venezuela.

YR: These things get red-hot very quickly, and whatever you left that conversation with in maybe the week or so that this information is being exchanged could potentially be the perspective you're going to hold on a particular issue.

And maybe what could happen in social media is, again, that it just begins the dialogue or the search for information, but that this continues over time—that we have to start to think about *kairos* differently or the way the immediacy of something is addressed because social media sort of makes it [*claps*] immediate, and it dies very quickly. I mean, this still is happening in Venezuela. These issues are still trying to be resolved, but you know it's not something that's being discussed at all anymore.

BK: That makes sense to me, and maybe what where we're at or where we're ending here is with an open question that we started with is with: how can and whether or not social media can allow for complex discussions and critical thinking? How can we work actively to overcome that sense of immediacy where there's a new issue every day and to deal with some things like Venezuela that, you know, we have to think about a decade of history in Venezuela to understand the context, and we have to understand maybe decades of US intervention in Latin America to kind of know what's happening, too. Does it afford us that kind of complexity or not?

*Cue music: "Y por qué no hacer una canción de Facebook y cantarla en un camión?"*⁷

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.

⁷ <http://www.frequency.com/video/y-por-que-no-hacer-una-cancin-de/160541674/-/5-11149805>