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PUBLIC ACCESS TO ALTERNATIVE/CRITICAL ANALYSIS: COMMUNITY MEDIA IN VENEZUELA

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Introduction

With the phenomenal growth of alternative media and grassroots-based social movements throughout the world in recent years, aided by the relative ease of access to critical and dissident analyses of social phenomena via the Internet, the awakening of political consciousness of an increasing number of people has put to rest the worn out adages “Ignorance is bliss” and “What you don’t know won’t hurt you”. With the interconnectedness of various movements on a global scale working for social justice, human rights, peace, and solidarity, more and more people are recognizing the fact that ignorance is NOT bliss and what you don’t know WILL hurt you. It was not cynicism but sheer arrogance that prompted former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Margaret Thatcher to defiantly declare to the world, “There is no alternative!” The belief within the corridors of power that the package of neoliberalism, free markets, free trade, and unrestrained monopoly capitalist globalization was the only way in which “modern” societies could advance themselves became a mantra propagated by mainstream media worldwide.

Unfortunately, particularly for those of us who live in advanced capitalist countries, we are heavily influenced by the mainstream media and mainstream education systems that strive to keep us misinformed, uninformed, or engaged in trivial pursuits. The status quo within elite dominated societies is maintained, with slight modifications, through the media system and the school system that are geared to hinder the development and utilization of critical thinking skills in the public at large. Children as students become adults as workers who have been socialized, through the saturation into every area of daily life of the dominant culture’s values, social assumptions, definition of self in relation to others, and interpretations of history and contemporary social phenomena, to internalize those cultural values and social assumptions and accept them as common sense. They are thus, for the most part, unable or unwilling to ask critical questions regarding their assigned role in the workplace, home, and society.

The “propaganda model” of the media, introduced by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in their 1988 book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, posits that there are five types of ‘filters’ in society that determine what is newsworthy and is thus printed or broadcast in the mainstream media. Dissident or critical analyses are given little if any coverage while the elite bias in media coverage is apparent with the ease of access to news coverage to those who espouse the government or corporate perspectives. The very fact that governments, particularly in advanced capitalist societies, represent the interests

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of major corporations and not the public enable the corporate-owned media to effectively filter out opinions and analyses that challenge the elite bias inherent in government/corporate pronouncements/perspectives. The corporate ownership of the media allows for the shaping of editorial content due to their sheer size, concentrated ownership, immense owner wealth, and profit-seeking imperative. Thus, the notion of “freedom of the press” is an illusion since the owners of the major media corporations, with their close ties to people in positions of power in government, are driven by free market ideology and the need to maintain access to and control of those “free markets” through coercion, bribery, or force of arms when needed. Any critical appraisal of “free market” capitalism, the very source of material wealth and power on the part of the dominant class is, unsurprisingly, filtered out.

Filter two is advertising. In order to attract as much advertising revenue as possible to cover the costs of production as well as ensure the lucrative profit rate, corporate media willingly offer a business friendly editorial policy that portrays corporations and their top executives in a favorable light.

Filter three relates to the predominant sources of information presented as news by the corporate media. Reporters, in both print and broadcast media, due to both economic cost efficiency incentives and reciprocity of interest, often rely on public relations spokespersons in government and in business circles (using press conferences, “think tank” releases, and interviews with “political pundits”) to provide them with stories considered “newsworthy”. Editors and journalists who question the veracity or bias of the furnished material risk the threat of being denied access to this cheap and easy flow of information. Of course, such reliance on official government sources and corporate PR gives the news an inherently conservative cast and gives those in positions of power tremendous influence over defining what is or isn’t “news”.

The fourth filter in the “propaganda model” of media is the use by government and corporations of what Herman and Chomsky label “flak”. This refers to negative responses to any media statement that is considered politically provocative by government or business elites, and may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, law suits, and public statements that may include threats of punitive action.

The fifth and final news filter identified by Herman and Chomsky (keep in mind that *Manufacturing Consent* was written during the height of the Cold War) was anti-communism. With the fall of the Soviet Union, there was an urgent need in the corridors of power in the advanced capitalist countries to create a new “enemy” in order to terrify their citizenry into supporting increases in arms production and military interventions abroad, and “narco-terrorists”, eco-terrorists, “evil dictators”, “rogue states”, and “anti-corporate globalization anarchists” have all come into being as legitimate enemies and as perceived threats to neoliberalism and the free market ideology. The global “war on terror” declared by the United States and supported by its allies has been constructed as the ultimate enemy that will justify the need for a permanent war economy, and any dissenting voices will be vilified as siding with the enemy.

The propaganda model of the media helps to clarify the reasons behind the relatively successful vilification of the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frias and the denigration of the social/political achievements that have been accomplished under his government during the past 10 years by the corporate media, particularly in the United States and in Venezuela itself. In Venezuela, the corporate media are still owned by the elites. The five major TV networks

and nine of the ten major newspapers maintain a continuing media effort to undermine the government under Chavez. But despite the corporate media and continuing US taxpayer financial support to anti-Chávez opposition institutions from USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (\$20 million annually), two-thirds of the people in Venezuela continue to support him and the United Socialist Party.

The demonization of President Hugo Chávez Frias by the corporate media in the United States began in earnest after Chávez, in response to then President George W. Bush's call for a "War on Terror" to be initiated in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11/2001, made the statement directed at Bush, "You don't fight terror with terror". He was then clearly marked as an outspoken opponent of imperial rule and defender of the right to self determination. The Bush regime was then determined to oust Chávez, but failed to do so following a US-backed military coup d'état on April 11, 2002 that was reversed within 48 hours with the massive mobilization of the citizenry in the streets of Caracas demanding a return to democracy; the humiliating defeat of the US-backed bosses' lockout and sabotage of Venezuela's state-owned oil industry from November 2002 to April 2003; and the subsequent manipulation of electoral contests through the funding of political parties and candidates favorable to US foreign policy and business interests. The United States continues to financially back the systematic sabotage of the economy by the Venezuelan business elite, aided by the tenacious opposition from the virulent and disreputable Venezuelan mass media which is closely aligned with the oligarchy.

Under the leadership of President Chávez, Venezuela has made unprecedented social and cultural changes benefiting the urban and rural poor as well as the working and lower middle classes, and has totally freed itself of dependence on the onerous terms imposed by the self-styled 'international banks' (IMF, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank) by paying off its debt. Nine new Bolivarian universities and dozens of technical schools have been established with over 200,000 students enrolled. Two major television studios and an increasing number of communitarian-based TV stations provide international, national and local news coverage that challenges and repudiates the Venezuelan corporate-owned media and US-based corporate media anti-government propaganda.

A major source of non-corporate controlled information regarding the process of social transformation that is occurring in Venezuela can be found on the website of Venezuela News, Views, and Analysis (<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/>). This website offers critical analyses by dissident scholars and grassroots-based accounts by social activists involved in the various social movements in Venezuela as well as links to a number of alternative media sites and access to documentary videos that depict recent events in Venezuela.

Rather than give an overview of the numerous progressive social programs that have been put in place to benefit the poor majority in Venezuela, I will focus this essay on the phenomenal growth, encouraged and supported by the government, of community media in Venezuela. My analysis is based on interviews I had with members of the first community-based television station in Venezuela, Catia TVe, and interviews with members of other community media stations that I visited in 2006 and again in 2008. I will attempt to show the ways in which the dissemination of critical and dissident analyses by an informed citizenry at the community level extending to the national level is able to increasingly counteract the force of lies, deception, and misinformation leveled against the revolutionary government in power by the elite-controlled corporate media in Venezuela.

Community Media

In 2008, thirty-four licensed, locally-controlled community television stations and four hundred radio stations were transmitting from barrios and low income neighborhoods throughout Venezuela. Community radio, TV and newspapers are the voice of the people, where they describe the viewers/listeners as the users and creators of media instead of the passive audiences. This year, 2009, marks the first decade of community media's constitutional existence after the Venezuelan Constitution was adopted in a 1999 referendum with over 90% of the vote in its favor.

The failed 2002 military coup against President Chávez is widely seen as one of the prime triggers for the rapid growth of community media in Venezuela. In 2002, there were only seven community radio and two community television stations operating in Caracas. Since then community media has grown markedly. The successful victory by the people over the short-lived 2002 military coup was, in part, the result of the efforts of community media activists counteracting the huge show of support for the coup by the private corporate-owned media. In fact, during the coup's two-day run, the opposition forced the closure of community media outlets such as Catia TVe. After the failure of the coup, however, the popular resistance that had toppled it inspired the creation of dozens of community media collectives, greatly expanding its presence across the country.

Apart from radio and television, another vital part of the community media movement has been an online-based news agency *Aporrea.org*. Operating on a low budget and a staff of six to eight full-time activists — supported by hundreds of contributors — the cutting edge reporting and analysis published on its web site has garnered tremendous hit counts, sometimes numbering in the millions.

The collaborators and members that are part of *Aporrea.org* include members of popular, cultural and community work groups of the Caracas neighborhoods, community radio and television station participants, union activists, and people from the various popular and progressive networks in Caracas. Community media have thus opened up a huge outlet to channel the viewpoints of sectors of the Venezuelan society that simply are ignored if not disparaged in the mainstream media.

Given the popular support that President Chávez commands, there are enough elements in community media to support a healthy stream of criticism that is undertaken in order to deepen and broaden the revolution, or to simply uncover abuses of authority and corruption in the government. More than anything else, however, Venezuelan community media act as a buffer against the plethora of uncovered stories and overlooked facts in the corporate dominated mass media in Venezuela. Despite the important roles that community media in Venezuela fulfill, even its most active participants are under no illusions about the challenges that remain ahead. Nevertheless, in light of the numbers generated by impressive online hit counts at alternative media websites such as *Aporrea.org*, and the diffusion of community television and radio broadcasts and the ever-growing number of stations connected to them, the fact that millions of Venezuelans read, listen to, watch and/or directly involve themselves in community media is of major importance.

It is clear from my readings and interviews that the media in Venezuela do not suffer from direct state control or censorship. Conversely, the key question for the future is not how little

“freedom of expression” is present in Venezuela, which according to the corporate media mandate translates to the freedom to exclude or stifle critical and dissenting analysis and the freedom to present their elite biased analyses as objective and value-free truth, but how much expression and influence will be achieved directly by citizen-run and community-based media and how much support community media will receive from the government under the Chávez administration.

In February 2008, Venezuela’s Communication and Information Minister, Andrés Izarra donated sixty-nine sets of audio-visual equipment to community television stations from around the country with the objective of promoting a National System of Popular and Alternative Communication. Regarding this move to strengthen government support for the growth of an independent community media, President Hugo Chávez stressed the central role of alternative media in Venezuela’s revolutionary process and called on community media to use their programs to continue to struggle for the truth to get out, saying, “We are battling for the dignity of the people and for the future of our youth. Search for the truth, criticize the government, criticize Chávez, criticize the ministers, criticize the enemy, attack hard and organize!” Emboldened by this statement, community media collectives are holding a series of national conferences to discuss ways to further strengthen and develop the National System of Popular and Alternative Communication.

Catia TVe: Venezuela’s First Community Television Station

In August 2008, I visited the Catia TVe studios in the Simón Rodríguez community in the western part of Caracas with a group of six participants in a Global Exchange study tour from the United States along with a Venezuelan interpreter. I was given the opportunity to interview several members of the Catia TVe collective while I was at their studios, and was also presented with a DVD documentary film (“*Catia TVe*”) produced by the collective in 2004 (with English subtitles) that outlines the historical beginnings and subsequent growth in influence of Catia TVe as well as an article (“*Catia TVe: Television from, by and for the People*”) written by members of the collective in July 2006 (in English) that also provides background information about the collective. I was told that I would be free to use the information provided in both the film and the article in any attempt on my part to share their story with the outside world. The fact that they have taken the time to transcribe their film and translate their article into English indicates that they recognize the importance of documenting and sharing their experiences, philosophy, and aspirations with community media activists worldwide so others may be encouraged by and learn from their struggle to democratize communications media. I derived the following information on Catia TVe from the written article cited above and from responses to my questions in open-ended interviews that I conducted in the studio.

Community media activists from throughout Venezuela participated in the discussions related to the need to incorporate the concept of social ownership of both radio and television airwaves when the Constitutional National Assembly was convened in 1999 to write the new Venezuelan Constitution. The Organic Telecommunications Law of 2000 recognizes the legal rights of community broadcast media in Venezuela. Article 12 explicitly states: “As a condition of telecommunications service every individual has the right to exercise individually and

collectively the right to free and pluralist communication through adequate conditions to create non-profit community radio and television stations dedicated to the community, in accordance with the law.”

In 2002, the Open Community Radio and Television Broadcast Ruling, which also came out of a deeply participative process involving the community media, defined the criteria for acquiring permits to broadcast legally. These criteria were informed by the community media’s model of “separating the medium from the message” with structures that encourage and enable independently produced messages from the communities without editorial constraints or corporate/government interference in managing content. Article 28 states: “Community radio and television stations will be broadcast media with independent and community productions, from the [local] community and from other communities. At least 70% of a community station’s daily broadcast programming must be produced within the community.” Article 29 specifies: “No single producer, from the community or independent, can take up more than 20% of the daily programming broadcast at a community television or radio station. The station’s paid staff may only produce a maximum of 15% of the programming with the rest to be produced by community volunteers.”

The fundamental goal of Catia TVE is to encourage media participation within organized communities. Catia TVE seeks community participation in the making of audio-visual productions reflecting community struggles and demonstrating how to build networks within the community. Catia TVE is located in a working class community, so those involved in the station are connected to the working class and express working class interests. Catia TVE participants continue to strive to raise their own political consciousness and sense of social responsibility, to struggle against all forms of discrimination, oppose imperialism, and be committed to the struggle to improve the quality of everyone’s lives. Catia TVE shares its space for communication with organized groups that come from various working class communities and grassroots-based organizations in Caracas. The Catia TVE collective defines “participation” as the right of the people to express their opinions and share their collective experiences through a radio-electric broadcast signal that belongs to the people — the public airwaves. This entails the right to independently create and broadcast audio-visual messages and information without the interference of the dominant class interests. The station slogan, “Don’t just watch television, make it!” underlines the stated goal of involving community residents in the production and transmission of information related to their common interests and concerns from their own perspectives.

In order for the community to make its own television programs, the collective holds workshops so that groups from the community have the minimum tools necessary to produce their own videos as part of Catia TVE’s weekly programming. Catia TVE’s training workshops help participants to analyze their collective experiences as well as identify, with a critical perspective, the successes, errors, obstacles and strengths of their struggles in order to effectively transform and improve their day-to-day lives and social reality. This entails having the skills of effective communication; developing a critical analysis regarding the conditions and social context in which they must live; identifying the cultural and ideological values that influence the group’s or collective’s vision; associating learning with the collective construction of knowledge; and identifying and analyzing their own biases.

The open, flexible, participatory, collective and practical characteristics are essential and decisive to what the collective refers to as “Popular Education” . Popular Education’s

fundamental objectives are based on the principles and values of democratic participation and the need to organize in order to take the appropriate action to effect progressive social transformation. The sharing of knowledge, based on the life experiences of the participants, motivates them to become further involved in the process of creating community solidarity.

Once participants conclude the Introductory Workshop on Community Audio-visual Production, the groups of participants (ranging from groups of four to seven people) form an ECPAI (Independent Community Audio-visual Production Team). An ECPAI team is understood in the following manner: It is a “team” because the idea of Catia TVE is to propitiate collective work and put it in the service of the community’s common interest. Working in teams also favors the organized distribution of work and the conscious analysis of how to produce material. It is “community” because the groups of people belong to a specific social sector with common interests and characteristics, and they associate with each other on a social and community level as a way of strengthening organization in their environment. “Community” does not only refer to the *barrio* (neighborhood), but also to student, worker, professional, artistic and sport communities. It is “audio-visual” production because Catia TVE produces audio-visual materials, and it is “independent” because the content produced for distribution is made by community teams working independently. The materials never have to comply to or follow an “editorial position” as in the private corporate media where the owners (and the commercial interests that provide them with funding through advertising revenues) determine to a large degree what content will or will not be aired.

Each ECPAI is organized by geographical zone or social area as a way of defining where an organization comes from or what interests concern them. And just as community organizations or workers use flyers, posters or other means of communication, the ECPAI uses television. Catia TVE’s purpose is to act as an organizing tool so that communities can produce their own audio-visual discourse using the publicly-owned television broadcast signal. Each ECPAI is a participatory and democratic organization, discussing audio-visual materials with their community, broadcasting them through Catia TVE, and then sharing their experiences with other communities.

The Catia TVE collective asserts that the idea that communities should have the right to produce their own audio-visual materials has nothing to do with philanthropy. The right to produce media forms part of the right that the poor have to organize themselves, as an exploited class fighting for liberation. For the collective, effective communication is organization and working class media is revolution. There is no such thing as “public opinion”. What exists is opinion based on class, and Catia TVE is transmitting the opinions of the exploited classes — those voices that never receive airtime on the corporate media.

Catia TVE is the first legal community television station in Venezuela. Catia TVE was instrumental in providing coverage of the active resistance and mass mobilization of defenders of the democratic government of Chávez against the coup on April 11, 2002, and when the people re-seized power and forced the coup leaders to return Chávez to his rightful place as the democratically elected president on April 13. Catia TVE also covered the sabotage in Venezuela’s oil fields throughout 2002 and 2003. Catia TVE has become a national and international example that other community television stations have followed. Communities throughout Venezuela are gathering the strength and technologies to follow in Catia TVE’s footsteps.

Catia TVE intends to grow by incorporating other communities and residents throughout

Venezuela into the community television station movement. Catia TVe holds audio-visual production workshops not only in Caracas but throughout the nation in order to help organize groups so they can form their own community television stations.

Worker struggles, community struggles, and the struggles of rural workers, women, indigenous peoples, and other exploited sectors flow together in community media. Within Catia TVe they unite, transforming the struggles into a revolutionary program—converting the struggles into a singular voice but without losing the importance of identifying the specificity of the various struggles. This unity is needed to broaden and strengthen the move toward building socialism.

When asked if Venezuela's community television stations are in favor of the Bolivarian Government, the response by the Catia TVe collective is that television is a space where all the exploited and marginalized sectors in Venezuela can participate. And so long as the Venezuelan government supports these struggles, the community media sectors identify with the Bolivarian Revolution and will fight against any social sector that plans to oust the government and take what rightfully belongs to the citizens. At the same time, Venezuelans will also struggle against any elements of the government bureaucracy that tries to usurp power against the public interest. For that reason, the Catia TVe collective declares that community television stations are “engaging in the revolution within the revolution”.

Children's Participation in Community Media

From 2:00pm to 6:00pm every day, Catia TVe broadcasts programs produced by children for children. The pre-recorded program that was airing the day I was at the studio was disappointing to me because it used a talk show format, typically found on commercial channels, in which several pre-teen girls wearing lipstick and earrings seemed to be preening for the camera vying for attention while being interviewed by two teenage boys asking personal questions about their likes and dislikes in fashion, food, and free time activities.

I asked if this is representative of the type of videos the children who participate in programming at Catia TVe produced, and I was told that some children's groups create animated shorts but the interview format is favored because it is the easiest to do. The Catia TVe spokesperson explained that this particular group's video productions have been very popular with children in the same age groups within the community. She went on to explain that two groups of children, one of junior high school age and the other of high school age, have produced documentaries in which they interviewed classmates, teachers, shopkeepers, social/political activists, and people on the streets in their community to ask their opinions about the various social programs that have been implemented by the Chávez administration. These programs attracted a large viewing audience made up of adults as well as children and led to much discussion in the community regarding the rights of children to speak and be heard, and the need to include children more in decision-making processes within the community.

On my first visit to Venezuela to attend the World Social Forum in 2006, I had the opportunity to visit a school compound in Caracas in the Barrio 23 de Enero. I met the person in charge of the compound, a university student leader who had been expelled from university for his involvement in political demonstrations supporting the Bolivarian Revolution, and he

explained that the compound is used not only for providing elementary school education in the daytime and adult literacy classes in the evenings but also as a meeting place for political activists and a community cultural center for people of all ages and interests.

What struck me most during my visit to this compound was when I happened to walk into one of the classrooms to find that it had been converted into a community-run radio station and to discover a nine-year-old boy being interviewed for a radio program. The interviewer (an adult male in his 30s) was obviously interested in obtaining the opinion of this boy on a serious issue and the boy responded to the questions in an articulate and concise manner. After listening for about ten minutes, I quietly exited the room and the Venezuelan university student I was with who was fluent in English explained to me that the boy was saying that he felt that more children should attend public schools because they can learn about issues that affect their day-to-day lives. Since I had tape recorded the portion of the radio broadcast we had just witnessed, the university student with me translated it for me. The boy explained:

I'm now in third grade and sometimes I get together with a friend I grew up with who's been going to a private school since entering first grade. In our classes at our local public school here, we learn about children's rights and children's responsibilities. We're taught that we are responsible for speaking out against domestic violence or any kind of violence. We're taught that we have a right to express our opinions and have them respected by adults. We're taught that we can help to create a better neighborhood by not littering or by helping each other. My friend told me that they don't have classes like that at the school he goes to. He told me that the teachers are very strict and sometimes he feels like he's in prison. He wants to come to my school but his father won't let him because he thinks my school is too political. I think it's important for us children to be aware of political issues and be informed of different perspectives so we can make our own decisions about what we feel is important to our lives. Some people tell me that I'm too young to start thinking so seriously about politics or social issues, but I tell them that I think I have the right to do so if I want to. I know lots of kids my age aren't interested in these things, but I am and a lot of my classmates are as well!

The program director joined us outside the radio station and explained that this community radio station has a waiting list of people from the community who want to talk about a broad range of issues. He added that children have just as much right as adults to express their opinions over the air. He felt that the interview with the boy would cause a stir in the community and that that was a good thing.

In Conclusion

During my visits to Venezuela in 2006 and 2008, the terms I came across repeatedly that are tied to the vision of creating a 21st century socialism in Venezuela are "endogenous development" and "workers' cooperatives". The state, under the leadership of Hugo Chávez, offers financial, legal, and moral support to grassroots-based efforts to create farmers' and consumers' cooperatives and collectives, worker-managed enterprises, and community-based media initiatives that are viewed as viable alternatives to market-driven capitalism. The government has established a regulatory role for the state in the economy and supports small

and medium-size businesses and favors national capital over foreign capital. It has strengthened state ownership and control of the petroleum industry; nationalized strategic enterprises in the oil and gas industries, steel, cement, food production and distribution, telecommunications, and electricity industries; and encourages various forms of communal and participatory ownership. The move toward local, regional, and national self-sufficiency, sovereignty, ecological sustainability, and self-reliance is part of the attempt by the state to overcome the power and control associated with the domination of international capital in league with the landed oligarchy and business elite in Venezuela in the processes of production, distribution, and consumption.

The Chávez government is clearly class-based with its strongest support coming from barrio residents and the working class in general. Chávez portrays himself as a “man of the people” who is proud of his African and Indigenous racial roots and modest class background. An Afro-Venezuelan man in his late 20s I talked with during a break from the Haiti Solidarity workshop at the World Social Forum in 2006 told me that the mainstream corporate media continually criticize Chávez for his personal appearance (likening him to a monkey in reference to his facial features and skin color), his aggressive, working class mannerisms, and his use of colloquial speech which they attribute to a lack of “proper” education. He went on to say that the reasons with which the corporate media employ to criticize Chávez are exactly what he and many of his friends find refreshing and admirable about this president. He stated, “Chávez identifies with the people, in language they can understand without any air of superiority or arrogance of power. That’s why the people are able to identify with him.”

In the area of women’s economic rights, the government implemented a program that offers a payment of 80% of the minimum wage to single mothers living alone and in need of social support, thus recognizing “housework” as a paid job, truly a revolutionary concept long overdue. Chávez indeed takes a strong stand against racism, elitism, and sexism, and speaks out against the uncontrollable greed of the wealthy and the violence and misery that accompanies neoliberalism and free market ideology. In both words and deeds he has angered those in positions of power associated with great wealth, and their control of the corporate media has in turn convinced the Venezuelan middle and upper middle classes to unite in opposition to his administration.

In the attempt to counterattack the influence of corporate media in Venezuela and elsewhere, in addition to the state support for the production, distribution, and consumption of alternative perspectives and critical analyses by community media within the country, Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba, and Uruguay joined forces to create Telesur, a shared media network and satellite television station which plays an integral role in hemispheric integration, that began transmitting in October 2005. This move was inspired by the perceived need to counter the dominance of the US corporate media, with 97% of television programs on private corporate-owned television stations in Venezuela of US origin. All the documentaries and programs on Telesur come from alternative sources such as independent producers, universities, and national radio and TV from various countries. The station transmits 24 hours a day and 60% of program content is news. Telesur has bureau offices in Los Angeles and Washington D.C. as well as in major cities in Latin American and the Caribbean. In February 2006, Telesur signed an agreement with Al Jazeera to exchange information and technology, yet another step toward creating an internationalist alternative media movement.

The Chávez government support for an internationalist alternative media movement and its

simultaneous support for independent community media within Venezuela points to the possibility of creating a truly informed citizenry that will be inspired to take action and participate in the struggle to create more socially just and equitable societies that reflect the interests of the general public and not the interests of the elite: Plutocracy to be displaced by participatory democracy is the ultimate goal.

However, the dismaying extent to which the majority of the people in the North lack political consciousness attests to the power of cultural hegemony in advanced capitalist countries. This concept, formulated by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s, allows us to understand the sophisticated manner in which ruling class ideas and interpretations of history and social phenomena are internalized and accepted as common sense by the majority of people in advanced capitalist countries. Cultural hegemony saturates the society (through the schools, media, churches, family) to such an extent that, for most people, it corresponds to the reality of social experience. It might be defined as an “organizing principle” or worldview that is diffused into every area of daily life through which the dominant culture is able to perpetuate its own philosophy, culture, morality, definition of self in relation to others, and social/political assumptions and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things. Cultural hegemony mystifies power relations and social issues and encourages a sense of fatalism and passivity towards political action. In this way, people contribute to the continued dominance of the ruling class by accepting the dominant culture’s values and social assumptions as their own, and corporate media today play an instrumental role in the perpetuation of cultural hegemony.

Gramsci fully expected the process of creating a counter hegemony in advanced capitalist countries to proceed gradually, with the subordinated classes at first only questioning the dominant culture’s values and assumptions. Other steps that lead to exposing the contradictions hidden within the hegemonic discourse would follow this first step of skepticism and doubting about prevailing ideas in the dominant belief system. This critical penetration into the false world of established appearances would then lead to the creation of an entirely new universe of ideas and values. Gramsci argued that the subordinated classes themselves, rather than an organized party leadership, must take the initiative in the counter hegemonic process, and it is they who must realize the potential for a social transformation based on their everyday lived experiences, creating a new consciousness embodied in everyday social processes, in thought and action, a thoroughgoing cultural revolution that sets out to transform all dimensions of everyday life. Thus, Gramsci emphasized the importance of the struggle for ideological hegemony at the grassroots level as the precondition for socialist transformation.

The proliferation of grassroots-based movements globally in recent years struggling to overcome ideological obfuscation and working to achieve such universal principles as social/economic/political justice, peace, and human rights is truly astounding. With this mutual search for world peace and the eradication of poverty and injustice, connections are being made by activists worldwide between local and international struggles as well as between the movements themselves, with a focus of attention on the interdependence of states and the power of people united at the grassroots to effect basic structural changes. These new social movements and grassroots-based organizations, moving beyond single-issue politics and armed with a transborder perspective, are one of the most promising developments of the current era. They recognize that the interests of the majority of people living in the South coincide with the interests of the majority of the inhabitants in the North. An alternative to corporate globalization has emerged with the ever increasing globalization of people united at the

grassroots. The Internet provides a technological tool that has enabled many people involved in the struggle to overcome the excesses of corporate globalization to make connections with each other and realize that they are not alone and what they are doing is not insignificant. The increasing flow of information is thus no longer restricted to those in positions of power. This is a major breakthrough in the effort to see the forest for the trees. The power and influence of corporate media is being challenged globally by the effective use of the Internet by alternative media (print, audio, and visual) as well as grassroots-based movements and progressive NGOs offering critical perspectives and dissident analyses. Unsurprisingly, their efforts are not being supported by their governments.

Now imagine a government coming to power that supports the effort to create a global counter hegemony — a government that opposes the dominant culture's values and social assumptions and represents the interests of the majority of its citizens. Is this in the realm of possibility — grassroots-based organizations representing citizens' interests working together with a government doing the same? Or is this some utopian fantasy? It is my contention that the ongoing social transformation being affected by the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela is substantial, and should be an inspiration and a source of empowerment for people throughout the world who demand their inclusion in the decision-making processes that affect all of humanity. The successful growth of the community media movement in Venezuela embodies the enabling effect of raising the political consciousness of the citizenry by means of the dissemination of information offering critical perspectives through the active participation of citizens as protagonists supported and encouraged by a government representing their interests. If those of us outside of Venezuela support progressive media reform movements, we should pay close attention to the process of democratization of the media that is unfolding in Venezuela today.