

“The More You Watch, The Less You Know”. Preferred Conclusions - The BBC, Syria and Venezuela

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*As the late media activist **Danny Schechter** [wrote](#), when it comes to the corporate broadcast media: ‘The more you watch, the less you know.’*

Schechter’s observation only fails in one key respect: ‘mainstream’ output *does* tell us a lot about which foreign governments are being lined up for regime change.

In 2013, it was remarkable to [see](#) the BBC reporting claims from Syria on a daily basis in a way that almost always blamed the Syrian government, and President Assad personally, for horrendous war crimes. But as the New York Times [reported](#) last month, the picture was rather less black and white. The US was embroiled in a dirty war that was ‘one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A’, running to ‘more than \$1 billion over the life of the program’. Its aim was to support a vast ‘rebel’ army created and armed by the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to overthrow the Syrian government.

The BBC’s relentless headline stories were mostly supplied by ‘activists’ and ‘rebels’ who, in fact, were militants attempting to overthrow Assad, and whose claims could not be verified. Veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn [described](#) the problem afflicting virtually all ‘mainstream’ reporting on Syria:

‘All wars always produce phony atrocity stories – along with real atrocities. But in the Syrian case fabricated news and one-sided reporting have taken over the news agenda to a degree probably not seen since the First World War... The real reason that reporting of the Syrian conflict has been so inadequate is that Western news organisations have almost entirely outsourced their coverage to the rebel side.’

There was a simple reason why ‘rebel’ claims were uncontested: they originated from ‘areas controlled by people so dangerous no foreign journalist dare set foot among them’. The additional point being that ‘it has never been plausible that unaffiliated local citizens would be allowed to report freely’.

This was obvious to everyone, doubtless including the BBC, which nevertheless produced a tsunami of ‘rebel’-sourced propoganda. Crucially, these stories were not balanced attempts

to explore the various claims; they sought to establish a version of events justifying regime change: 'rebels' and 'activists' were 'good', Assad was 'bad' and had to go. Journalist **Robert Parry** [explains](#):

'The job of the media is not to provide as much meaningful information as possible to the people so they can exercise their free judgment; it is to package certain information in a way to guide the people to a preferred conclusion.'

The BBC campaign was clearly inspired – whether consciously or otherwise – by a high-level decision to engineer regime change in Syria.

The key moment arrived in August 2013 when the US came very close to launching a major attack against Syrian government forces, supposedly in response to Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons in [Ghouta](#), Damascus. Only the UK parliament's rejection of the case for war and warnings from US generals on doubts about the claims, and likely fallout from regime change, prevented Obama from attacking.



Source: New Eastern Outlook

Particularly disturbing was the fact that, as the possibility of a direct US regime change effort faded, so too did the steady flow of BBC atrocity claims. It was as if, with the goal temporarily unattainable, the propaganda tap was simply closed. It was later re-opened ahead of an anticipated, pro-war Clinton presidency, and then as part of an attempt to push president-elect Trump to intensify the Syrian war.

'Well, Shock, Shock, It's The Oil!'

This year, we have witnessed a comparable BBC propaganda blitz on Venezuela centred around opposition [claims](#) that President Maduro has 'eroded Venezuela's democratic institutions and mismanaged its economy'.

The BBC campaign has again been characterised by daily reports from Venezuela presenting a black and white picture of the crisis: Maduro 'bad', opposition 'good'. The BBC has again promoted the sense of an escalating crisis that will inevitably and justifiably result in regime change. It is no surprise, then, to [learn](#) from the Independent:

'The head of the CIA has suggested the agency is working to change the elected government of Venezuela and is collaborating with two countries in the region to do so.'

CIA director **Mike Pompeo** said he was 'hopeful that there can be a transition in Venezuela and we the CIA is doing its best to understand the dynamic there'.

No eyebrows were raised in a US political culture obsessed with unproven claims of Russian interference in last year's US presidential elections. Last month, Pompeo's boss, President Trump, [commented](#) on Venezuela:

'We don't talk about it but a military option, a military option is certainly something that we could pursue.'

Pompeo's and Trump's statements indicate a continuation of US policy that [supported](#) a 2002 coup that temporarily overthrew (then) President Chavez and which 'was closely tied to senior officials in the US government'.

Political analyst **Ricardo Vaz** [notes](#) the ironic fact that 'many of the opposition leaders' denouncing Maduro's alleged attacks on democracy, including **Henrique Capriles, Julio Borges, Leopoldo López** and **Maria Corina Machado**, 'were directly involved in the 2002 coup attempt'.

US interest in Venezuela was [explained](#) with admirable candour in a classified US government document from December 12, 1978:

'OUR FUNDAMENTAL INTERESTS IN VENEZUELA ARE:1. THAT VENEZUELA CONTINUE TO SUPPLY A SIGNIFICANT PROPORTION OF OUR PETROLEUM IMPORTS AND CONTINUE TO FOLLOW A MODERATE AND RESPONSIBLE OIL PRICE POSITION IN OPEC...'

According to the respected BP 'Statistical review of world energy' (June 28, 2015), [proven oil reserves](#) in Venezuela are the largest in the world, totalling 297 billion barrels.

The US Secretary of State, **Rex Tillerson**, naturally shares Trump's and Pompeo's view of the country, [commenting](#):

'We are evaluating all of our policy options as to what can we do to create a change of conditions where either Maduro decides he doesn't have a future and wants to leave of his own accord or we can return the government processes back to their constitution.' (Our emphasis)

The fact that Tillerson was chairman and chief executive officer of the world's largest oil company, ExxonMobil, from 2006-2016, having joined the company in 1975, might give cause for pause in considering the 'change of conditions' he has in mind. In 2007, the Evening Standard reported:

'BP and the other majors are taking a hard line with Chavez, demanding conditions and compensation for [Venezuelan policy changes]... Exxon Mobil chief executive Rex Tillerson said that unless the negotiations produce a profitable proposal, "we won't be staying".' ('Oil giants face reserves blow in Venezuela grab,' Evening Standard, April 30, 2007)

And of course Trump has left us in [no doubt](#) about who is the rightful owner of the world's oil:

'I wasn't a fan of Iraq, I didn't want to go into Iraq. But I will tell you - when we were in, we got out wrong. And I always said, in addition to that: "Keep the oil!"... So we shoulda kept the oil. But okay, maybe we'll have another chance... But the fact is: we shoulda kept the oil.'

Our search of the Lexis database (August 30, 2017) for UK national press articles mentioning 'Tillerson', 'Exxon' and 'Venezuela' over the seven months since Tillerson was made Secretary of State generated precisely three hits. None of these discussed oil as a possible motive driving US policy - a taboo subject.

Investigative journalist **Greg Palast** [describes](#) why and when Venezuela became an Official Enemy of the West:

'Well, shock, shock, it's the oil! Chavez, back in 2000, 2001, decided that he wasn't going to give it away anymore... Big US oil companies were paying a royalty for Venezuela's super-heavy oil of about 1 per cent - 1 per cent! - okay. And for the regular oil, the heavy oil, it was 16 per cent. So the oil companies were keeping 84 per cent, and Chavez said: "You're going to have to pay 30 per cent, you can only keep 70 per cent of our oil... You gotta split off a bit for the people of Venezuela." And, of course, that made him enemy number one - not to Americans, but to America's landlords, the oil companies.'



Regional specialist **Mark Weisbrot** [commented](#) recently on the Venezuelan opposition's US allies:

'These right-wing U.S. politicians - with much cooperation from all of the U.S. administrations of the past 15 years - have consistently fought to overthrow the Venezuelan government. This is all they can think about, regardless of the consequences of escalating violence, increased suffering, or even civil war.'

Weisbrot's overly-optimistic conclusion:

'The U.S. strategy of "regime change" has contributed to the death of hundreds of thousands of people - mostly civilians - in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan. It has also had a hideous history in the Americas. Hopefully

something has been learned from these crimes and tragedies.'

The BBC's Propaganda Blitz

In numerous 'reports', the BBC has presented damning criticism of the Venezuelan government, often with no or nominal balance. We will sample below from a large number of similar offerings with a few related examples from other corporate media.

On May 6, the BBC published a piece [titled](#): 'Venezuela protests: Women march against Maduro'. The article reported:

'The US has also expressed concern about what UN ambassador Nikki Haley called a "violent crackdown". At least 36 people have died and hundreds have been injured in weeks of protests.'

This gave the impression that a government 'crackdown' was responsible for the deaths. But the truth was more mixed. In July, Venezuela Analysis [reported](#) that since violent anti-government protests began on April 4, there had been 14 deaths caused by the authorities and 23 direct victims of opposition political violence, with 61 deaths disputed or unaccounted for.

Like so many BBC articles, this one focused on claims that Venezuela is a 'dictatorship':

'"The dictatorship is living its last days and Maduro knows it," former MP Maria Corina Machado told AFP news agency at the women's march.'

The BBC even included a comment presumably intended to remind readers of the infamous toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad (in fact orchestrated by US forces):

'Meanwhile video posted on social media purportedly showed the pulling down of a small statue of **Hugo Chavez** in the western town of Rosario de Perija.'

In similar vein, a May 9 BBC [piece](#) included the comment:

'The secretary general of the Organisation of American States (OAS) likened the country to a dictatorship.'

While recognising that the Maduro government certainly merits criticism for mishandling the current situation, 'both economically and politically', political analyst Greg Wilpert [noted](#) that

'none of the arguments against the democratic legitimacy of the Maduro government hold much water'. Moreover, 'polls repeatedly indicate that even though Maduro is fairly unpopular, a majority of Venezuelans want him to finish his term in office, which expires in January 2019'.

Western media devoted intense coverage to Maduro's decision to hold elections for a

Constituent Assembly in July. In response, the Trump administration extended sanctions. Mark Weisbrot [commented](#):

'The pretext for the sanctions is that the new Constitutional Assembly will essentially carry out a coup d'état, abolishing the National Assembly – which the opposition won by a wide margin in December 2015 – and allowing **President Nicolas Maduro** to cancel presidential elections, which are due next year.'



But as Weisbrot noted, such a cancellation 'will not happen automatically' as a result of the Constituent Assembly election, and so 'it does not make sense that the sanctions should be triggered by the election itself'.

On May 11, the BBC [published](#) 'Inside Venezuela's anti-government protests'. The first comment relayed by the BBC:

'There's no freedom of expression here in Venezuela. There's no freedom of any kind.'

Media analyst **Joe Emersberger** [describes](#) the reality:

'The biggest lie told over the past fifteen years about Venezuela is that its media is cowed by the government and that it has rendered the opposition voiceless.'

He [adds](#):

'In fact the protests and the leading opposition leaders' take on the protests are being extensively covered on the largest private networks: Venevision, Televen, Globovision. If people abroad sampled Venezuela's TV media directly, as opposed to judging it by what is said about it by the international media and some big NGOs, they'd be shocked to find the opposition constantly denouncing the government and even making very thinly veiled appeals to the military to oust Maduro.'

The BBC's second quoted opinion:

'We're here to put an end to the dictatorship in Venezuela, so that our children

can grow up in a free Venezuela.'

There was no balance and there have been no similar compilations looking 'inside' Venezuela's pro-government protests. One would hardly guess that Maduro was elected president on April 14, 2013 in a democratic election.

In a May 12 [report](#), 'Venezuela protests: a week in pictures', the BBC included two successive photo captions, which read:

'People angry with the government of President Nicolas Maduro have been taking to the streets almost daily since the beginning of April.'

And:

'Many have been injured, and there have been close to 40 protest-related deaths.'



This again suggested that people 'angry with the government' had been killed. Opposition [violence](#) has included bomb attacks on police, grenades thrown at the supreme court building from a helicopter, a government supporter burned alive, shootings, attempted lynchings, and so on. This violence was not mentioned by Paul Mason when he [condemned](#) 'Maduro's crackdown' in the Guardian. A New York Times op-ed under the title, 'Venezuela Needs International Intervention. Now.,' [commented](#) in similar vein:

'President Nicolás Maduro has responded with an iron fist. More than 50 people have been killed, 1,000 injured, and 2,700 arrested...'

The bomb attack on Venezuelan National Guard soldiers shown in [this video](#), severely injuring several of the soldiers and cheered by people watching, would of course have been described by all US-UK media as a 'terror attack', if it had happened in the West.

The Guardian [published](#) a similar photo gallery of anti-government protestors, but not of pro-government protestors. The compilation came with remarkable captions of this kind:

'Drawing inspiration from Ukraine's 2013-14 revolt, young protesters in Venezuela carry Viking-like shields as they battle government security forces during protests against President Nicolás Maduro'

One photo caption read:

'"Miraflores on fire" is written on the front of this shield. Miraflores Palace is the president's official workplace'

Another:

'The opposition says President Maduro has created a dictatorship. The last parliamentary vote held in 2015 gave the opposition a majority but the government has repeatedly blocked any attempts to oust Maduro'

The BBC's May 16 piece was [titled](#), 'Venezuela: Teenager killed as mass protests rage'. A May 18 BBC [piece](#) maintained the sense of developing crisis: 'Venezuela: Soldiers sent to quell looting amid protests'. On May 22, a BBC [report](#) opened with these words:

'"Venezuela is now a dictatorship," says Luis Ugalde, a Spanish-born Jesuit priest who during his 60 years living in Venezuela has become one of the South American nation's most well-known political scientists.'

The BBC later [offered](#) another 'inside' look at anti-government protestors: 'Apathy to activism: Venezuelan students on why they protest.' Mario Bonucci, rector of the University of the Andes, was quoted:

'This is an institution where you can speak your mind freely without fear of repercussion and that's uncomfortable for this government.'

A remark that again ignored the fact that widespread criticism of Maduro's government *is* published and broadcast by many Venezuelan media. The BBC offered no balancing comment.

The 2002 Coup - Telling Omissions

On July 9, the BBC [wrote](#) of opposition leader Leopoldo López:

'Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has praised the decision to release from prison one of the country's main opposition leaders, Leopoldo López...'Mr López was serving a 14-year sentence for inciting violence during anti-government protests in 2014, a charge he has always denied. The Supreme Court said he was released on health grounds.'



Leopoldo López

There is rather more to be said about Lopez. Venezuela Analysis [commented](#):

'Lopez is also well known in Venezuela for his active participation in the April 2002 coup against the democratically elected president Hugo Chávez. During the coup, using his authority as Mayor of Chacao, he led the illegal arrest of Minister of Justice Ramón Rodríguez Chacín.'

The report continued:

'In a joint appeal with Maria Corina Machado, López called on citizens to join his "La Salida" campaign ("The Way Out"), described the government as a "dictatorship" and called on Venezuelans to "rise up" emulating the example of January 23, 1958 (when a popular uprising overthrew the Perez Jimenez dictatorship). The message was clear: Venezuela was a dictatorship, the government had to be overthrown by force.'

The Guardian also [reported](#) on Lopez:

'Security agents have since seized two opposition leaders from their homes after they called for protests against the vote.'

Joe Emersberger [pointed](#) out some telling omissions:

'Umm no. Leopoldo Lopez - while already under house arrest - made a video in which he called for a military coup. Don't try this while under house arrest in the UK, where you can get put away for Facebook posts advocating a riot (even if you are not under house arrest at the time).'

Writing for OffGuardian, Ricardo Vaz [asked](#) of corporate media performance:

'Why is there never a mention that the opposition leadership is full of protagonists from that US-backed military coup that ultimately failed? Quite simply because it would undermine the entire "democracy vs. dictatorship" propaganda narrative.'

Numerous journalists have attempted to use the Venezuelan crisis to also attack Jeremy Corbyn as part of the relentless [smear campaign](#) against him. In The Times, **David Aaronovitch** [wrote](#) of the Venezuelan revolution:

‘I believe we need to know why you [**Jeremy Corbyn**] think it’s failed.’

This from the columnist who has tirelessly backed wars of ‘liberation’ generating mass death and utter disaster in [Iraq](#), [Libya](#) and [Syria](#).

Conclusion - Enforcing ‘The Truth’

The goal of a mass media propaganda campaign is to create the impression that ‘everybody knows’ that Saddam is a ‘threat’, Gaddafi is ‘about to commit mass murder’, Assad ‘has to go’, Corbyn is ‘destroying the Labour party’, and so on. The picture of the world presented must be clear-cut. The public must be made to feel certain that the ‘good guys’ are basically benevolent, and the ‘bad guys’ are absolutely appalling and must be removed.

This is achieved by relentless repetition of the theme over days, weeks, months and even years. Numerous individuals and organisations are used to give the impression of an informed consensus – *there is no doubt!* Once this ‘truth’ has been established, anyone contradicting or even questioning it is typically portrayed as a shameful ‘apologist’ in order to deter further dissent and enforce conformity.

A key to countering this propaganda is to ask some simple questions: Why are US-UK governments and corporate media much more concerned about suffering in Venezuela than the far worse horrors afflicting war-torn, famine-stricken Yemen? Why do UK MPs rail against Maduro while rejecting a parliamentary [motion](#) to suspend UK arms supplies to their Saudi Arabian allies attacking Yemen? Why is the imperfect state of democracy in Venezuela a source of far greater outrage than outright tyranny in Saudi Arabia? The answers could hardly be more obvious.

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