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**New Propaganda: The Public Diplomacy of the
Authoritarian Regimes in China and Venezuela**

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Summary

Nowadays, we can talk about 'new propaganda' to refer to the positioning and communication strategies of authoritarian regimes like Venezuela and China. This paper analyses these two cases of 'post-modern propaganda', that is to say, authoritarian regimes' use of the instruments of public diplomacy to achieve international prominence.

Introduction: Post-modern Authoritarianism

We have spoken before about 'new public diplomacy'. Nowadays however, we can also talk about 'new propaganda' to refer to the positioning and communication strategies of authoritarian regimes like Venezuela and China.

Both are economic powers; the former in the export of oil, the latter in the export of consumer goods. Both are aiming for leadership in their respective regions of Latin America and Asia, and have consequently undertaken intensive conventional and 'public' diplomacy activities.

Despite their obvious differences, both countries have implemented ambitious campaigns to influence public opinion in other countries to win support for their external activities. Both countries launched their international propaganda programmes around 2004, when China created the Confucius Institute for the teaching of the Chinese language world-wide, and Venezuela launched Telesur, the Latin alternative to CNN.

Finally, both authoritarian regimes have benefited from the criticism that has been directed at the US since the start of the War on Terror and the Iraq War. Despite China's systematic violation of human rights, the US's reputation has suffered more in this respect because of the episodes in Iraq, Guantánamo and the secret CIA flights, etc. Hugo Chávez has systematically exploited these problems to project himself as the anti-system leader in Latin America and the world.

We will now proceed to analyse these two cases of 'post-modern propaganda' in more detail, that is to say, authoritarian regimes' use of the instruments of public diplomacy to achieve international prominence.

China: The 'Gentle Giant'

While some analysts consider China's establishment as a world power to be positive for the international order, others are not so optimistic. What no one doubts, however, is that, for better or for worse, its impact will be enormous. To give you an idea, Paul Woodall, the economy editor of *The Economist*, has compared China's impact on the world economy in the 21st century with nothing less than the Black Death that devastated Europe in the 14th century and plunged the society of the Lower Middle Ages into crisis. Let us not forget that the Black Death is thought to have originated in China and spread to Europe through trade. The integration of China's 1.3 billion people will be as momentous for the world economy as the Black Death was for 14th-century Europe, but to the opposite effect. The Black Death killed one-third of Europe's population, wages rose and the return on capital and land fell. By contrast, China's integration will bring down the wages of low-skilled workers and the prices of most consumer goods, and raise the global return on capital (Woodall, p. 5).

In the international political and diplomatic circles of the late 1990s, China's 'peaceful rise' doctrine was aimed at allaying the distrust it was arousing among its Asian neighbours. China was aiming to portray itself as a pacific power or 'gentle giant' (to use the name of the progressive British rock group of the 1970s). Official discourse by the Chinese authorities makes use of ideas such as 'do good to our neighbours, treat our neighbours as partners', or 'make our neighbours feel secure, and help to make them rich'.

China is also beginning to undertake active public diplomacy in the form of events, exhibitions, cultural festivals, and so on, targeted at international public opinion and the average citizen. The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and Shanghai 2010 World Expo mega-event strategy is just the tip of a huge iceberg, and the result of a long-term strategy that began in the early 1990s when the State Council Foreign Propaganda Office was set up to counter the isolationist reaction to the Tiananmen Square protests. The objective is to show China's 'true image' to the world. From 1991 onwards, the Chinese government began to publish white papers on human rights in China, Tibet, the environment, the situation of children, etc (Wang, 4). It is aiming to counteract the negative propaganda spread by the international media. It is also more actively lobbying the elite in other countries. Also in 1991, the Chinese authorities enlisted the services of Hill and Knowlton to conduct lobbying activities in the US.

In 1998, the Party Propaganda Department was renamed 'Publicity Department in English'. Nevertheless, in Hooghe's opinion, the turning point came when Zhao Qizheng was appointed Minister of the Information Office of the State Council that same year. It consequently took on a more proactive stance and greater transparency, albeit within the limits imposed by the Chinese communist regime. By the late 1990s, senior Chinese officials were constantly stressing the need to inform the world of the changes that were taking place in China and, consequently, of the need to strengthen foreign propaganda. It is worth noting that the meetings of the foreign propaganda agency were chaired by Prime Minister Li Peng or President Jiang Zemin (Wang).

Carrying on the Maoist tradition, the Chinese authorities conducted communist propaganda abroad until the 1990s, just as the Soviet Union did at the climax of the Cold War. As of 1954, *Government Work Reports*, targeted at both internal and external audiences, were published for the National People's Congress. In 1958, the Chinese authorities launched the *Peking Review* for 'foreigners to know about China's policies and study China's political situation and development trends'. It was published in English, French, Japanese, German and Spanish (Wang, 5).

As Wang has concluded in his analysis of the two official Chinese publications (the *Peking Review* and the *Government Work Reports*), there are recurring themes in this type of propaganda from 1954 until China's opening up policy of the 1990s:

- Socialism
- Historical victimisation
- Third World and non-alignment
- Opposition to US hegemony

During the Maoist era, Chinese propaganda advocated active support for revolution in other countries (Wang). This discourse began to change in the 1990s due to internal changes. It was then that the discourse of cooperation and 'peaceful rise' emerged, and this is what has led many analysts to conclude that China too has begun to implement public diplomacy, and even new public diplomacy.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that Chinese public diplomacy, like the country's domestic policy, continues to be determined by the type of regime. While a centralised and hierarchical system gives the Beijing authorities complete control over the image projected to the outside world, authoritarianism is a weakness in a world where states are bound by democratic principles and rules. As Hooghe rightly points out, the Chinese authoritarian regime explains 'both China's strengths and weaknesses with regard to public diplomacy' (Hooghe, 89).

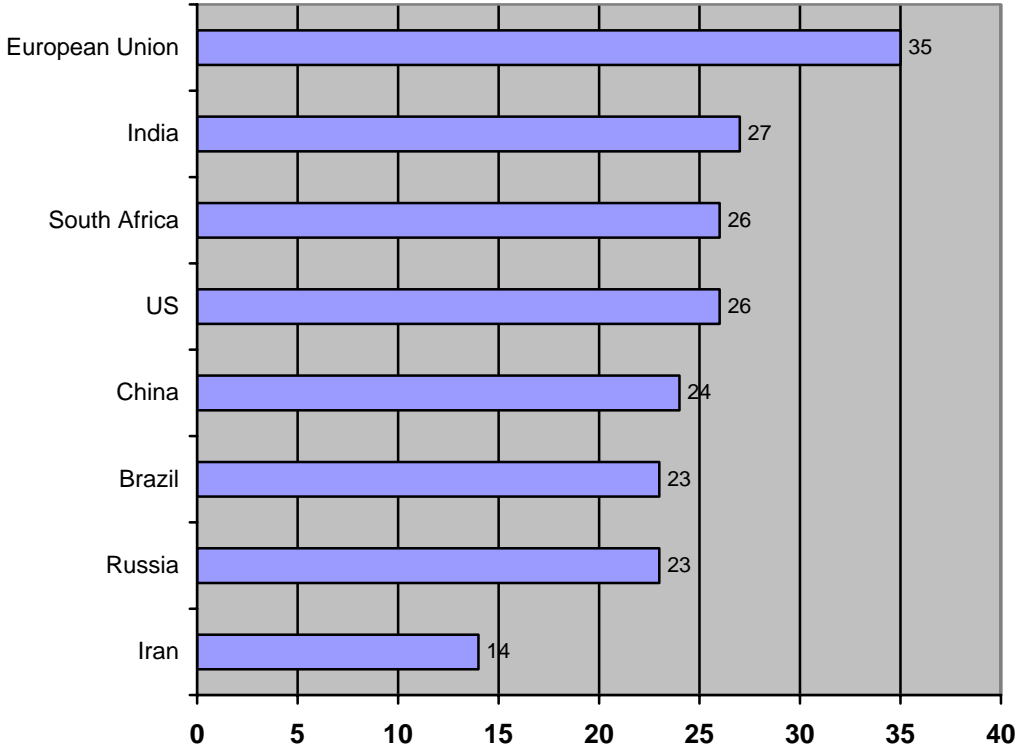
China's Image Abroad

Despite the communist authorities' propaganda efforts, China's image is still tarnished by many of the problems prior to the turning point of the 1990s. The Tiananmen effect is still taking its toll.

China's dual role as a market and single-party dictatorship has caused ambivalence among world opinion, where positive and negative feelings coexist in the same magnitude and intensity. Without a doubt, China, along with the US, is one of the countries that creates the most ambivalence among citizens all over the world.

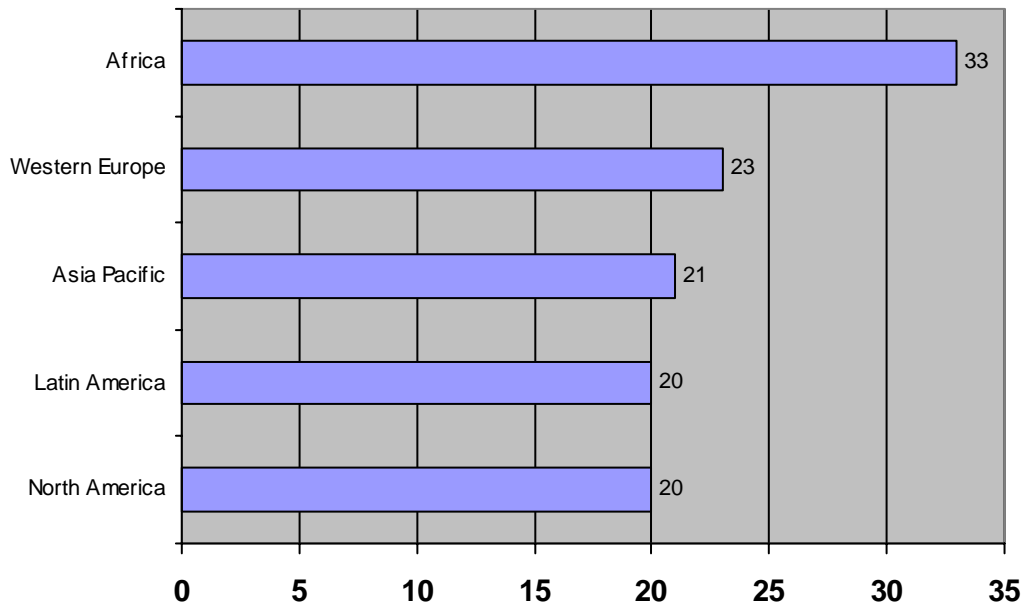
This would explain why, when the Gallup International Voice of the People 2007 survey asked whether different countries should have more, the same or less global influence than was currently the case, China was midway between the EU (the highest rated) and Iran (the lowest rated). Thirty-five percent of world citizens are in favour of Europe increasing its influence, while only 14% would like to see Iran carry more weight. China, in contrast, receives the support of 25% of respondents worldwide.

Graph 1. Should these countries have more global influence



Of the world regions surveyed, Africa is the most pro-China: 33% of African citizens would like to see China increase its influence.

Graph 2. Regions most in favour of China

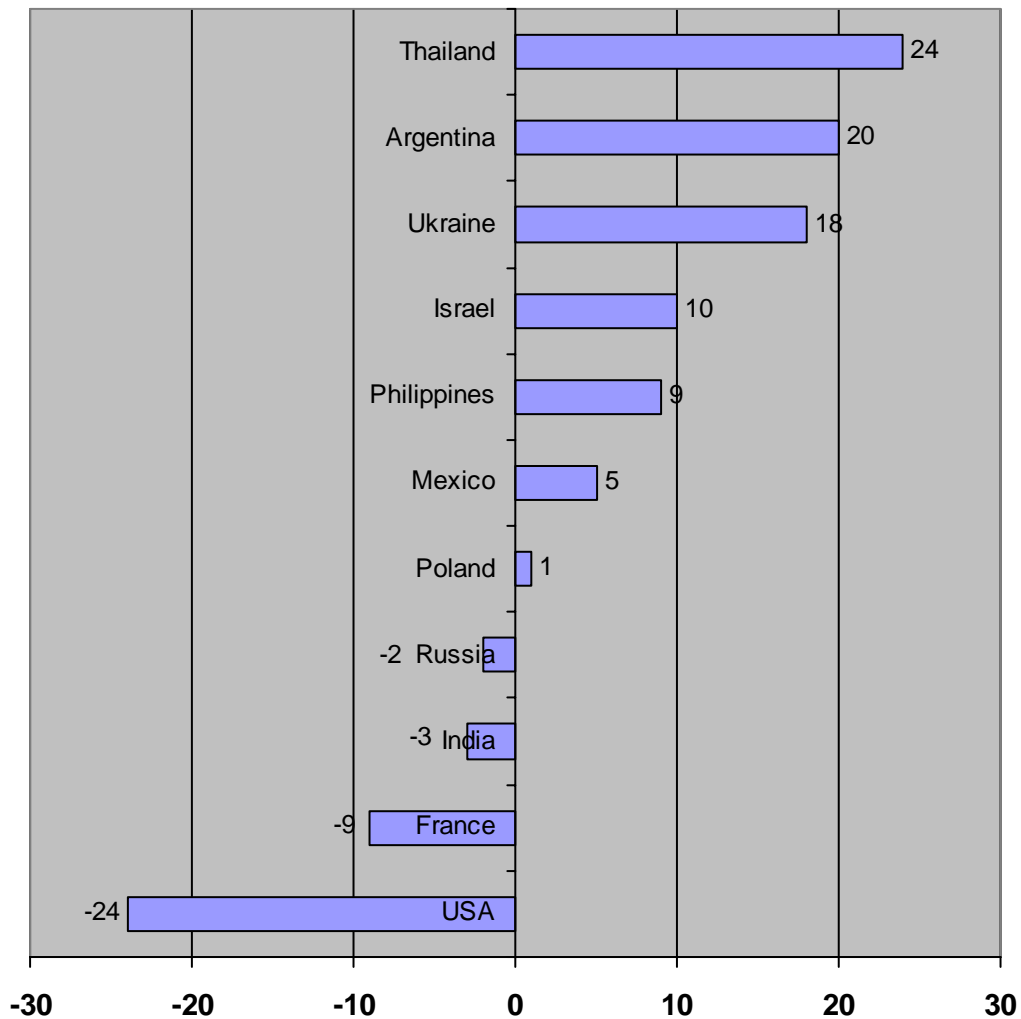


Other studies also confirm this ambivalence towards China, and negative scores even outweigh positive ones in some countries. According to the German Marshall Fund Global Views 2004 survey of US public opinion on foreign policy, 40% of Americans saw China as a threat in 2004, compared to as many as 60% in the late 1990s.

A poll conducted for the BBC World Service by the international polling firm GlobeScan together with PIPA aimed to measure the feeling of threat if China were to become a world power. When respondents were asked if they think it would be positive or negative if China were to become 'significantly more powerful economically than it is today', on average across all 22 countries polled, 48% saw China's influence as positive and 30% saw it as negative. Higher levels of resentment were recorded in the US, Italy and Spain, where the scores were just the opposite of the world average. In Spain, for example, 47% saw China's position as a world power as negative, and just 31% viewed it as positive.

China's economic growth in recent years has not gone unnoticed by the rest of the world, and it is often seen as a threat. Just as political aspects and foreign policy influence China's image in Japan and the US, the economic aspect is influencing the way many European countries, in particular, view China. According to the findings of the World Public Opinion 2007 survey, one of the countries that feels most threatened by China's economic growth is France. Here 30% of respondents see China's rise as a world power as negative, compared to 10% who view it as positive.

Graph 3. Most threatened by China's economic growth



Note: % of respondents who believe that the Chinese economy growing to be as large as the US economy is positive; %% of respondents who believe that the Chinese economy growing to be as large as the US economy is mostly negative.

Source: World Public Opinion 2007.

According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project survey conducted in 16 countries in May 2005, Spain is the second country in the world that feels most threatened by China. When respondents in Spain were asked whether China's economic growth was good or bad for their country, almost one in every two Spaniards (48%) said 'bad'. This percentage was only surpassed by France, where 60% viewed it as negative.

The findings of the Barometer of the Real Instituto Elcano, another Spanish survey, conducted in February 2005, reveal that just 30% of Spaniards believe that the 'Chinese market is a great opportunity for Spanish companies', compared with 61% who say that the 'the prices of Chinese imports are a threat to Spanish companies'.

Being seen as an economic threat is a problem for a country aspiring to achieve global influence. Another shadow that looms over China is the political regime and, in particular, the violation of human rights, although on the latter point, China has benefited from criticism directed at the US for the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq.

Criticism of the US is evident when we analyse public opinion in Spain, one of the European countries that is most critical of US foreign policy. The Spanish are particularly critical of the violation of human rights. In the Transatlantic Trends 2005 survey, which was conducted in the US and some 10 European countries, Spain was the country that most agreed with the statement 'due

to its violation of human rights, the European Union should restrict trade with China'. This was the opinion of 61% of Spanish respondents, while the average in Europe and the US was approximately 50%.

Nevertheless, while the Spanish are critical of China in this respect, they are even more critical of the US. When conducting a study on Globalisation and Human Rights, the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research asked respondents the question, 'In your opinion, what country has the least respect for human rights?'. Despite stories of the death penalty and the persecution of Chinese dissidents in the news, only 2% of respondents mentioned China, while 14% cited the US and 14% Iraq.

Another negative aspect, and which is partly due to China's authoritarian regime, is corruption. In early 2000, the Chinese authorities themselves reported that two-thirds of the 40.000 civil servants investigated for corruption had been found guilty; some 2,500 judges and 1,400 procurators were convicted for abuse of power; and 125.000 members of the communist party were expelled for involvement in corruption. This phenomenon is reflected in international surveys. In the 2006 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index of 163 countries, China ranked 70th and Spain 20th.

Linked to authoritarianism and corruption is a lack of transparency. Politicians, entrepreneurs and scientists all over the world associate China with opaque data and a shortage of information. Official Chinese reports and statistics are not considered reliable. With a score of 88 out of 100, China occupied first place in the Opacity Index Report published by consultancy firm Price Waterhouse Coopers in 2001. In 2004, *The Economist* pointed out that unreliable Chinese statistics were a turn-off for foreign investors, concluding that it 'invented the abacus but can't add up'.

Considering the always-gigantic lights and shadows looming over China, it is no surprise that its image is shrouded in ambivalence. It is admired as an economy, but it also arouses contempt, and its authoritarian regime is not trusted. The situation can best be summed up using the conclusions of the previously mentioned World Public Opinion survey of 2007: 'in most countries polled, majorities or pluralities believe the Chinese economy will grow to be as large as the US economy. In no country do most people think this would be mostly negative. Majorities in every country polled believe this is either a good thing or equally positive and negative. This sanguine reaction is not because China is widely trusted. World publics do not trust China any more than they trust the United States' (WPO, p. 36).

Chinese Soft Power?

Many contemporary analysts see China's soft power as its main asset for public diplomacy. In our opinion however, a more complex analysis needs to be conducted.

In his analysis of soft power, Nye claims that a key factor in soft power is politics, both domestic and foreign, and, more specifically, the degree to which a country respects the principles and rules that are considered legitimate at the global level.

If China is viewed with ambivalence, it is because its soft power is being weakened by the political factor, that is to say, by the nature of its institutions and its foreign policy. As pointed out earlier, the weakness of China's soft power is a non-democratic regime in a world where freedom and democracy are valued. News of China's violation of human rights and a lack of freedom (the persecution of dissidents, the dispute over Tibet) damage its credibility as a world power (Gill/Huan).

Furthermore, China's foreign policy is partly to blame for its lack of legitimacy as an international leader. While it is true that China has shown its more pleasant side in conflicts like that of North Korea, its strategic alliances with dictatorial regimes, particularly in Africa, further strengthen its image as an unscrupulous dictatorship. As Gill/Huan have pointed out, in many Latin American and African countries, leaders of dubious reputation hold China up as a model because of the

spectacular economic growth it has achieved without having to bow to democracy. This socio-political model, which has become known as the 'Beijing Consensus' after the liberal Washington Consensus, is at least as problematic as its forerunner. No matter how much the Chinese authorities advocate harmony and cooperation in the resolution of global problems, communist dictatorship and the support of totalitarian regimes abroad will ultimately take their toll. As Gill/Huang have pointed out, the main problem of China's soft power is the imbalance between the three pillars of soft power, that is to say, the political system, foreign policy and cultural attractiveness.

Nevertheless, despite the negative political aspects that weaken its soft power, positive aspects also abound. One of the strengths of China's soft power, and which often goes unnoticed, is the Chinese Diaspora in Asia and North America. In countries all over the world, from Canada and the US to Singapore and Malaysia, we can find 'little Chinas'. While it is difficult to make an accurate estimate, and the different data sources differ significantly, it is estimated that there are approximately 50 million Chinese spread throughout the globe. According to the US Census, there were 2.5 million Chinese living in the US in 2000. Since 2000 China has promoted more than 80 pro-China associations among overseas communities across the world and has supported a global network of these organisations (Hooghe, p. 95).

Without a doubt, the Chinese language and culture are the main pillars supporting China's soft power. Several analysts have recently drawn our attention to the attractiveness of the Chinese culture. All things Oriental and minimalist aesthetics are a hit world-wide. Traditional wisdom, such as tai chi and acupuncture, are the height of fashion in the West.

But it is much more than its culture and thousand-year-old values. China's most recent cultural products are winning world acclaim. In 2000, Chinese writer Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Chinese films are also winning awards at international film festivals. One of the stars of the US professional basketball league is Chinese. It is forecasted that China will be the number one tourist destination by 2020.

One of China's main assets is undoubtedly the language. Right now, there are between 30 and 40 million people learning Chinese all over the world, and demand for Chinese language teaching continues to rise. It is estimated that in the US alone demand has increased by more than 60% since 2001. This growth rate is now comparable to Spanish, the fastest-growing language in the US (Otero, 2007).

The language is a fundamental resource for Chinese public diplomacy. And the Chinese authorities were aware of this when they created the Confucius Institute.

The Latest Step Forward: The Confucius Institute

In 1987, China formed what would later become the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (abbreviated as *Hanban*, from *Hanyu Bangongshi*, or China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). The goal was to create an international network of Confucius Institutes for the teaching of the Chinese language and culture.

It is ironic that the Chinese authorities called the institute after Confucius, considering that Confucianism was, until recently, banned after Mao's Cultural Revolution in an endeavour to establish a secular communist state. After opening up to 'market communism' in the 1990s, the Confucius ideal served China's two public diplomacy objectives to perfection: on the one hand, it is remindful of this thousand-year-old culture, which is so admired abroad; on the other, it reinforces the peaceful rise discourse of mutual respect, harmony, etc (Otero, p. 489). And indeed *Hanban* is committed, in addition to the teaching of the Chinese language and culture, 'to contributing to the formation of a world of cultural diversity and harmony'.

The Chinese Ministry of Education has clearly stated the objectives of this initiative, 'Teaching Chinese as a foreign language is of strategic significance to popularise the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the

economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China's influence in the international community' (Otero, p. 489). The first two institutes opened in Seoul and Maryland in November 2004. An additional 100 institutes were opened during the following three years. By mid-2007 there were approximately 110 institutes, and the figure is expected to reach 140 by the end of the year. The objective is to have 500 institutes in operation by 2010 and 1000 by 2020 in order to teach Chinese to 100 million students all over the world.

There are now institutes on the five continents, geographically concentrated in the US (24 institutes), Europe (30) and Asia (over 30). It is worth noting that there are also six institutes in Africa, a continent towards which China is exerting considerable diplomatic efforts.

This rapid growth has been based on a low-profile strategy. In contrast to some of its European counterparts, such as the Goethe Institut and the Instituto Cervantes, which have representative offices in state capitals, the Chinese authorities have opted for discretion, using the university departments or institutes of other countries. These provide the infrastructure, and China the funding and teaching staff.

Despite this strategy, designed to offset the rejection and suspicion aroused by the 'yellow power', the establishment of the institutes was not without controversy, especially in the US. Although Harvard University authorised the creation of the Confucius Institute, it rejected the Chinese Government's generous funding offer in order to distance itself from the Peking regime.

It is undeniable that the Chinese authorities have changed their strategy with the creation of the Confucius Institutes. China has moved from simple foreign propaganda to traditional cultural diplomacy by promoting Chinese culture and language abroad. It has also begun to undertake people-to-people diplomacy. The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) is a non-governmental organisation aimed at the promotion of friendship and mutual understanding between the Chinese and other peoples of the world.

Despite this, as Hooghe has pointed out, the CPAFFC is still under the control of the Communist Party and is therefore not independent, thus preventing true dialogue. More than new public diplomacy, it is post-modern propaganda. We already mentioned the Nobel prize winner, Gao Xingjian. He is exiled in Paris and his works are not published in China. Instead of improving China's image, his situation only weakens it. The soft power and public diplomacy of China show the harsh reality of the growing contradictions of the system and the imbalance of soft power, which Gill/Huang so accurately diagnosed.

Venezuela: Public Diplomacy and Oil

Since the Castro Revolution, China has been one of the main sources of economic support for the Cuban regime. China is also one of the preferred partners of the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who visited Beijing on one of his first official foreign visits in winter 2004. As we all know, China is one of the largest consumers of oil, after the US, and Venezuela is one of the world's largest oil producers, as well as one of the main suppliers of the US, for example. This is a very important source of 'hard power' for Venezuela. Nevertheless, until Hugo Chávez arrived in power, Venezuela had never undertaken such an ambitious foreign image campaign as the present one. The Venezuelan President is aiming to export his populist 'Bolivarian Revolution' model to the outside world.

Chávez has consequently become the most visible standard bearer for anti-imperialist discourse against the hegemony of the US in Latin American and the world in general. He has taken part in anti-globalisation summits and forums. He has known how to exploit international circumstances and widespread anti-American sentiment after the Iraq War. It is not surprising that the US see him as a potential threat.

Venezuela has also undertaken intense diplomatic activity in Latin America, as is evident from the Bolivarian Regime's support of indigenous initiatives, like Bolivia and Ecuador, and Marxist parties in Nicaragua. It has also maintained good relations with populist leaders, like Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, which, as we will see, gave rise to the launch of Telesur, an international television channel funded mainly by Venezuela.

But it did not stop with Latin America. Chávez's diplomatic activity outside the region, and particularly his relations with Iran, have raised his international profile. His announcement that Venezuela, like Iran, was intending to conduct nuclear research for civilian purposes, has further reinforced his image as a new potential 'Axis of Evil'.

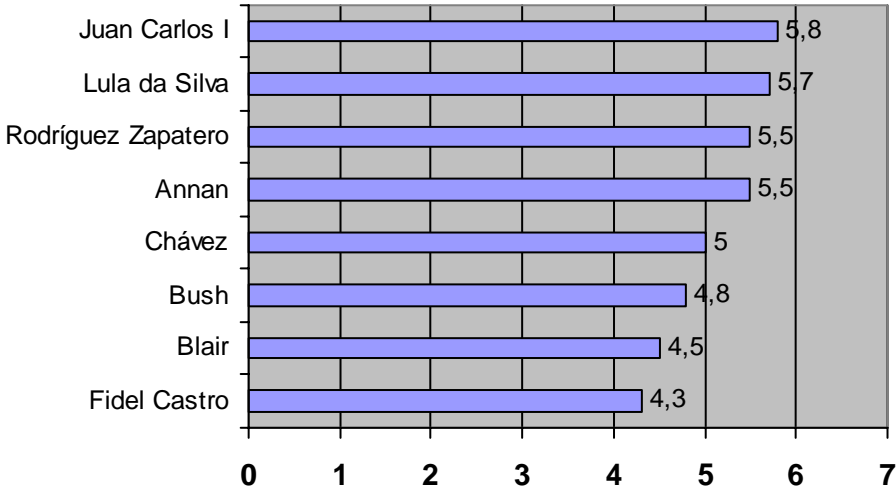
Although Chávez has been likened to Hitler, he is perhaps more akin to Goebbels. Chavéz has given great importance to the media an instrument of propaganda for domestic and foreign policy. It is therefore not surprising that he has managed to create a good image for himself in many countries of the region.

Venezuela and Chávez's Image

In a region like Latin America, where democracy is a relatively new form of government and strong and charismatic leaders have always enjoyed a certain amount of affection, it is not surprising that Chávez has obtained high scores in foreign opinion polls. Despite the fact that he is a pro-coup leader, Chávez was one of the highest rated leaders in Latin America in 2005. Although the Latin Americans have a much higher opinion of Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who received a score of 5.7 out of 10, Chávez is approved of by the majority with a score of 5. Fidel Castro, incidentally, failed with a score of 4.3.

Chávez is even slightly more popular than Bush and Blair, who, with scores of 4.8 and 4.5 respectively, were among the world's worst rated leaders after the Iraq War.

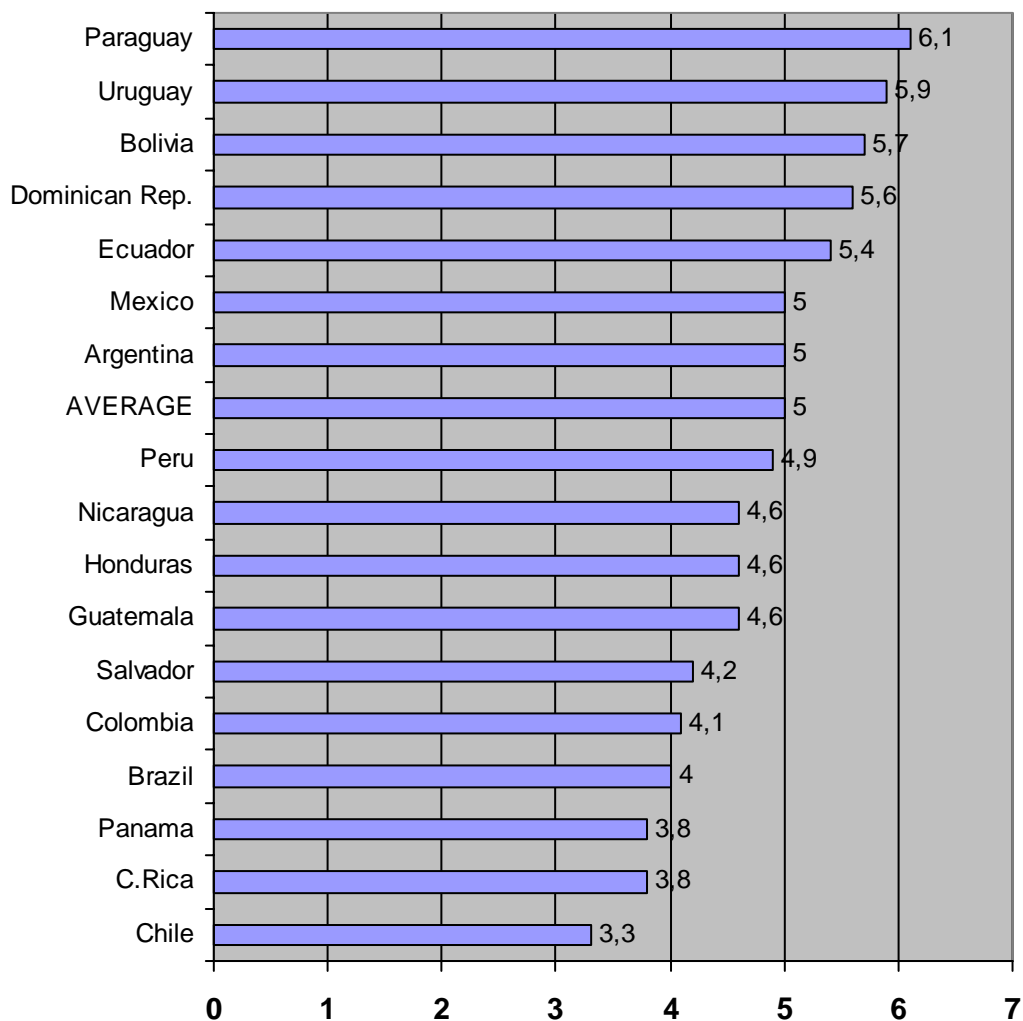
Graph 4. Popularity of world leaders



Source: Latinobarómetro 2005.

In some countries, Chávez comfortably exceeds the pass mark and does quite well. This was the case in Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic. With regard to the larger countries in the region, only Brazil, Chile and Colombia appear to be able to resist the 'charms' of the Venezuelan President.

Graph 5. Popularity of Hugo Chávez



As mentioned earlier, Chávez's anti-system strategy has also yielded results outside Latin America. Venezuela's image in Spain was not as tarnished by the typical problems associated with Latin America in general, such as poverty, corruption and violence. In fact Chávez's anti-imperialist, or, basically, anti-American discourse won him new fans, until he made Spain the target of his anti-imperialist attacks following the Santiago de Chile Summit in November 2007.

Radical left-wingers in Spain saw Chávez as the new Fidel Castro, capable of standing up to the US. On his first official visit to Spain in 2004, Chávez was greeted by crowds of anti-system students at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid as if he were the new Messiah. Izquierda Unida, a coalition of left-wing parties in which the Spanish Communist and Green Parties carry the most weight, has always defended Chávez's government and the democratic nature of his regime. When the Venezuelan President lost his constitutional referendum in November 2007, Izquierda Unida's leader Gaspar Llamazares concluded that by losing the referendum, Venezuela, in contrast to the commonly-held world view, had demonstrated that it was not governed by an authoritarian regime.

Telesur

Projects are underway to create regional TV channels in Latin America. In July 2005, representatives of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain, Panama, Portugal, the Dominican Republic and Mexico met in Mexico City to lay the foundation for the Canal Iberoamericano TV channel, which was to go on the air in 2006. While it has already been approved by the Latin American Ministers of Culture, this TV channel for Spanish and Portuguese

speakers has yet to be fully defined.¹ The initiative, which was conceived three years ago, was instituted by Mexico at the Meeting of Latin American Ministers of Culture.

The channel will be entirely devoted to culture and will broadcast programmes produced by the participating countries. At a later stage, news bulletins covering all of Latin America will be aired. Canal Iberoamericano will initially operate from the premises of Canal 22 (Mexico). Enrique Strauss, the Canal 22 Director, has stated that it will not represent a significant financial burden because it will be funded by the 25 participating countries. In phase one, the channel will be broadcast to the participating countries only; in phase two, broadcasting will be extended to all of North and South American, and Spain and Portugal will be included in phase three.

At the Latin American Summit in Salamanca last October, a special communiqué was approved on the 'dissemination and promotion of Latin American expression'. The communiqué called for cooperation in the field of television in Latin America, following recent television experiences in the sector. The leaders requested that the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), chaired by Enrique Iglesias, include in its agenda an analysis of television experiences 'in the different Latin American countries with a view to putting forward joint proposals for the dissemination and promotion of Latin American artistic, educational, scientific and social expression'.

In January 2005, President Hugo Chávez announced that the creation of a television station had been authorised. It was to be a public limited company serving Latin America and charged with, to use his own words, 'disclosing the reality of the region'. At a Cabinet meeting, the Venezuelan Government officially approved the creation of Telesur. A few days later, at the end of January, Chávez travelled to Argentina to implement the agreements signed² in July the previous year and to discuss the creation of a Latin American television station with his Argentine counterpart, Néstor Kirchner. At this meeting, a ceremony was held to mark Argentina's official membership of the Telesur project.

A fourth partner, Uruguay, joined later on. President Tabaré Vázquez had initially planned for the government to enact the agreement, but parliamentary pressure and the controversy generated by the media forced him to wait for a legislative opinion to support the initiative.

Thus, Hugo Chávez, Néstor Kirchner, Fidel Castro and Tabaré Vázquez united to create Telesur, a regional public television channel to be aired on 24 May 2005. The objective of Telesur is to disseminate Latin American cultural programmes, information and content in an endeavour to counteract the influence of US TV channel CNN.

Although the founding members of Telesur are Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba and Uruguay, new members are also welcome, as it is a plurinational initiative. Andrés Izarra, the then Minister of Communication and Information of Venezuela, said that it was 'a new state television company to serve as a communication tool for the region, an integration effort in which all countries of the south (referring to the American Continent) were invited to participate (...) Telesur is a public limited company, and, therefore, other states, and even private investors, can get involved'.

Surprisingly, Brazil is not a member of the project, despite the fact that in September 2004, Andrés Izarra announced that Venezuela and Brazil had agreed to sign an agreement to establish the legal basis of Telesur. Commenting on the participation of the latter, the General Manager of Telesur said 'it is not important whether Brazil joins or not. The political fact is that it is a Pan-Latin American company that does not belong to any particular state... no one has to join because this is not going to influence the editorial line'.

The company is jointly owned by Venezuela (51% stake), Argentina (20%), Cuba (19%) and Uruguay (10%). The satellite channel is funded by the project members and it had an initial budget

¹ A general meeting will be held to discuss the channel by-laws, decide on the international supervisory body, set deadlines and appoint an executive committee, among other issues.

² At the 16th MERCOSUR Summit, both presidents had signed agreements for the creation of a Latin American television station. The agreements were signed in Puerto Iguazú, in the Argentine province of Misiones, on 7 July 2004.

of US\$2.5 million, although very little and contradictory information is available on investment³ and maintenance costs.⁴

The Telesur headquarters are in Caracas and it has nine correspondents on the American continent (Bogota, Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Puerto Príncipe, The Havana, La Paz, Montevideo and Washington). It covers South America, Central America, the Caribbean, the US, Western Europe and North Africa.

The Telesur Advisory Council is comprised of a number of different personalities, including journalists, writers, artists, sociologists, political analysts, researchers and filmmakers, mainly from Latin America, but also Europe and the US. The best known members include the Argentine Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel; the Cuban troubadour Silvio Rodríguez, the former Minister of Culture of Colombia Camilo Osorio, the Argentine film directors Fernando 'Pino' Solanas and Tristán Bauer, the US actor Danny Glover, the Nicaraguan poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, the Pakistani journalist and film-maker Tariq Ali, and the French writer and journalist Ignacio Ramonet.

The Chairman of the Board of Directors is Andrés Izarra (Venezuela),⁵ the Vice-Chairman is the journalist Aran Aharonian (Uruguay) and the board members are Ovidio Cabrera (Cuba), Jorge Botero (Colombia), Beto Almeida (Brazil), Ana Skalon (Argentina) and Ricardo Font (Venezuela). The Editorial Board comprises Andrés Izarra (Chairman), Aran Aharonian (General Manager), Ovidio Cabrera (Deputy General Manager), Jorge Botero (Director of Information), Gabriela González (Programme Director), Nohra Rodríguez (Director of Production) and Raymond Palmero (Financial Director).

The launch strategy consisted of two consecutive phases. The first, initiated on 24 May, was dedicated to finalising the technical details to ensure quality broadcasting. There were spots and promotions during the following two months to inform the public of the channel genre and programmes. During the second phase, initiated on 24 July, some of the programmes went on the air and the programme schedule was gradually finalised. Telesur initially began broadcasting four hours a day, until reaching 24-hour broadcasting, seven days a week, over the following months.

At midday on 24 May 2005, the Latin American television project instituted by four countries in the region, Televisión del Sur CA, popularly known as Telesur, went on the air. The first programmes were promotional spots to give viewers an idea of the channel genre and programmes, and the final programming schedule was gradually implemented. The Pan-Latin American television station thus launched its battle 'to break away from the latifundium' of international channels, to use the words of the Telesur director, Aharonian.

Twenty-four July was the date chosen to launch Telesur as it was the 222nd anniversary of the birth of Simón Bolívar, the leader of several independence movements throughout Latin America, and who is much admired by the Venezuelan President. Hugo Chávez took part in the ceremony via video conference, which, coincidentally, several newspapers in the region described as having a strong ideological content. Chávez said that 'the media cannot change the minds of men; if Telesur is to strike a chord in the minds and souls of our people, it will do so by clinging to the truth'. And in keeping with his usual demagogic discourse, went on to add 'I think Bush is glued to the transmission... He has threatened to broadcast some programmes from there. But no one is listening'.

³ According to Official State Gazette nr 38.235 published in Venezuela on Monday, 25 July, Telesur was allocated a budget of US\$10,832,058 (B\$ 26.993.488.495) for operating expenses and had a workforce of 160 employees.

⁴ The media has stated that the members contributed film and documentary material, as well as the infrastructure for the correspondents in their respective countries.

⁵ In late July 2005, Izarra officially resigned as the Minister of Communication and Information to take over the management of Telesur and to ensure it remained independent of the government, according to his own declarations. 'This division of duties has been in the pipeline for some time. It was not done prematurely to accelerate the creation of the channel. But once it has been created, it is necessary that the government is not directly involved in its management', said Izarra.

Telesur broadcasts 24 hours a day in Spanish, with Portuguese subtitles for Brazilian viewers. Programmes include news bulletins, documentaries and interviews. News programmes account for about 40% of programming and the remaining 60% is comprised of home or independent audiovisual productions by regional and/or local television companies, universities and social organisations.⁶ In addition to signing agreements⁷ and acquisitions, Telesur produces its own programmes. Some of the programmes it will broadcast, are *Memorias de fuego* (a review of socio-historical processes), *Subte* (an account of everyday life in the city), *Trabajo y Tierra* (tradition and modernity applied to agricultural work), *Maestra Vida* (profiles of Latin American personalities), *Sones y Pasiones* (popular music from the region), *Memorias en Desarrollo* (Classic Latin American cinema), *Marca Pasos* (journeys through Latin America), *Nojolvud* (contemporary films), *Telesurgentes* (social thought and action), to mention a few.

In addition to Telesur, Factoría Latinoamericana de Contenidos (FLACO) was also created to boost the production, promotion and distribution of audiovisual material in the region. In the opinion of Colombian journalist and producer Jorge Botero, one of the traits that distinguishes Telesur is the presence of Latin American films.

Izarra indicated that Canal 7 (Argentina), Televisión Nacional de Bolivia, TV Caribe de Colombia, TV Ciudad de Uruguay and nine Brazilian television channels would broadcast Telesur programmes; in Venezuela, it is to be broadcast via cable until it is assigned its own wavelength. Telesur is broadcast via NSS 806 from Caracas to the rest of Latin America, Central America, the Caribbean, North America, Western Europe and North Africa. As it is a free station, broadcasting is simplified and free of charge.

The Telesur⁸ website, whose motto is 'Our North is the South', describes it as a channel to promote integration and its maxim is 'if integration is the end, Telesur is the means'. It states that it was created in response to a Latin American need, that is to say, to have a vehicle that enables all inhabitants of the region to disseminate their values and image, discuss their own ideas and transmit their own content, in a free and equitable manner. It further states that it is a station with a social mission and was 'set up to serve historical memory and cultural expression alike'.

'Telesur constitutes an alternative to the one-way discourse of the large news channels and is an instrument to serve the integration of the Latin American nations and peoples'; its mission is to develop a new communication paradigm for Latin America.

The three pillars of the programme schedule are: to inform, to educate and to entertain. It explains that because information is an inalienable right, the channel will feature daily news through news reports, morning news programmes, hourly news bulletins, news analyses, chronicles, interviews and reports in cooperation with the permanent correspondents and a network of collaborators. The second pillar refers to the compulsory duty to educate by offering content that furthers viewers' education and, finally, as entertainment is the common heritage of the Latin American people, there will be programmes of an entertainment nature and in keeping with the idiosyncrasies of the region.

Since its launch, many analysts in the region have suspected that the channel would be used as a propaganda instrument by Chávez, who they accuse of using it to promote and disseminate his political project to the entire region. They see it as one of Chávez's initiatives to counteract what he calls the 'domination' of international TV and radio channels on the American continent.

Statements made by Venezuelan government officials and senior executives at the channel have done nothing to dispel this criticism. At the end of March, for instance, the Telesur General Manager stated that the objective of the channel was to 'do ideological battle at the mass level. For many years we believed that we had to fight with small local radio stations and small newspapers',

⁶ The General Manager of Telesur denied that it would be fed by information from state channels. To the contrary, 'it will be fed with content produced in Latin America by independent and official entities, universities and social movements, by everything that reflects the reality of our continent'.

⁷ In July Telesur signed a partnership agreement with Qatari channel al-Jazeera.

⁸ The address is www.telesur.tv.net.

adding 'it is time to stop thinking like dwarfs and the objective of Telesur is to enter the battle of mass television'.⁹ He further stated that the new channel 'is the only alternative to the hegemonic message we are being bombarded with by the north'. Our adversaries are 'those who want to continue seeing themselves through the eyes of the CNN, TVE, BBC or French television'. On another occasion, he even went as far as to say, 'they insist on asking who is going to guarantee that it will not become a government propaganda channel, and we say, nobody. Telesur is, without a doubt, a political and strategic project', and Aharonian acknowledges that it will serve the objectives of the Bolivarian Revolution. A month after the channel was created, Almeida, the director of Telesur in Brazil, said 'Latin America is going through a rich period with the progress of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, the victory of the masses in Argentina and Uruguay, and Cuba reaffirming the socialist construction process'.

Chávez and Kirchner, to say nothing of the Castro Regime, have been severely criticised for trying to influence the different news media in their respective countries. *La Nación* newspaper (Argentina) stated that it was not easy to obtain information on Telesur or the financial contributions¹⁰ Argentina would have to make to join Telesur, or the type of programmes it would broadcast, apart from the typical content any public television would provide.¹¹ It likewise stated that it had its suspicions about the control exercised by the Venezuelan President, considering that Telesur was headquartered in Caracas and the studios were right beside Chávez's state channel, Venezolana Televisión.

At the same time, another prestigious newspaper, *El Mercurio* (Chile), asked 'what reason do we have to believe that this "Bolivarian CNN" is going to be any less biased, more truthful or have a specially-defined agenda?', concluding that in economic and viewership terms, the success of Chávez's initiative was dubious and its only contribution was a bad signal for the entire region.

The introduction section of the official Telesur website states that it is essential to have an audiovisual alternative that promotes Latin American identity and embodies the fundamental principles of a true communication medium, that is to say, truthfulness, justice, respect and solidarity; it makes no mention of independence, however.

Furthermore, Telesur caused confrontation between its founders and countries such as the US and Colombia. In July 2005, the US House of Representatives passed an amendment to 'initiate radio and television broadcasts to Venezuela for at least 30 minutes a day of balanced, objective, and comprehensive news programming'. The amendment was introduced by Connie Mack IV, a Republican of Florida's fourteenth congressional district, and was unanimously approved. The Republican therefore had access to the US diplomacy budget for the next two years; millions of dollars at the disposal of the Department of State and other agencies with foreign relations responsibilities. When questioned about the amendment, the US ambassador to Venezuela, William Brownfield, explained that the initiative was aimed at responding 'to any anti-American messages transmitted by Telesur... without violating the radio space of Venezuela', as some spokespeople of Chávez's government had claimed.

Chávez described the US initiative as another 'desperate imperialist' attack. The imperialist giant is entering a dangerous phase of desperation. There is nothing more dangerous than a desperate giant'. At the same time, he threatened to launch an 'electronic war' against North America if the US government tried to affect the radio signals of Telesur. Venezuela's Vice-President, José Vicente Rangel, described the amendment passed by the US House of Representatives as 'anachronistic' and 'senseless', and compared it to the Radio Martí¹² initiative in Cuba.

⁹ Along the same lines, Izarra stated 'Telesur is invading an area that is almost entirely dominated by oligarchies and their allies from the North'.

¹⁰ One month before the launch, Gabriel Mariotto, the National Under-secretary of Communication, believed that the costs of Telesur to Argentina would be 'minimal', although they had not yet been budgeted. It would contribute to television and filming material, and the costs of maintaining the correspondent in Buenos Aires; although the latter had not yet been estimated as the final budget would depend on the partnership agreements.

¹¹ The Media Secretariat announced that agreements would be signed with private producers, universities and the Argentine state channel to provide material to Telesur.

¹² For several years, the US has been operating Radio Martí and TV Martí to counteract Cuban propaganda.

The US was not the only country annoyed by the project. The first trial broadcasts also irritated Colombian intelligence bodies who told *El Tiempo* newspaper (Colombia) that the channel featured news on national and international terrorism, and portrayed a negative image of Colombia. Furthermore, it was reported that at a meeting of the Andean Community led by Chávez, the Colombian Vice-Chancellor, Camilo Reyes, said he was sorry that 'of the 44 million law-abiding Colombians, Telesur had to choose Tirofijo (the leader of the FARC) for its first seconds of broadcasting'. Chávez ridiculed the criticism, saying 'the CNN also features images of Tirofijo and it is not criticised', and once again stated that the objective of the channel was to strengthen Latin American integration.

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