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Following Hugo Chavez

Much has been written about Trump and the media. His dismissal, indeed disdain, of journalists is well known – typically referring to them as ‘the most dishonest human beings on earth.’ The President’s arrival in office has led to a continuing bad tempered relationship between his officials, such as Sean Spicer or Kellyanne Conway, and the White House press corps. In parallel to this Trump has wherever possible sought to replace traditional media relations by relentless direct engagement with his public, as befits a former reality TV star. During his campaign we became familiar with the random 3am tweets. In this way Trump is devising a new form of political communication – for a social media age – making pronouncements direct to the electorate and citizen. The topics include anything from policy on China, the environment or drones to critiques of TV shows or fellow celebrities.

Most senior western politicians have a twitter account – but it is very obviously managed for them – and is usually little more than a series of anodyne observations from their office along the lines of ‘delighted to visit Doncaster’. The official POTUS account is typical of such a commentary. In contrast, Trump as a former reality TV show host, uses social media to influence policy and to make a direct connection to audience which has a very different tone. Astonishingly even after taking office he has retained his personal account @realdonaldtrump which makes unmediated and off the cuff observations to his millions of followers that are quite different from any other presidential media. Indeed the reporting of Trump’s twitter feed pronouncements has become a core part of US political journalism....and now that he wields power they have even greater significance.

Trump’s media style has remarkable parallels with another well known, high profile - and frequently exasperating - populist leader. Hugo Chavez who governed Venezuela from 1999 - 2013 had a similar outspoken dislike of journalists. He referred for example to one Venezuelan TV channel as a bunch of ‘media terrorists’ and he avoided holding traditional press conferences, which would involve answering questions from journalists. Like the US president, Chavez sought ways to circumvent mainstream media professionals. At the centre of this policy Chavez used to host himself a weekly TV chat show ‘Alo Presidente’. It was a cross between David Dimbleby style Question Time and a version of Jerry Springer, inviting viewers to participate in political debate. Chavez discussed questions from the (selected) live audience or received remotely through a phone-in or via Twitter.

This was interspersed with a series of special studio guests or pundits and occasional filmed location inserts. The programme was typically open-ended and on occasions would last up to 6 hours where the president continued a tireless flow of chat on all matters, big and small.

Over the years *Alo Presidente* became a central vehicle for policy and government activity. The style was in many ways similar to Trump's - as a version of government via reality TV. The audience based Sunday morning show which Chavez anchored from locations around the country became compulsory viewing not just for government officials but for foreign diplomats, trying to work out what was going on in Venezuela. In March 2008 for example Chavez opined on air about a border dispute between Ecuador and Colombia which had involved the assassination of a leading member of the FARC rebel group. Live on television Chavez affirmed his support for the Ecuadorians and their sovereignty. He went ahead and told his Minister of Defence to move 10 battalions to Venezuela's border with Colombia and announced to the audience that the Venezuelan embassy in Bogota would be closed forthwith.

Trump has announced policies and intentions on his twitter feed, such as the Mexican border wall. It remains to be seen how they will be implemented. And it was not just foreign policy that was made on a Venezuelan TV show. Famously Chavez announced nationalisations which were swiftly implemented. In one famous episode in 2002 he even sacked several senior figures from the powerful national oil company – *Petroleos de Venezuela* – live on air. 'These people.... they have stepped over the line... I have decided to dismiss them...'

Cabinet ministers were obliged to attend the filming of *Alo Presidente* and often sat squirming in the front row of the audience. Then when a matter arose, either from a member of the public phoning in or in the studio, Chavez would turn to a minister and either ask him what he was going to do or instruct him to respond. Topics ranged from typical low level constituency surgery matters to wide ranging subjects of public interest. From all over the country citizens phoned in with their problems, from social security payments to access to medical care

Other leaders in South America and beyond started to follow Chavez practice of doing politics on TV. Ecuador, Bolivia and El Salvador all saw versions of the president as reality TV presenter, using a popular format to promote their message and politics.

Anchoring *Alo Presidente* was not the only way that Chavez used to communicate directly. His presidency coincided with the early days of Twitter and he quickly grasped its possibilities, just as Trump has done more recently. Chavez set up a Twitter feed originally in 2010 and began to engage

with his audience in a typically forthright way and Twitter was duly described as a 'tool of government' by the Guardian correspondent in Caracas, Rory Carroll.

Twitter was then only starting to become a widespread and global tool, but Chavez was soon attracting followers at 2000 a day – by the time he died in 2013 he had over 4 million. Obviously as a Socialist and Bolivarian leader the messages were very different to those of President Trump, but they exhibited the same brash tone of pronouncements – connecting directly to a populist base.

'Brothers and sisters of my fatherland, the best present you can give me is to continue to strengthening the Bolivarian revolution and Socialism!!'

Chavez announced appointments, promoted his policies and replied to enquiries and entreaties from the public. 'Hello Tums! Of course it is possible to also help out with medicines. That's where we are going!! That's socialism.' Apparently the presidential Twitter feed became such a phenomenon that 200 people were said to be employed dealing with responses and engagement with the @Chavezcandanga twitter handle; ongoing conversations, queries, pleas for help.

As Chavez started to promote himself and his messages on Twitter one political scientists in Venezuela observed how Twitter had become a fundamental instrument for Chavez "it has tremendous propaganda values and is part of his charisma mechanism." Meanwhile the creator of the directory Twitter Venezuela commented that Chavez might have won in PR terms, "But it is no way to run a country. You can't make decisions based on messages of 140 characters." That hardly seems to bother President Trump.

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