Slightly Brainwashed?[1]

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Norwegian media covers to a very limited extent Latin America, and when something is reported from this part of the world, it is often negative and stereotypical: Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez is a dangerous dictator, and Mexico is little more than a drug war. Are the journalists pre-programmed to prioritize like this?

The recent referendum in Venezuela ended with a solid majority for changing the constitution, allowing the president and parliamentarians unlimited reelection, in accordance with what president Chávez had wanted. This will mean that Venezuela gets more or less the same system as the one we have in Norway and that should not create a major drama. Still, Norwegian newspapers have almost unanimously made big fuzz and warned against dictatorship.

Lifetime dictator

Aftenposten went as far as to write that"president Hugo Chávez brainwashed a majority to believe that Venezuela is best served having him as a lifetime president". Perhaps it is Aftenpopsten's commentator that has had his brained washed? Because the result of the referendum did not give Chávez mandate to be a life time president. He still has to be elected every six years. And Venezuela's inhabitants would not like to hear that they have lost all judgment and let themselves be tricked to believe that the president's wishes are best for them.

There are several reasons for being skeptical towards Chávez – just ask the opposition in Venezuela – but there are limits to how biased the descriptions of the situation can be before they become simply laughable. The bias is also epidemic in the other camp. Unconditional celebration of Chavez of the kind one can find in Klassekampen also does not invoke much confidence. Klassekampen stands out among Norwegian media, because it cheers for Chavez' progress and views the development in Venezuela as a pure class struggle. Can we believe in what this newspaper tells us?

Those who support Chavez often accuse the opposition for dominating the media in the country, while his opponents say that Chavez has total control. Why are there so few voices that can give anything but one-dimensional and predictable reports? Where are all the nuanced comments, written by journalists that don't automatically scream about dictatorship or revolution?

Emphasizing the most powerful

That the coverage of Latin-America lacks nuances is related to the fact that it is tiny. Normally one gets some explanatory and thorough comments about an area only when it gets

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gets substantial news coverage. If we exclude the very particular 1980s, when all the conflicts in Latin-America were interpreted within the framework of the Cold War, and the "US backyard" was hot stuff in the media, it is safe to say that the news coverage of Latin-America has been sparse.

The logic of the media contributes to drawing the attention of the journalists towards the powerful countries in the world. Guatemala and Peru have no chance against the USA. With a few exceptions Latin America always gets the least attention when compared to other parts of the world. My own Master thesis (*hovedoppgave*) studied the historical coverage of Latin America during selected years from 1902 to 2002. It showed, among other things, that Africa was twice as frequently in the Norwegian media as Latin America and the Middle East almost three times as frequently. (Africa has more of aid and missionaries from Norway while the Middle East has "everything": terrorism, religion, conflicts, war and not least the USA).

More than half of the articles about Latin America were short notes, which allows very little analysis and background information. Moreover, the notes were often picked directly from the newswires – often most likely a correspondent of a large news agency in the USA – and they seemed to seldom be edited. This leads also to a significant US influence on Norwegian news coverage. Thus, one may question both the scant news coverage of the region, but also the framework for interpretation that dominates the coverage.

US influence

Norwegian journalists seem to often simply buy the US' view on news stories from Latin America. That does not necessarily mean that Norwegian journalists are brainwashed by movies with Mexican bandits or the rhetoric of US presidents. But Norway has close cultural, political and military bonds with the US and there are still relatively few Norwegian journalists that speak Spanish and Portuguese well enough to pick news directly from Latin America. At the same time journalists are under pressure to produce. Thus, they pick what is most easily available, and that is mostly news from the CNN, New York Times, AP and other North American sources.

As the USA have very tense relations with Venezuela, and the USA is dependent on the oil from Chávez, I would guess that the US media gave the referendum in Venezuela much more attention than the referendum about a new and more just constitution in Bolivia. Even President Obama calls Chávez a dictator. This has probably also influenced Norwegian media: During January and February this year Norwegian media produced more than six times as many articles about the referendum in Venezuela than the one in Bolivia, although the Bolivian arguably was of much more historical significance.

The logic of the media

Journalists tend to run in the same direction – in Norway as well as other countries. Editors are afraid of loosing ground on the issues that everybody writes about. Moreover, news should not bee too new. The ideal news story seem to be about something that people already have some knowledge of.

The recent news stories about the drug war in Mexico fits well with this kind of logic, because we all know what Mexican bandits are like: sweaty, wicked, unshaved guys with a bad English. In my study of the historical Latin America coverage, Mexico was the country that

most frequently was associated with crime. Although travel stories from Yucatán gives the drug-bandit articles some competition now, it seems like the picture of Mexico as dangerous, unstable and violent is still prevalent.

Journalists are socialized into the medias norms of how to select and frame issues. It takes a lot from a single journalist to break free from the newsrooms' routines and demands, and seek completely different stories about different topics and fight to get them published. But it is possible. There are examples of journalists that show they have the level of knowledge and the interest needed to reach a reasonable view of Latin-America. Luckily. May they continue for a lifetime!