"Don't Watch Television, Make It!"

Community Media, the State, and Popular Politics in Caracas, Venezuela

by

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A dissertation in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

New York University

September, 2009

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Thomas Abercrombie

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Faye Ginsburg

DEDICATION

For my mother, Nina Glick Schiller

With love and gratitude

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks go to the men and women at Catia TV who welcomed me into their lives and shared their insights and experiences. Without their patience and willingness to allow me to observe and participate in their work, this dissertation would not have been possible. My hope is that this project honors the complex challenges that these media producers embrace on a daily basis. I greatly appreciate having had the opportunity to learn from them, debate with them, and share passions for a better world.

At New York University, Faye Ginsburg and Thomas Abercrombie have generously shared their knowledge and critical engagement. I am grateful to Thomas Abercrombie for his incisive comments on my work throughout graduate school, which allowed me to formulate and advance this project. I am indebted to Faye Ginsburg both for her ongoing intellectual engagement and for inspiring my interest in understanding the social practice of media production. I also thank Greg Grandin, Bruce Grant, and Rafael Sánchez, who have provided invaluable encouragement and guidance.

Chapters of this dissertation greatly benefited from the feedback I received from the Work in Progress in Latin American Society and History workshop hosted by the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at NYU and from the History of Women and Gender workshop organized by NYU's Department of History. In addition, the practical media production skills and knowledge I gained participating in NYU's innovative Program in Culture and Media in the Department of Anthropology proved

enormously important to allow me to understand and participate in the work of television production in Caracas.

This research was made possible through the support of the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (2003-2007), a Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (2006), a Summer Travel Grant from the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University (2003), and the Constance Sutton/ International Women's Anthropology Conference Student Award from the Department of Anthropology at New York University (2003).

My appreciation goes to all who engaged the research presented here in distinct and important ways, especially, Lila Abu-Lughod, Fernando Coronil, Sujatha Fernandes, Cheryl Furjanic, Jeff Himpele, Meg McLagan, Carmen Medeiros, Fred Myers, Molly Nolan, Bambi Schiefflien, David Smilde, and Noelle Stout. In addition, throughout my life, Antonio Lauria, Betty Levin, Stephan Reyna, and Constance Sutton have provided warm encouragement and have influenced my intellectual development. Susan Reyna, Robert Albert, Steven Bloomstein, and Julio Alvarez were instrumental in first introducing me to Venezuela, for which I am very grateful.

This work has benefited from the excellent feedback and political camaraderie of my wonderful dissertation writing group, Ipek Celik, Maggie Clinton, Priya Lal, Deborah Matzner, Qian Zhu, Angela Segura, and Franny Sullivan. In addition, I thank Haytham Bahoora, Leigh Claire La Berge, John Patrick Leary, Liana Maris, Shane Minkin, Tsolin

Nalbantian for their feedback and friendship. John Patrick Leary first introduced me to people at Catia TV in 2003. It has been tremendously helpful to continue to share our thoughts and ideas about media and politics in Venezuela. I am grateful to Maggie Clinton for her unmatched writing companionship and critical reading of my chapters. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Sherene Seikaly for her close engagement with this work, sharp editorial insights, and emotional and intellectual generosity. I look forward to a long career of collaboration with this group of scholars.

My family has been a source of vital encouragement. I am grateful to my mother Nina Glick Schiller for sharing her emotional support, political and intellectual wisdom, and passion for anthropology and social justice. I am proud to follow her example. I thank my father, David Schiller, for his love and faith in the pursuit of knowledge. His commitment to teaching and unwavering belief in my abilities have been a source of constant sustenance. I am also indebted to my best friend and sister Rachel Schiller, as well as Devan Aptekar and Isobel Aptekar who have provided me with so much love, support, and joy. I have been so fortunate to have wonderfully helpful step-parents, Janet Sullivan and Stephan Reyna. I am thrilled to add to my support team Doug and Sari Biklen.

Finally, my love and appreciation goes to Noah Biklen for his patience, kindness, and delicious meals. Noah's constant reminder to "trust the process" made completing this dissertation much less onerous. His steady encouragement, love, and humor have brightened my life.

PREFACE

I started examining some of the issues explored in this dissertation in 2000, when I spent eight months after I graduated from college living in a rural community outside of Cumaná, a small city in eastern Venezuela. Together with women and occasionally men from the mountain valley, I watched endless hours of *telenovelas*, Latin American soap operas. I wanted to understand how rural men and women engaged commercial television's flashy depictions of elite urban experience and melodrama. Together with Anahi, one woman from the mountain valley with whom I had grown particularly close, I watched the concluding chapter of "*Maria Rosa Buscame Una Esposa"* (Maria Rosa Find Me a Wife), a Peruvian *telenovela* about a secretary who—surprise!—falls in love with her wealthy boss. During the final episode, the boss recognizes his feelings for his secretary and the two live happily ever after. Anahi and I cried.

At this point, Chávez had been President for less than two years. I had little sense of what his presidency might mean for Venezuela or Latin American politics more broadly. Along with my interlocutors, I devoted little attention to Chávez or the central government. At this point "the revolution's" social programs did not yet exist. The *campesinos* with whom I was living felt no change in their everyday lives under Chávez, beyond being annoyed when he interrupted our *telenovelas* with long-winded speeches. For the most part they remained loyal to Democratic Action, the political party in

Venezuela that had done most to solidify identification with rural Venezuelans through efforts at land reform and some wealth redistribution.

I came away from this period of research knowing that commercial television encouraged very poor women to aspire to middle-class lifestyles, relating and comparing the ups and downs of their daily lives to the characters on the *telenovelas*. I conducted this project at a time of increased anthropological attention to the role of media in people's everyday lives. I was drawn to the analyses that recognized that audiences were not dupes of bourgeois values and aesthetics, although they did not always have access to tools that would allow them to negotiate all of television's "free" messages (Abu-Lughod 1995).

I was eager to learn more about the Venezuelan "media world" (Ginsburg et al. 2002). I first heard about the community television station Catia TV, the subject of my dissertation, at a conference on neoliberalism organized by *Left Turn* magazine at New York University in 2002. Conference organizers invited Blanca Eekhout, a young middle class Venezuelan woman, to speak about Catia TV, the station she founded together with activists from a poor neighborhood. I returned to Venezuela in 2003 to learn more about Catia TV, based in Caracas, and what Blanca Eekhout called the Bolivarian revolution, Hugo Chávez and his allies' increasingly radicalized political project, named after the early nineteenth century liberator of Latin America, Simón Bolívar. My experience watching telenovelas with very poor women in a marginal area of the country fueled questions about the urban poor's experience of media production in the nation's capital.

As a beginning documentary filmmaker, I became interested in how my understanding of the subjects I was documenting deepened as I reviewed my footage frame by frame, attempting to construct a narrative that crystallized particular truths. I wondered what this critical distance might provoke for people from poor neighborhoods in Caracas. How might their efforts to create narratives that were truthful and also marked by their perspective shape not only how they saw other media productions, but how they saw themselves and their surroundings? I set out to do ethnographic research on how people teach, learn, and advocate for community media production as a method to construct a more just society.

My dissertation touches on these issues. Yet, as is common with most long-term projects, what I encountered during the course of my research provoked very different questions than those that I set out to answer. I found that the arena of media production—the editing and screening of Catia TV's programming—was not the principle practice that allowed Catia TV producers to learn about the world and assert themselves as political actors. My focus shifted to consider how upwardly mobile organized poor use media as a tool to enter new political arenas and shape the direction of the state.

The alignments and some of the meanings of basic buildings blocks of everyday experiences among community media producers in Caracas were the reverse of what I knew in the United States. In Venezuela, the commercial media was the harshest critic of the government, while the head of state referenced Gramsci and Marx. Producers at Catia TV repeatedly asked me to explain how American democracy worked. What was this

thing called the “electoral college”? Was it true that Americans did not directly elect their President? I was embarrassed as I fumbled for answers, suddenly aware of my limited grasp of the logistics of American democracy. It made little sense to them that although I was well educated I could not easily articulate the founding principles and procedures of popular sovereignty.

Given how democracy in the United States is often used as the standard measuring stick for the rest of the world (Gledhill 2000: 7-8), I was startled by my own lack of knowledge of elements of its history. At the same time, the major news outlets in the United States and Venezuela argued that democracy was under threat in Venezuela. Chávez was stretching too far into the realm of society, trampling individual freedoms. In the course of this project, it became clear that in order to assess what is taking place in Venezuela it is necessary to also explore the tenets, promises, and possibilities of liberal democracy. The ideal yet everywhere nonexistent separation of state, civil society, and economy—central to political liberalism—called for an investigation of the narratives concerning the political processes within Venezuela and internationally. Was this critique related to actual political practices in Venezuela and elsewhere or was it a way to castigate and foreclose the radical project to expand participation among community media producers?

The outcomes of the Bolivarian revolution are uncertain. Some of the deep tensions that arise around this project are a result of the efforts of social movement activists in Venezuela (a group which includes many government actors) to formulate a

political and cultural logic through which to forge social justice and equality. The premise of liberal democracy at the heart of much of the official government and social movement actor discourse, comes into conflict with activists' attempts to enact change. This conflict is a condition of community media activists' everyday lives. I show how community producers form ideas about freedom, justice, equality, and democracy in the midst of everyday attacks based on global hegemonic discourses and in conversation with historical conceptions of socialism.

Producing knowledge about the social world is an important political instrument. A primary aim of Chávez-aligned cultural producers, such as Catia TV media-makers, was to shape knowledge and representations that encourage people to believe and struggle so that the Bolivarian movement could achieve collective empowerment of the poor. Of course, in addition to reflecting upon it, I am part of this effort to represent the Bolivarian movement. I found this work of representation at times paralyzing. Bloody histories of state violence makes it impossible to approach "the state" and "revolution" innocently. The recent upsurges of political activity in Latin America among groups who align with governments and make claims to revolutionary politics have been dismissed by critics as anachronistic, defunct, and a product of power-crazed demagogues. Scholars consistently point to "independence" and "autonomy" from governments, political parties, labor unions, and other institutional arenas for politics, as the necessary conditions for the progressive development of politics. Yet scholars' own "fetish of autonomy" (Hellman 1992) presents a serious barrier to understanding social movements

who ally with actually existing governments. My hope is also that the social theory with which we understand the world will not constrain the possibilities for imagining different concrete ways to engage in social movement and government.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of community media production, politics, and social change in Caracas, Venezuela. I examine how community producers from the poor neighborhoods of west Caracas use the tools of television production to gain entrance into official state arenas and barrio organizations where they participate in the formation of ideas and representations about "the state" and "the people." In so doing, this dissertation makes analytical contributions to the anthropology of media, theories of the state, and liberalism.

In the past decade, Caracas's community media outlets have expanded from informal groups of activists organizing and documenting everyday life in their impoverished neighborhoods to licensed broadcasters who use state funds to train and equip their neighbors to be television producers. Marginalized for many decades by state practices and mainstream media representations, community activists recognized that media production was a fundamental tool to assert their rights and gain access to shaping local and national politics. Community media making in Caracas has provided barrio-based social actors new possibilities not only to understand the technological process of production behind media representations, but also the socio-political dynamics involved in the production of the state.

Media activists at Catia TV, Caracas's most prominent community television station and the focus of this dissertation, engage the social practice of media production

as a method of critical pedagogy, performative politics, and everyday state formation. In five chapters, I document the changing meanings of the state in the daily life of community media producers and analyze how these political activists negotiate their alignment with the government.

The dissertation, moreover, challenges binary understandings of autonomy and dependence central to liberalism. I show how beliefs and expectations that media groups can and should be autonomous from the state shape Catia TV producers' political practice and outlook. While defying the fixity of the boundary between conceptual realms of state and society, I argue that community producers also draw on normative liberal notions about the independence of society from the state to assert their authority.

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INTRODUCTION

In a national setting where television networks obsess over audience ratings, Catia TV's slogan "Don't Watch Television, Make It!" invites curiosity if not confusion. What's the point of television, if not to watch it? Boldly proclaimed from the rooftop of this community television station (see Figure 1) located in a poor region of Caracas, Venezuela, Catia TV's motto is an important clue to how and why local activists have turned to community television as a form of political activism. The maxim, "Don't Watch Television, Make it!" makes a claim not only about television. It asserts that people, through their force of creation, can shape social action. Demanding production in place of reception, the slogan urges passers-by to represent themselves directly. Despite the fact that Catia TV has a small audience, it has emerged as a national force. Its position raises significant questions about the importance of television production as a social practice.

Over the past decade, Caracas's community media outlets have expanded from informal groups of activists organizing and documenting everyday life in their impoverished neighborhoods to licensed broadcasters who use state funds to train and equip their neighbors to be radio and television producers. Marginalized for many decades by state practices and mainstream media representations, community activists recognized that media production was a fundamental tool to assert their rights and gain access to shaping not only local but national politics. With the rise of anti-neoliberal president Hugo Chávez and his self-described Bolivarian revolution, the government

has invested massive resources from the sale of petroleum into social programs, including community media initiatives. Previously marginal grassroots media groups soon found themselves not only in the spotlight, but in some senses, guiding it.

Figure 1. Catia TV's headquarters, 2007. Billboard reads: "Don't watch Television . . . Make it!" (photo by Naomi Schiller).

Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuelan governments have repeatedly launched ambitious modernizing projects financed by oil profits and international loans, with the aim of remaking the state and its relationship to the population. However, the Chávez government's break with the national business elites shortly after election in 1998 signaled a departure from politics as usual. Declaring in 2005 that Venezuela was on the path to building socialism for the twenty-first century, Chávez and his supporters recast many familiar tropes of revolution and modernist state formation, while at the same time crafting new policies and approaches.

Supported by high oil prices, the government engaged in transformation of state institutions, disengaged from international lending organizations and redistributed wealth to the nation's poorest, creating barrio-based education and healthcare programs, which assert the importance of local participation. My ethnographic research with community television producers for thirteen months over a period of four years, took place during a period of rapid transformation and often, ad hoc shifts in government and grassroots procedure and strategy. Community producers noted, as I observed, that this was a time of possibility, a narrow window to attempt to construct something new.

A botched anti-Chávez *coup d'etat* in 2002, staged with the support of the owners of Venezuela's major commercial media outlets, made the government's need to rethink its communications' approach glaringly obvious. Grassroots media groups and government initiatives converged to create a set of community media practitioners who are state-supported and often trained by actors in state institutions but led by the urban poor and based in poor neighborhoods. Some of these producers, like the founders of Catia TV, had been organizing around media democratization in poor neighborhoods for a decade before Chávez came to power. Others have been encouraged through new funding possibilities and training workshops to engage in media making as a way to participate in their local community and gain new skills. During the same period, the Chávez government developed a new state-run television network called Vive TV with the help of community media activists. Thus, for a range

of social actors, media making has afforded new possibilities not only to understand the technological process of production behind media representations, but also the socio-political dynamics involved in the production of the state.

This dissertation is about how a group of people from poor neighborhoods in Caracas and their allies participate in state-making through the production of television. I analyze Catia TV's practice of production as a method of critical pedagogy, performative politics, and everyday state formation. Catia TV, the focus of my research, is the largest and most prominent barrio-based media outlet in Venezuela. The station began as a film club organized by a group of young men in a poor neighborhood in the aftermath of the 1989 Caracas uprising against the implementation of structural adjustment policies. Catia TV's founders, who in the 1990s positioned their media productions as the expression of the "voice of the voiceless" confronting the elite-controlled commercial media and government, now find themselves in very different positions. Catia TV is not only aligned with but is also supported by the government. On the heels of the legalization of community media in the 1999 Constitution and the 2000 Law of Telecommunications, Catia TV began broadcasting in 2001. At the time of my research in 2007, Catia TV consisted of thirty full time paid staff and around 100 volunteers. The station receives funding from the state oil company, and other state institutions.

"This revolution is too easy," an assistant director of Catia TV once said to me over lunch in the food court of a crowded mall in downtown Caracas. Changes in

Venezuela defy easy categorization. Despite social programs and public works projects, the formation of grassroots-government coalitions that aim to transform everyday understandings of state force, freedom, and democracy have been neither easy nor wholly successful. The participation of barrio-based activists in media production carries much symbolic weight for the Chávez government, whose legitimacy depends on displays of its commitment to the poor and the appearance of social change initiated from below. These new alliances between community media organizations and state institutions provoke questions about how social activists engage the state and negotiate normative ideas about autonomy central to theories of liberal democracy.

The Chávez government's involvement in and funding of what is commonly considered the realm of "civil society" makes the field of community media particularly fraught. A liberal conception of democracy intrinsic to modern state formation in Venezuela maintains that a strong, autonomous, and universally accessible civil society of citizens separate from the state regulates and influences the government to act in the interest of the majority.[1] State-supported voluntary associations, like Catia TV, thus betray what liberal democratic theory maintains is the

[1] Scholars use a related term, "public sphere," to designate the space of democratic debate where voluntary associations of civil society deliberate politics and culture. I follow Gupta (1995) and Navaro-Yashin (2002) in avoiding the term public sphere or its revisions as counter-public to describe Catia TV's participation in politics and the media world of Caracas. The public sphere concept, while extremely useful, seems in this context to instantiate the rigid conceptual divide between state and society that my project seeks to challenge.