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The Arab Spring is a Latin American Winter: TeleSUR's “Ideological Approach” and the Breakaway from the *Al-Jazeera* Network

Massimo Di Ricco

Abstract: The Arab Spring represents a breaking point in the cooperation between the pan-Latin American satellite television TeleSUR and *Al-Jazeera*. Even if in February TeleSUR firmly condemned the closure by Egyptian authorities of the *Al-Jazeera* Cairo offices, NATO military intervention in Libya and the beginning of protests in Syria provoked an important change in TeleSUR coverage of the Arab Spring. This shift coincided with a departure from the *Al-Jazeera* network, sanctioning the possible end of a collaboration that always had strong political connotations. TeleSUR joined the cause of the protesters in the coverage of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, meanwhile it took what we can refer to as an “ideological approach” in the coverage of the uprisings after the international intervention in Libya, implicitly embracing the official media version of the Arab regimes. This stance sparked controversy especially within grassroots Latin American movements, igniting a strong debate mainly visible on the web. At an international level, the undeclared departure from the *Al-Jazeera* network reflects the future split between leftist Latin American governments, who embrace and fund the multi-state TV network TeleSUR, and the forces that will come out from the Arab Spring. Finally, the Arab Spring represented a missing opportunity for TeleSUR to play an important role in global media, and not only for a national or regional audience. Indeed, TeleSUR gave more importance to the political interests of the channel's founders, than in pursuing a balanced information out of ideological interests or geopolitical strategies..

Keywords: TeleSUR, Chavez, Venezuela, Al-Jazeera, Arab Spring, Libya, Syria, Egypt

Introduction

During the first Summit of South American - Arab Countries (ASPA) held in Brasilia in 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez praised *Al-Jazeera* as a model to follow for the new oncoming project of pan-Latin American satellite television TeleSUR (Herrera Navarro, 2008: 142). One year later, US conservative Republicans accused *Al-Jazeera* and TeleSUR to build up a “network of terror” as

consequence of the agreement of cooperation the two channels signed.¹

The Arab Spring represents a breaking point in the cooperation between the two channels, and it well represents the autonomous stance of TeleSUR in covering the recent events in the Middle East. Even when in February TeleSUR firmly condemned the closure of the *Al-Jazeera* Cairo offices by Egyptian authorities, NATO military intervention in Libya and the beginning of protests in Syria provoked an important change in TeleSUR coverage of the Arab Spring. This shift coincided with a departure from the *Al-Jazeera* network, sanctioning the possible end of a collaboration that always had a strong political connotation. TeleSUR joined the cause of the protesters in its wide coverage of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, meanwhile it took what could be defined as an “ideological approach” on the coverage of the uprisings after the international intervention in Libya and the beginning of the protests in Syria, implicitly embracing the official media version of the Arab regimes. Gaddafi's Libya and the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad need to be considered as major allies in the Middle East region of the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez. It is argued here that TeleSUR's stance on the Arab Spring is mainly reflecting the stance and global geo-strategical agenda of the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez and that of so-called Latin American “progressive” governments.

This article aims to analyze TeleSUR's coverage of the Arab Spring through analyzing the presence of its correspondents on the field and the related thematization of the events. This will help better understand TeleSUR's relationship to its Latin American founders. The channel's evolving relationship with *Al-Jazeera* and the political consequences behind the “ideological approach” will be analyzed, which reflects the stance of many Latin American governments on the uprisings in the Middle East. The analysis aims to focus on the shift in TeleSUR's coverage, and it represents an important contribution to the study of so-called “counter-hegemonic” television channels and on the relationship between media and politics in Latin America.

TeleSUR: Origins of a Regional and Geostrategical Project

In 2004 Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, already with certain popularity among the population of the Middle East region for his pro-Palestinian stance and strong anti-imperialism, gave an interview to the Qatari-based *Al-Jazeera* channel. He underlined the importance the pan-Arab satellite channel had as a reference for Venezuela and as a symbol of bravery, dignity and as being the mouthpiece of the truth (Herrera Navarro, 2008). One year later in Brasilia, during the first Summit

¹ This was the declaration made by Republican Congressman from Florida, Connie Mack. See: http://mack.house.gov/index.cfm?p=PressReleases&ContentRecord_id=fddc76f6-fd8c-42fb-aa21-7c2c81588bea&ContentType_id=8c55a72b-64f8-4cba-990c-ec1ed2a9de24&Group_id=b3c463ca-96b6-41ff-94e5-a945437bc123&MonthDisplay=2&YearDisplay=2006 (last access 30.04.2012)

of South American-Arab Countries (ASPA),² President Hugo Chavez publicly announced the ongoing project to create a pan-Latin American satellite television using the recent experience of *Al-Jazeera* as a model.³ Besides launching the channel on a strict Latin American level, the idea, in Chavez' words, was to create a media alliance between Latin American channels and Arab television to enable the different audiences to get to know one another better (Herrera Navarro, 2008).

Few weeks later, at the end of July 2005, the new born satellite channel TeleSUR started broadcasting live for a short period of four hours a day. Later in November, during the *Cumbre de los Pueblos* held in the Argentinian coastal town of Mar de la Plata,⁴ TeleSUR was presented to the jubilant crowd as the new television of the ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas in which actually several Latin American countries participate.⁵

TeleSUR represents the first of this kind of news and information channel in Latin America with a regional and global perspective (Painter, 2008: 45). Even if it is almost completely supported by Venezuelan government oil revenues, it receives funding also from Argentine, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Ecuador,⁶ and its signal reaches most of Latin American states, North America, Europe and parts of Africa and Asia.⁷ TeleSUR claimed since its establishment its commitment to cover local, regional and worldwide stories with a new angle, but also with the attempt to promote the union of Latin American countries in order to face the media monopoly of foreign satellite channels (Gomez Mejia, 2010). Indeed, TeleSUR was originally established to contrast the influence of North American channels in the region and as a Latin American answer to CNN and to *Al-Jazeera* (Kozloff, 2008: 192; Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2007: 57; Arcila, 2005: 45). For this reason, TeleSUR has been considered as one of the several so-called "counter-hegemonic"

² The Summit of South American-Arab Countries (ASPA) is a forum for political and bi-regional cooperation and whose main supporter has been former Brazilian President Lula Inacio Da Silva. It is important to underline that a new summit was scheduled in February 2011 in Peru, but it was indefinitely postponed due to the events occurring in the Middle East.

³ On the establishment and the recent history of *Al-Jazeera* see: Lamloom (2006); Sakr (2007).

⁴ The *Cumbre de los Pueblos* is a platform established in 1998 in order to create an alternative to the *Cumbre de las Americas* (Summit of the Americas) and to start a debate around topics such as neo-liberal politics, poverty, militarization and free trade agreements in the region.

⁵ The ALBA is an international organization whose main objective is to strengthen the relation among different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean which are mainly sharing a similar political ideology, often defined as "leftist" or "progressive". Members of the ALBA are: Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The ALBA was mainly established as a reaction to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA - ALCA in Spanish). It was established as a medium of regional cooperation, which is to be considered as one of the main goals of Chavez during his mandate, and in line with other Latin American regional projects such as UNASUR, MERCOSUR, CELAC or CAN. An account on the establishment of these regional projects can be found in: Chávez Frías (2006).

⁶ The shares in TeleSUR changed in the last years due to the recent involvement of Bolivia and Ecuador in the project. The official share is as follows: Venezuela 46 per cent, Argentine 20 per cent, Cuba 14 per cent, Uruguay 10 per cent, Bolivia 5 per cent and Ecuador 5 per cent.

⁷ It is possible to have a look at the satellite coverage and the worldwide distribution of TeleSUR on its web page. See: <http://www.telesurtv.net/el-canal/cobertura-satelital>; <http://www.telesurtv.net/el-canal/distribucion> (last access 14.03.2012).

television channels which were established in the last decade (Painter, 2007).⁸ Beside the idea of contrasting foreign perceptions of Latin America, it is necessary to look at the channel as a regional and global geopolitical project. Authors of empirical studies on TeleSUR were almost unanimous, even if with partially different results, in highlighting that the channel is part of the foreign policy of the Chavez government and a tool in his international strategy against the United States hegemony in the region (Painter, 2008: 67; Gomez Mejia, 2010). Such a stance has also been remarked by former directors of TeleSUR (Arcila, 2005: 49; Burch, 2007: 227; Painter, 2008: 52). Other authors highlighted that TeleSUR was established as a tool of regional integration, as a communication strategy from the South (Burch, 2007: 228-229; Faivre d'Arcier, 2007: 237), and related to the Latin America political situation, where left-wing governments started different processes of cooperation at the regional level (Painter, 2007: 15-17). Salö, too, defines the double agenda of TeleSUR in relation with Chavez' policies, which is the idea of pan-Latin Americanism on one side, and anti-imperialism on the other side (2007: 51-52). Since Hugo Chavez reached the presidency of Venezuela in 1998, there was a renewed and growing interest in projects of regional integration on one side, with the establishment and strengthening of organizations such as Mercosur, ALBA and Banco del Sur, and a strong anti-imperialism on the other side (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008b: 210-211).⁹ TeleSUR's goal of being a tool for regional integration could be counteracted by the scarce presence of cable and satellite television in Latin America.¹⁰ However, we suggest here that, along with the geopolitical strategies of the Venezuelan government, the goals and objectives of TeleSUR slightly changed since its establishment in 2005, and that the channel is currently pursuing a more important position within the global media space.

To better understand TeleSUR and its "political" interests, it is necessary to frame the establishment of the channel in the historical context of Venezuela and the region. This needs to be related with the fact that left-wing governments having achieved power in Latin America, and along with the situation of the media in Venezuela in particular.¹¹ According to Painter (2007: 6), any analysis of TeleSUR needs to be related with President Chavez' antipathy toward local private media within the country, and with Chavez' attempts to counter the hegemony of the United States. Indeed, both could be related. Chavez blamed local private media

⁸ "Counter-hegemonic" television channels can be defined as having the objective and intention of offering different news content from that of Western media such as CNN and BBC. According to Painter (2007), examples of these channels are Russia Today, Press TV, CCTV-9, France 24 and TeleSUR.

⁹ However, it is necessary to remark that projects of regional integration have always been a priority of different Latin American governments and local actors since these countries' independence. See: Jaramillo (2008); Recondo (2001).

¹⁰ Some authors consider that TeleSUR audience could reach less than half a million people in all Latin America (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008b: 217), while other are registering an audience of between 5 and 6 millions (De Moraes, 2011).

¹¹ Several left-wing governments reached power in Latin America after Hugo Chavez won the presidential elections in Venezuela in 1998: Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Ecuador and Bolivia. Beside these countries, it is necessary to add other two bastions of the left within the region, such as Cuba and Nicaragua.

and the US of being directly involved in the attempted coup he suffered in 2002.¹² The opposition's role and private media in the coup was indeed a turning point in Venezuelan media (Salö, 2007: 16; Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008a: 203-205). Many of the local media outlets during these events took the side of the opposition against the Chavez government and they soon recognized the new government that was elected after the coup (Kozloff, 2005). These considerations help to understand the relation between media and politics in Venezuela and Latin America, and it is an explanation for the declared "political" approach behind TeleSUR.

TeleSUR, Chavez and the Special Ties with the Middle East

Al-Jazeera has always been the first model for the new born pan-Latin America channel and it served to facilitate on a media level the knowledge and exchanges between the two regions.

Such a strong relation was also enhanced by the increased popularity of Hugo Chavez within the Arab world. The reason for such popularity is related to Chavez' strong political stance towards the situation of the Palestinian people or for his fierce condemnation of Israel's military attacks against Arab states, especially after the 2006 war on Lebanon and more recently after Operation *Cast Lead* in Gaza.¹³ For what concerns more specifically the cooperation with *Al-Jazeera*, the first contact between the Venezuelan government and the Al-Thani family of Qatar, the main owners of the pan-Arab channel, took place in the last decade during one of the several visits of Hugo Chavez to Doha and the Gulf region for the meetings of the OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, of which Venezuela is one of the most powerful members from outside the Middle East region.

The relation between *Al-Jazeera* and TeleSUR increased exponentially since the launch of the Venezuelan-backed television channel in 2005. The first agreement of cooperation dates back to 2006 and it had the main objective to exchange media products and start a collaboration in order to facilitate news coverage in both

¹² In April 2002, President Hugo Chavez was detained by some members of the national Army and ousted from the Presidency for almost two days. A combination of popular demonstration along with the support of Chavez guards and soldiers loyal to him restored him in power. The documentary "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (2003) by Kim Barthley and Donnacha O'Briain is focusing on these events.

¹³ Both Venezuelan and Bolivian governments expelled the respective Israeli ambassadors from their countries at the beginning of 2009 and as a consequence of the military operation in Gaza. In March 2009, and as a consequence of the Venezuelan President's stance against Israel's operation in Gaza, the Libyan government titled the stadium of Benina, in Eastern Libya, in honor of Hugo Chavez. Two years later, when rebel forces conquered the town, the name of the stadium was changed to "February's Martyrs". See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/misc/newsid_7928000/7928407.stm; <http://www.eluniversal.com/2011/03/08/hugo-chavez-se-queda-sin-estadio-en-libia.shtml> (last access 14.03.2012).

regions.¹⁴ In exchange, *Al-Jazeera* opened its first Latin American bureau in Caracas, Venezuela's capital. Since then, several other agreements have been signed between the two channels, the last of which was signed in 2010 with the aim of creating a common project for the training of professional journalists.¹⁵

The importance of this relationship, especially from Chavez' perception, is that it represents an alliance between two regions which are both facing different kind of imperialist aggressions. It seems important to underline such public stance and perception displayed by the Venezuelan President because it will be considered as significant in order to understand this specific case study and, as a consequence, TeleSUR's coverage of the Arab Spring.

According to Painter (2008), both television channels could be considered as "counter-hegemonic", and offering a different vision to that of mainstream Western media.¹⁶ Even if both could be defined as state-channels, it is possible to remark an important difference on the relationship between media and politics regarding *Al-Jazeera* and TeleSUR. *Al-Jazeera* was never really associated to a particular ideology or a state; even if owned by the rulers of Qatar, a Gulf state that only in the last years started acquiring political preponderance in the region and showing specific geopolitical interests.¹⁷ On the other side, TeleSUR has always been associated to a specific left-wing ideology of the Venezuelan state and the other "progressive" governments of the region.

TeleSUR has always been very keen to represent the ALBA position concerning the events in the Middle East. TeleSUR's stance in favor of the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian resistance within the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been very well-defined. In line with Venezuelan and ALBA governments, TeleSUR often described Israeli policies or acts of violence toward the Palestinians as mournful events and it often condemned the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.¹⁸

All these considerations and transnational relationships between institutional organizations such as the ALBA and the OPEC, or between media enterprises such

¹⁴ TeleSUR signed in these years several other agreements of cooperation with Russia Today, France 24 and the BBC (mostly in terms of media products exchange).

¹⁵ According to this recent agreement, journalists from TeleSUR would receive a 15-days training in Qatar. See: "*Periodistas de teleSUR se capacitan en cadena de televisión Al Jazeera*", TeleSUR, 29/03/2010 (last access 14.03.2012).

¹⁶ Painter (2008) is mainly referring in his article to *Al-Jazeera English*. *Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Jazeera English* have different directors and bureaus, but the same owner. We consider that they share the same news values and ethos.

¹⁷ It is possible to wonder if the Arab Spring and the new active role of Qatar as political actor in the region changed the internal dynamics within *Al-Jazeera* and the relationship between the channel and their owners.

¹⁸ In 2010, David Segarra, a journalist from TeleSUR joined the activists of the Gaza Flotilla on the Navi Marmara and he was one of the few journalists on the boat who was able to contact live the channel for the coverage of the events. TeleSUR released a documentary on the Gaza Flotilla on the first anniversary of the raid by Israeli forces titled "Fire on the Marmara".

as *Al-Jazeera* and TeleSUR, shed light on the fact that it is difficult to clearly separate the coverage of events of the channel with the political stance of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his administration. Considering this background and the political context, the Arab Spring appears to be a strategic opportunity for the Venezuelan government to defend its geopolitical interests and boost international pretensions.

The Arab Spring and TeleSUR: Egypt and Tunisia

The Arab Spring took TeleSUR, like most of the international media, with surprise. The uprising in Tunisia was mainly covered by Hisham Wannous, the Middle East correspondent for the channel, based in Damascus.¹⁹ TeleSUR clearly supported the cause and claims of the Tunisian population against the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.²⁰ The correspondents in Tunisia and the journalists from the studio used to define the uprising as a “popular revolution”, which permitted to “end the dynasty of Ben Ali”; the protests are described as “popular”, “economically motivated” and being “violently repressed by the police”.²¹ In sharp contrast with what will be for example the coverage in Syria, where foreign correspondents were not allowed to move freely within the country for a long period of time, TeleSUR constantly stressed the “information siege” and the lack of information due to state repression and censorship of the media.²² The correspondent is often wondering if the uprising will reach other Arab regimes, but specifically mentions only the Egypt of Hosni Mubarak.²³

When the uprising in Tunisia ended with the ousting of Ben Ali and the revolutionary spark moved to Egypt, TeleSUR was already on the field in Tahrir Square and fully covering the uprising against the Mubarak regime. When on January 30 Egyptian authorities closed the *Al-Jazeera* Cairo offices, TeleSUR issued a communiqué condemning the Egyptian government in the name of the freedom of expression “of the historically silenced peoples”, considering the act as “a barbaric and unjustifiable massive censorship that violates freedom of

¹⁹ First in 2006, and then in 2007, it was signed a first Memorandum of Understanding between TeleSUR and the Radio and Television of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Memorandum was ratified in 2009 by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, implied the establishment of a TeleSUR bureau in Damascus.

²⁰ It is possible to find TeleSUR's correspondents coverage of the Arab Spring at the channel web page: <http://multimedia.tlsur.net/media/telesur.video.web/telesur-web/#!es/lista/noticia/corresponsales> (last access 14.03.2012). Among the correspondents we will mention in this article, only the reports of Reed Lindsay from Libya are currently not available on the website. However it is still possible to find them on the *Youtube* platform.

²¹ An example in the use of this terminology are the reports of January 7, 10 and 14. On January 10, TeleSUR put the emphasis during the report of Santiago Alba Rico on the police violent repression against the demonstrators. Also on January 24, after the fall of Ben Ali, protests were defined as “popular”.

²² On January 7 TeleSUR speaks of “informative blockade” in Tunisia. On January 10 too, correspondent Santiago Alba Rico highlights the lack of freedom of expression within the country.

²³ It is the case of the report of Hisham Wannous from Damascus on January 15. Wannous did not consider the possibility that similar protests could have spread to Syria.

expression”.²⁴ Such a communiqué explains well, on one side, the general stance of the Latin American channel toward the ongoing Arab Spring and, on the other side, the strict relation and solidarity towards *Al-Jazeera* and its journalists while covering the uprising in Egypt.

While in the case of Tunisia TeleSUR mainly relied on the help of correspondents from other Latin American media or international news agencies,²⁵ in the case of Egypt, TeleSUR quickly sent its own team of journalists to cover the uprising. Indeed in Egypt, since the beginning of the demonstrations on January 25, there were already two teams in the field. TeleSUR sent to Cairo two special correspondents, Rodrigo Hernández and Reed Lindsay.²⁶ One of the TeleSUR crews faced a detention in the first days they landed in Cairo: the journalists were blindfolded, interrogated and released only after several hours.

TeleSUR correspondents well explained the situation in Egypt describing the violent acts of the Egyptian police against the demonstrators and the harassment toward international journalists.²⁷ It is important to mention with regard to the channel's coverage of other protests in the region, that the correspondents on the field and from the studio, did not give real importance to the version presented by the Egyptian government on the demonstrations in the streets.²⁸ TeleSUR correspondents lingered on the abuses of the Egyptian police and on the attempts of Mubarak followers to create tension among the protesters, on the general suffering of the Egyptian people, the widespread use of torture by the security forces and the happiness of the people at the moment Mubarak was ousted from power. The channel broadcasted live the celebration of the fall of Mubarak on February 11 and the jubilant images of the demonstrators from Tahrir Square. In that day the two correspondents defined the defeat of Mubarak as the victory of the people against an oppressive regime.

²⁴ This is the full text of the communiqué sent out by TeleSUR on February 7: “The New Television of the South. C.A. TELESUR strongly protests the closure of the offices in Cairo from our sisterly network AL JAZEERA, and the invalidation of accreditation, expulsions, arrests, harassment and other violence against its journalists. Physical assault, deprivation of personal liberty, destruction and theft of equipment to journalists as well as the blocking of the Internet, social networks and telephone by security agencies, is a barbaric and unjustifiable massive censorship that violates the freedom of expression and the right to information. Telesur is joining the commitment of AL JAZEERA to defend the voice of the historically silenced peoples, and calls for respect for human rights and especially the personal freedom of opinion and free expression and access to information for all who are within Egyptian territory. See: “*teleSUR condena cierre de Al Jazeera y atentados contra libertad de expresión en Egipto*”, TeleSUR, 05/02/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

²⁵ In Tunisia, the channel mostly relied on the support of journalist Santiago Alba Rico, who reported for TeleSUR several times in January 2011.

²⁶ Beside them, there have been also some reports from Ulises Canales, Prensa Latina correspondent in Cairo.

²⁷ On February 2 and February 4 Reed Lindsay explains how he was attacked by Pro-Mubarak demonstrators and the police, who were blocking the work of national and international journalists. On February 9, too, the other correspondent, Rodrigo Hernandez, reports on the attack he faced with his crew in the streets of Cairo.

²⁸ During these days of demonstrations, between January and February, former President Hosni Mubarak and former Vice President Omar Suleiman blamed respectively the Muslim Brotherhood and unnamed foreign and Egyptian elements to provoke the protests in the streets in order to destabilize the country.

In the case of Egypt, the wide and professional coverage of TeleSUR was in line with international media coverage of the events and it was even overtaking the main global media with the presence of two correspondents on the field. *Al-Jazeera* was supported when it came under attack and the international press was defended when attacked or obstructed as happened in Tunisia. However, as we will see, the channel would not put forward the same position in other Arab countries facing demonstrations in the streets.

The Arab Spring and TeleSUR: Libya and Syria

TeleSUR's approach to the coverage of the Arab Spring changed between the end of February and the beginning of March, when the demonstrations against their respective regimes spread to Libya and Syria, which are two important political allies of the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez in the region. As it was previously mentioned, there have been several meetings between Chavez and ALBA members with Gaddafi as well as with Bashar al-Assad in the last years, meanwhile almost no meetings were arranged with other Arab leaders such as Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali or Abdullah Saleh.²⁹ Libya and Syria are strategic allies of Chavez in the region, while the other countries invested by the protests were mainly in the sphere of influence of Western powers.

During most of February the coverage of the Libyan uprising was left to Hisham Wannous, who reported from Syria, and in few other cases to Rodrigo Hernandez, who relocated from Egypt to Morocco. Both Middle East correspondents, not yet on the field in Libya, described the chaos of the situation in the country and they especially highlighted the fact that the rebel forces did not want to reach a deal with Gaddafi.³⁰ Wannous accommodated his own initial coverage of the Libya uprising to the rest of the international media and he was mostly relying on the coverage made by the *Al-Jazeera* network. Wannous described the masses of demonstrators reaching Tripoli and “struggling for the liberation” of Benghazi, and he denounced the excessive use of force against the demonstrators. He also mentioned the indiscriminate killing of many demonstrators, and he also adopted the rumor spread by international media on the existence of more than thousand of dead.³¹

²⁹ TeleSUR didn't cover much the uprisings in Morocco, Jordan, Yemen and Bahrain. Only in the case of Morocco and Jordan the channel sent briefly a correspondent on the field for few days.

³⁰ It is the case of the reports by Hisham Wannous on February 21 and Rodrigo Hernandez on February 23. On February 22 TeleSUR started reporting on the mounting international pressure against Libya and it highlighted US plans to overthrow Gaddafi.

³¹ There were in the reports from Hisham Wannous on February 20 and 22. Wannous mentioned the presence of demonstrations in Tripoli and the dead of almost 200-300 within the country, mentioning that some other sources were saying the dead were more than 1000. Several international media adopted the rumor. See for example CBSnews article on February 23: “*Doctors, diplomats say thousands dead in Libya*” (last access 30.04.2012). Few months later, independent investigations from international human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, denied the existence of such amount of dead in Libya in the days after the uprising started. The organizations blamed international media to exaggerate the news in order to impress

At that point, it seems that TeleSUR still had not a clear stance toward the uprising in Libya, while at the same time the channel was not relying on first hand information. *Al-Jazeera* was still considered as the usual hero in defending the cause of the oppressed, and not a leading actor within the uprising. Before it began spreading the news of a possible international military intervention on the soil of Libya, TeleSUR was still without correspondents on the ground. As just mentioned with the initial coverage of Wannous, the Venezuelan television channel mainly focused on the social problems provoked by the internal strife and the main consequences of the conflict, which was overtly considered the humanitarian crisis of the refugees fleeing from Libya to Tunisia or Egypt.

With the first accusations of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the intention to send a commission of investigation to Libya in order to verify the claims of genocide and deliberate killings of civilians, the position of TeleSUR started to gradually change. First, the channel compared the situation in Libya with the role of Israel in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and in Lebanon in 2006, highlighting the double standard of the international tribunal. TeleSUR started then giving wide coverage to Arab peoples' massive outrage against the position of ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo.

At the same time, TeleSUR was following Egypt's post-Mubarak transitional period describing the ongoing political situation within the country mainly in terms of will and interests of the Egyptian people.³²

Few days after the beginning of the uprising in Libya, and after the first scenes of chaos started spreading around in international media, two correspondents from TeleSUR landed in Libya: Jordan Rodriguez and Reed Lindsay, the latter relocated from Cairo. Jordan Rodriguez made Tripoli his headquarter, while Lindsay started covering the advance of the rebels forces towards Tripoli, choosing his headquarter in Benghazi. They both arrived in Libya between the 24th and the 28th of February, and they described the different situation in Tripoli and in Benghazi. Both correspondents underlined after their arrival in Libya that there were different degrees of freedom of movement journalists faced in the two sides of the country. Around Tripoli, journalists were mainly controlled by the government, and it was difficult to work alone, meanwhile in Benghazi journalists were free to move alone wherever they wanted, without interference from rebel forces or other actors on the field.³³

Jordan Rodriguez started covering the crisis in Libya on February 22 from the airport of Rome, in Italy, where he met Italian workers fleeing from Libya. Among the almost 300 people landing in Rome, he highlighted the statements of one

worldwide public opinion and facilitate NATO military intervention in Libya and the approval of UN Resolution 1973.

³² The use of such terminology is present in almost every report of TeleSUR after February 11, the day Mubarak resigned.

³³ Reed Lindsay explains this in his reports on February 25 and on March 7.

Italian and former Libyan resident saying that the situation in Tripoli was very calm. His coverage was already focusing on unmasking international media manipulation of the situation in Libya. Jordan Rodriguez covered the uprising from Tripoli but he also moved to several other towns around the capital in order to confirm rumors of clashes, fights or ongoing demonstrations. Rodriguez described the situation in Libya as calm, he focused on the normalization of life in Tripoli with people opening shops and going to school, and he put special emphasis on the demonstrations staged on a daily basis in favor of Gaddafi in Tripoli's Green Square.³⁴ He often highlighted how certain Arab or international media wanted to present the situation as chaotic, meanwhile the situation was instead very calm.³⁵ He also described the difficult situation he and his crew were facing to cover the uprising, and he underlined the fact that they were detained by the police two times in few days. After that, Rodriguez almost avoided to highlight that he was moving around Tripoli along with representatives from the Libyan government, which probably means that his movements and coverage of events were mainly directed by the Libyan government. In those days at the beginning of the uprising, the coverage from the Green Square in Tripoli was almost constantly live on TeleSUR, and the demonstrations in support of Gaddafi from the capital's square were the main background images during the telephone connections with the correspondent. Rodriguez only reported about the rebels in a couple of occasion during the whole month while he was staying on Libyan soil.³⁶ Other topics covered in the reports have been the continuous efforts for peace negotiations and the several tribal leaders meetings organized in order to reach an agreement. Jordan Rodriguez directly blamed international media for the situation of conflict in Libya later in April during an interview in TeleSUR's studios in Caracas.³⁷

Reed Lindsay started covering the uprising in the Eastern part of Libya on February 28, explaining the suffering of the people in a similar way he did in Egypt during the violent repression of the protest by the Egyptian police. Among the coverage of several important events of the ongoing conflict, he described the massacre of Abu Salim, the massive demonstrations in the square of Benghazi, the government bombing of Ras Lanuf, and the clashes in Brega. He often highlighted,

³⁴ In almost all of his reports from February 24 to March 22, Jordan Rodriguez mentioned the continuous presence of people in Green Square in support of Gaddafi, while in the studio in Caracas, they used to edit his voice with images of a jubilant crowd coming from the square.

³⁵ On February 23, the day after he landed in Libya, he affirmed that international media manipulation of the events was aiming at a foreign military intervention. On March 1 and March 5 he denounced the manipulation of Arab channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*. Until the end of March he always mentioned in his reports media disinformation on the events in Tripoli. Jordan Rodriguez often quoted "local media" or what the "government of Libya" declared. The reliability of these sources was never questioned in his reports. Only on March 3, as a consequence of a rebel attack in Tripoli, he reported how Libyan authorities were not keen to show international journalists what was really happening.

³⁶ He released an interview with some members of the opposition only in the case of the town of Zawiya.

³⁷ "*Jordan Rodriguez: Medios son los responsables de la situacion en Libia*", TeleSUR, 05/04/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

during his telephone or live-video reports with TeleSUR's studio in Caracas and from his *Twitter*-TeleSUR account, the total absence of direct European and American involvement in the conflict, underlining how the Libyan people instead rejected a foreign intervention.³⁸ He was cautious on the number of dead in the Eastern part of Libya,³⁹ and he defined the demonstrations as “popular rebellion” and “spontaneous”, saying since the beginning that these were peaceful demonstrations and that attacks to military barracks were done with Molotov cocktails and stones. He denies the presence of “terrorists”, as mentioned by local media, and he described the rebels as civilians and defected military forces.⁴⁰ In one of his last reports, on March 12, he denounced that Gaddafi's forces were bombing residential areas, an hospital and a mosque.

Around March 14, and without any apparent explanation, Lindsay suddenly disappeared from the coverage of TeleSUR of the uprising in Libya and his *Twitter*-TeleSUR account stopped being updated too that same day. Few days before Lindsay released a touchy interview to another Venezuelan private radio, describing the suffering of the Libyan people and the brutality of the repression of Gaddafi's regime toward his own people.⁴¹ Jordan Rodriguez continued the coverage of the Libyan uprising from Tripoli until March 22, but TeleSUR did not replace Lindsay in the Eastern part of the country with another correspondent. Lindsay's departure opened the field for a series of speculations on the web concerning the ongoing internal debate within the Venezuelan channel on the coverage of the Libyan uprising.⁴²

In the middle of the Libyan crisis, on March 1, TeleSUR gave wide importance to President Hugo Chavez's stance towards Libya, who rejected an international intervention against the Gaddafi regime, and presented the war in Libya as an imperialist attack.⁴³ Such a stance represented an important turning point in the

³⁸ He mentions this supposed position already few days after arriving in Benghazi, on February 28 and on March 1.

³⁹ This results to be a sensitive topic considering that international media exaggerated the number of dead in order to provoke an international intervention. On February 26, Lindsay reported hundreds of dead, mentioning that some human rights organizations were raising the number to at least a thousand. Few days later, on March 4, in a special report on the fight for Benghazi he mentioned the dead of 220 people and the presence of more than 500 wounded.

⁴⁰ He denied the presence of terrorists and foreign troops on the ground on March 2 and March 4.

⁴¹ Beside the interview he released to this Venezuelan private radio, there are no more marks of the presence of Lindsay in the coverage of the Arab Spring. Lindsay is actually based in Cairo and he was covering for TeleSUR the uprising in Egypt. Before the uprisings he reported from Cairo the Parliamentary Election of November 2010. After his “disappearance” from TeleSUR, Lindsay then continued the coverage of the Libyan uprising with less frequency on the television news and documentary network The Real News Network.

⁴² Al Giordano, editor in chief of the online magazine *NarcoNews*, speculates that Lindsay's coverage of the uprising in Libya provoked a strong debate within the journalists of TeleSUR. See: “Why is TeleSUR a Flop? Look No Farther than Its Libya Coverage”, *NarcoNews*, 23/02/2011: <http://narcosphere.narconews.com/thefield/4324/why-telesur-flop-look-no-farther-its-libya-coverage> (last access 14.03.2012).

⁴³ On February 25, Chavez clearly expressed his support for the Libyan government. Chavez hoped for a peace solution to the crisis, rejected any military interventions and blamed media manipulation. As we have seen, these topics have been also the focus of the coverage of correspondents on the field in Libya.

coverage, that needs to be considered along with the stance of the International Criminal Court and the possible foreign military intervention through the Security Council of the United Nations. Foreign powers' interests in overthrowing Gaddafi were now more evident, and it is possible to argue that such evolution of the events made it easier for TeleSUR to assume a clear stance against it, considering that anti-imperialism represented one of the main pillars of the channel.

On the other side of the Middle East, TeleSUR's correspondent Hisham Wannous has been one of the few international journalists who was able to work within Syria during the uprising. In his coverage of the Syrian protests he was often quoting the state-controlled news agency Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), and considered local media as a main source of information. In Caracas too: while presenting the coverage of the national press on the situation in Syria, they used to rely mainly on the Syrian newspaper Al-Ba'th, mouthpiece of the party which retains the power in Syria since 1963 and is very much close to the stance of Bashar Al-Assad's regime.

Wannous gave wide importance to the demonstrations in support of President al-Assad staged in the capital Damascus, and he shared the stance of the government, explaining the demonstrations, the killings, and the violence in terms of military operations of foreign armed gangs.⁴⁴ Wannous in many occasions blamed foreign, Arab and international media for spreading false information on the situation within the country. During his live-video reports with Caracas, Wannous focused on the siege staged by the followers of Assad's regime to the *Al-Jazeera* bureau in Damascus, and he reported the accusations from the Syrian government to the Qatari channel of being an actor directly involved in the conflict, and wants to stir up the protests in the country.⁴⁵ Wannous presented Syria as the main country supporting the resistance against Israel in the region and he blamed foreign power for destabilizing Assad's governments due to his anti-imperialist position.⁴⁶

TeleSUR's correspondent in Damascus continued denying in the following months rumors of clashes going on in other parts of the country, and describing instead the situation as very calm all around Syria, adding that the martyrs were mainly members of the National Army, and describing the demonstrators as “vandals” and “terrorists infiltrated in the demonstrations” who were attacking other citizens and soldiers.⁴⁷ During these first months of the protests in Syria, images were mainly taken from the demonstrations staged in favor of President Bashar al-Assad and

⁴⁴ Wannous used to refer to the presence of “foreign hands destabilizing the country”, “external agents”, “elements infiltrating”. In one case, on April 12, he accused former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and former Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam to finance and support the armed groups. On April 18, Wannous directly incriminated the United States of stirring up the protests in order to facilitate foreign military intervention.

⁴⁵ “*Siria: Grupos opositores han recibido ordenes de incrementar tension en el pais*”, TeleSUR, 18/04/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

⁴⁶ Such a position was expressed in the report of March 26.

⁴⁷ “*Al menos 120 policas muertos en Siria tras enfrentamientos con grupos armados*”, TeleSUR, 06/06/2011; “*Al menos 10 muertos dejan ataques de infiltrados contra manifestaciones siria*”, TeleSUR, 06/05/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

mixed with ones of daily life in the *souq* of Damascus. Opposition demonstrations were not completely obscured, but in most of the case Wannous used to define them as “limited and small” in comparison with the amount of people within the country. These were described as not directly against the government, but asking for some reforms. Indeed, the reforms promoted by Bashar al-Assad have been a central point in the coverage of Wannous, who often remarked how Syrian people were happy and grateful to the President for the reforms granted. Manipulation of international media with the aim of preparing a military intervention was another main subject reported by Wannous, and in a couple of occasions he covered the attempts of Syrian citizens to prepare legal petitions against international media.⁴⁸

While Wannous remained the only correspondent from TeleSUR in Syria, not having been replaced or supported by any other colleague for a long time, several other TeleSUR correspondents reached the capital of Libya, Tripoli. Jordan Rodriguez was replaced by Rolando Segura, who in the following months focused his reports on the situation in Libya on different but recurring topics: NATO bombing and the targeting of civil population, consequences of the bombardment in the Libyan infrastructures, delaying classes in universities, normalization of life in Tripoli, attempts of peace agreements.⁴⁹ Libyan people were strictly identified with the ones loyal to Gaddafi, who are resisting against the “Empire”.⁵⁰ In the following months, the rebels were mainly defined as “armed opposition” or “seditious groups”. As a result of the NATO intervention in Libya, TeleSUR completely blacked out on the other actors involved in the conflict.

When in August the National Transitional Council (NTC) forces started the siege of Tripoli, TeleSUR correspondents in Libya described and showed the images of the rebels reaching the main square of the capital, but they defined Gaddafi’s loyalists as the “revolutionary population” resisting against the attempt to defeat the real revolutionary forces of Gaddafi. Gaddafi is still defined in TeleSUR as the man of the nationalist revolution who “managed to free the Libyan from the Western powers”.⁵¹ TeleSUR reported in its coverage the siege of Tripoli by rebel forces loyal to the NTC, but it continued to show images of Gaddafi followers staging demonstrations around the capital. In the evolution of the events and the fall of Tripoli, Wannous alerted TeleSUR’s audience of Syria being the next possible target of the Western imperialist intervention in the region. He then added that spontaneous demonstrations went on in the streets of the capital Damascus to reject such a possible scenario.

⁴⁸ He covered this attempt by Syrian citizens on July 27, on May 10 and on August 1.

⁴⁹ Rolando Segura remained in Libya until the siege of Tripoli on August 21. He was then replaced by Diego Marin, who started his reports from Tripoli on August 29. In Caracas, the channel at that time used to introduce the conflict going on in Libya with the title “Attack on Libya” or “Aggression to Libya”.

⁵⁰ A good example on the use of such terminology is in the report of April 11.

⁵¹ “*Rebeldes libios toman Plaza Verde de Tripoli*”, TeleSUR, 21/08/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

It is important to add that in the case of Libya and Syria most of the events that were occurring within these countries have been fully covered, but TeleSUR mainly presented only the position of the governments or local media on these same events without questioning their reliability.

TeleSUR's "Ideological Approach" toward the Arab Spring

On October 2010 Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez started a two-weeks worldwide tour in order to sign new political and economic agreements and strengthen bilateral relations with partner countries. Among others, he visited Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Iran, Syria, Libya and Portugal, before flying back to Caracas. The objective of the last Chavez world tour was in principle to strengthen economic bilateral relations between the countries, but also to consolidate the cooperation on a political level and to create a block of countries opposed to Western powers. It is possible to argue that while Chavez main goal at the beginning of his Presidential mandate was to achieve a regional Latin American integration, in the last few years he relocated himself and Venezuela on a more international level by strengthening new political alliances with the main goal of countering "el imperio" on a global scale.⁵²

The bilateral relations between Venezuela and the countries which faced an internal uprising during the Arab Spring, such as Libya and Syria, have been improving constantly since Chavez reached power in 1998. Chavez visited Tripoli and Damascus several times in the last few years, and in lesser occasions Bashar al-Assad and Gaddafi visited Caracas. Among the several economic contracts of cooperation signed during Chavez recent visit to Libya, the sixth in his Presidential mandate, one of them aimed to establish a TeleSUR bureau in Tripoli and set up a satellite signal for the reception of TeleSUR in Libya.⁵³ Along with the already good relations and cooperation agreements with *Al-Jazeera*, this seemed to be another important step for Chavez to spread his message within the region and also to spread the stance of the Latin American Bolivarian governments in the Middle East.

At the end of January, looking at the political crisis in Egypt, Chavez expressed his admiration for the Egyptian people and he warned the United States of attempts to

⁵² Another Latin American country, Brazil, has been active in the last years in carving out a place on the international level. Brazil allied with South Africa, India and Turkey on different occasions, sharing a common stance on issues such as the Arab Spring and nuclear energy in Iran.

⁵³ During Chavez recent visit in Libya at the end of October 2010, Libyan and Venezuelan authorities signed ten bilateral agreements. One year before Chavez and Gaddafi signed eight agreements of bilateral cooperation while the former Libyan leader was participating at the II Meeting of South American and Africa States (ASA) at the Venezuelan Margarita Island. During this event in 2009 Chavez gifted Gaddafi with a replica of the sword of Bolivar, Venezuelan national hero. See: "Chávez: "Lo que es Bolívar para nosotros es Gaddafi para el pueblo libio", *Elpais*, 30/09/2009: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Chavez/Bolivar/Gaddafi/pueblo/libio/elpepuint/20090930elpepint_1/Tes (last access 14.03.2012).

interfere in a sovereign country.⁵⁴ On February he clearly expressed his support for the Libyan government, but he mainly focused on media disinformation, the rejection of foreign intervention and main interests in Libyan oil. With the ongoing NATO military operations in Libya, Chavez called for a ceasefire and for a political solution to the crisis. Later in August, Chavez clearly supported Gaddafi and excluded the possibility to officially recognize the NTC government, whom he considered simple “terrorists”.⁵⁵ The topics presented by TeleSUR during the coverage of the Arab Spring have been very similar to the position expressed by President Hugo Chavez, especially on the uprisings in Libya and Syria: imperialist intervention, mainstream media disinformation, the madness of the “Empire”, the attempts to find peaceful solutions.⁵⁶

It was evident that TeleSUR had difficulties to establish certain distance between the political stance of its main founder, the Venezuelan government, and the independent coverage of the events.⁵⁷ What appears to be even more obvious is that in covering the Arab Spring the pan-Latin American channel decided to firmly stand for a political and ideological approach, taking the side of those regimes allied with the Venezuelan government and the countries belonging to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA).⁵⁸ At the beginning of the uprisings, when its outcomes and main actors were still not clear, TeleSUR managed to cover the events with an independent stance and with a very professional presence on the field with several correspondents. However, the situation changed when red-lines were touched. The main red-line was what TeleSUR correspondents on the field and journalists from the studio in Caracas defined as the “imperialist attacks and interests in the region” and “international media manipulation”. Along with that came the fact that two close allies of the Bolivarian government of Venezuela, Libya and Syria, found themselves confronted with internal protests. Indeed, a considerable split in the position of TeleSUR on the protests in the region needs to be related to these two main events. In the first case, criticism of NATO and foreign intervention took the priority over the possible reasons behind the protests. The possible foreign intervention completely obscured any possible criticism of the allied governments of Venezuela, such as Syria and Libya. As mentioned in other studies on the channel, TeleSUR did not falsify the news (Painter, 2007: 36), but it just presented them in different ways in order to be

⁵⁴ The same day, on January 30, Chavez expressed his concern for the situation in the Arab region and that he had already talked with Gaddafi and Assad, who were defined as “socialists” and “revolutionaries”.

⁵⁵ These declarations of Chavez were released on August 1 and on August 23.

⁵⁶ On several occasions, correspondents from Tripoli reported of tribal leaders meetings to achieve a peaceful solution.

⁵⁷ In a recent interview with Nikolas Kozloff in 2007, TeleSUR's former director Aram Aharonian denied that its television channel was a pro-Chávez mouthpiece (Kozloff, 2008: 197).

⁵⁸ On September 9, 2011, the Foreign Ministers of the ALBA countries released a declaration after their meeting in Caracas where they condemned the NATO military intervention in Libya, the violation of UN Resolution 1973, they condemned international media for supporting the military attack on Libya and they warned of a possible similar international intervention in Syria. See: “*Declaración especial de los ministros de Relaciones Exteriores del ALBA-TCP sobre la situación de Libia y Siria*”, TeleSUR, 10/09/2011 (last access 14.03.2012).

closer to Venezuelan geopolitical interests. NATO bombardment or foreign conspiracy became the main criteria for analyzing the Arab Spring in these two countries, while in the case of Egypt, Tunisia and other countries of the region, foreign elements were not taken into consideration.⁵⁹ The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were considered instead as legitimate.⁶⁰ It is argued here, that the latter were not geostrategic allies, while in the cases of Syria and Libya it was a mix of anti-imperialism and geopolitical strategy, where it is difficult to define the limits and predominance of one over the other.⁶¹

In confronting the imperialist threat, they stopped reporting on the reasons behind the peoples' protest and sided instead with the position of the allied political regime. In doing so TeleSUR started criticizing in an almost veiled manner its main partner in the region: *Al-Jazeera*. Such a stance represented a detachment from the Arab channel which has been the main source of emulation for TeleSUR at the time it was established in 2005. The resignation of Al Jazeera's Beirut bureau chief Ghassan Ben Jeddo provoked in Venezuela a controversial debate on the actual position of the pan-Arab Qatari channel concerning the Middle East protests. The head of Venezolana de Television (VTV), the state television close to Chavez and TeleSUR's position, accused *Al-Jazeera* of being an actor fully involved in the ongoing conflicts and hiding behind Qatar's agenda in the region.

TeleSUR's stance toward the uprisings, as a consequence of the Venezuelan position on the political situation in the region, had several implications on the internal and international level, too. On one side, it provoked a strong debate in whole Latin America at the level of social media and leftist Latin American groups over the necessity to differentiate between what Venezuela and TeleSUR defined as "the imperialist attack" and the righteous claims of the people who spontaneously started the uprisings against autocratic regimes.⁶² As analyzed by Castro, in Latin America there was much more a united stance against a military intervention, than for the support of autocratic regimes (2011: 310). On the other side, TeleSUR's stance, which reflects the political and ideological approach of the Bolivarian states, implicitly provoked still unknown consequences at international level in terms of bilateral relations among those several Latin American governments who

⁵⁹ The few reports on the uprisings in Bahrain or Yemen did not take into consideration the possible interests of Saudi Arabia or the United States in controlling the uprisings or helping the repression of the protests.

⁶⁰ The Egyptian and Tunisian regimes always had strong relation with Western powers. Hugo Chavez never met with former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, but Venezuela and Egypt established in May 2010 a first Joint Commission to evaluate possible future agreements of bilateral cooperation and they signed five agreements in matters of education, commerce, culture and education. The second meeting was due in 2011 but it was canceled.

⁶¹ However, it is necessary to remember that Chavez and his allies in Latin American are particularly at odds with military intervention, considering the continuous and historical attempts by the United States to mingle in Latin America affairs or for being involved in several coups d'état (Castro, 2011: 310).

⁶² We agree with Castro (2011) on the presence of several "left" in Latin America and that also the position on the situation in Libya helped making their differences clearer. Support for Gaddafi mainly came from those countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador which had strategic and political reasons to support him.

embrace and fund the multi-state TV network TeleSUR, and which were cautious in supporting the claims of the population during the Arab Spring, and the forces that will come out from the mainly popular uprisings of the Middle East.

Missing a Global Opportunity and Breaking Away from Al-Jazeera: Where is TeleSUR Going?

The coverage of the Arab Spring symbolizes a missed opportunity for TeleSUR to become an important reference in global media, and not only for a national or regional audience. According to Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, major events can help a news network becoming a crucial referent within the struggle for power in media space (2008b: 217). Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando considered in 2008 that TeleSUR had yet to face such events and they were wondering on a possible future event which could happen in Latin America. Instead, such an event appeared on the international level. Considering Chavez' evolving presence in the last years on a more global level, and considering TeleSUR as a political project of Chavez in order to achieve an international presence (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008b: 212), we can affirm that the Arab Spring represented the perfect occasion to get an important place on a global level. From this perspective, the Arab Spring represented for TeleSUR what the Gulf War in 1991 represented for CNN in terms of its consolidation as a global broadcaster. The Arab Spring touched directly two main pillars of the pan-Latin American channel and the Venezuelan government: the direct involvement of close allies in the events, such as Libya and Syria, and the presence of "Empire" interests. TeleSUR gave more importance to the political interests of the channel's founders, than in pursuing a balanced information out of ideological interests or geopolitical strategies.

The presence of these two conditions had a controversial effect and was the basis of the split in TeleSUR's coverage of the protests. This was a drastic change. TeleSUR offered a professional coverage especially in the case of Egypt and in part also in the case of Libya, where they had been the first crew of international media landing on Libyan soil. But while in the case of Egypt and Tunisia they were expressing the voice of the people, in the case of Syria and Libya the voice heard was that of friendly governments. At this point the channel mostly focused on denouncing international media manipulation. In these attacks to international media, a direct and indirect target was *Al-Jazeera*, a partner and role model for TeleSUR. Now, the alliance between the two Arab and Latin American networks appears to loose its grip.

TeleSUR's stance toward the Arab Spring implicitly helped consolidating the channel as a media outlet close to the political position of the Bolivarian Latin American governments, but especially with the Venezuelan administration. The channel will face more and more difficulties in managing to differentiate between the coverage of news, the stance of its founders and their political or ideological

agenda. The coverage of the Arab Spring made obvious that TeleSUR is step by step walking away from being based on balanced news and the values of impartiality.⁶³

TeleSUR, Chavez and Venezuela are strongly connected in the imaginary of the people, in Latin America and in the rest of the world. Chavez' popularity in the whole Middle East region supposedly will decrease after the Arab Spring. TeleSUR's coverage has damaged the channel's reputation also in the Arab world (Castro, 2011: 308). That seems to represent the end of a honeymoon between the Arab population, TeleSUR and Hugo Chavez, along with cooling down the political relationship between the channel and *Al-Jazeera*, that lasted only six years. TeleSUR correctly blamed mainstream media for disinformation and for manipulating information, especially in the case of Libya, and it was probably the first in doing so, but the ideological approach definitely damaged its credibility as a global media not only in Latin America but mainly on the international stage. TeleSUR's coverage followed *realpolitik* reasons and the strict antinomy of imperialist vs. ant-imperialist. The latter is a perspective that Arab protestors had already overcome, but which the Venezuelan-based channel TeleSUR still aims to reproduce by not managing to differentiate between legitimate demands of the population and foreign interests.

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⁶³ Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando suggest that, since its establishment, TeleSUR wanted to move away from the anglosaxon traditional model which implies impartiality and objectivity in the coverage of the news (2007). This is very different from the stance of *Al-Jazeera* which still consider impartiality as a main pillar (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008b: 223; Sakr, 2007)

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- Reed Lindsay TeleSUR Twitter Account: [http://twitter.com/#!/reedteleSUR](#)
- Jordan Rodriguez TeleSUR Twitter Account: [http://twitter.com/#!/jordanteleSUR](#)

Author Massimo Di Ricco is lecturer at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogota, Department of History. He has a Ph.D. in Mediterranean Cultural Studies from the University of Tarragona (Spain). Areas of research interest include the relation between individual and communities in the Middle East, history and cultural production, and the role of grassroots organizations and social movements, and the relationship between the Middle East and Latin America. He spent several years in Beirut and in Cairo, working also for several media. His most recent publications include “Secular Identity and Sectarian Games: Sheikh Naboulsi’s Fatwa and the Quest for a Lebanese Extended Citizenship” for the journal *Ethnopolitics*, along with a chapter in the book “Family Law in Islam: Divorce, Marriage and Women in the Muslim World” edited by Maaike Voorhoeve for I.B. Tauris.
Email: massimodiricco@gmail.com