Framing the Revolution: Circulation and Meaning of *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*

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This article analyzes the circulation and contingent social production of meaning of *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, the documentary film that chronicles the 2002 coup d’etat in Venezuela and its dramatic reversal. Drawing on interviews and observations with distributors and activists in New York City in 2004 and ethnographic fieldwork with community media producers in Caracas between 2003 and 2007, I explore how social actors contribute to the ongoing production of *Revolution*’s impact. In this multisited account, I argue that the work of activists and distributors to frame the importance and authenticity of *Revolution* has been vital in molding debates and facilitating public discussion not only about Venezuelan politics but also about the role of media producers in shaping truth. This article draws attention to the ironies and complexities that filmmakers, distributors, and activists face when they use documentary film to challenge mediated depictions of the historical world.

In the documentary film *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, Irish filmmakers Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Briain (2002) challenged the widely accepted narrative about what provoked the 2002 coup d’etat attempt against Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. On the day of the coup, April 11, 2002, Venezuela’s private news media broadcast images of
several Chávez supporters firing their guns at something beyond the frame of the film together with footage of wounded and murdered anti-Chávez protesters. Media outlets juxtaposed two segments of footage filmed from different perspectives and moments in time to produce what appeared to be visible evidence of violence on the part of Chávez supporters against unarmed opposition protestors. Based on these images, the private news media together with leaders of Chávez’s opposition blamed Chávez and his supporters for the violence that left 19 people dead in the streets of Caracas on the day of the coup. The footage, repetitively broadcast in Venezuela around the world, was used to justify the removal of Chávez from government. Revolution, which entered global circulation 1 year after the coup, recontextualizes the now-infamous footage of Chávez supporters firing their weapons. Using additional footage not broadcast on the day of the coup, Revolution’s narrator asserts that rather than shooting at anti-Chávez demonstrators, the pro-Chávez gunmen were shooting in self-defense against snipers and opposition-aligned police.

In this pivotal shooting scene and others throughout the film, Revolution argues that the Venezuelan commercial media constructed an inaccurate representation of historical events through the manipulation of representations in order to justify the coup. Although during the coup period much of the commercial media dismissed the people from shantytowns who demonstrated to demand Chávez’s return as an irrational and uncivilized mob or simply excluded them altogether from media coverage (Duno Gottberg, 2004) Revolution presents a radically different image of Venezuela’s poor. With vivid images of the mass mobilization of Chávez’s supporters to demand the president’s return, Revolution portrays Caracas’s poor as the historical protagonist determining the revolutionary direction of Venezuela. Revolution tells a gripping story about how the poor—who stand in as “the people” of Venezuela—had the collective power to shape political outcomes. Revolution challenges what Luis Duno Gottberg called the “mediatic mediation” of the social body of Venezuela, the mass media’s intervention into creating social belonging and recognition through representation and exclusion on television and in print media (p. 15).

Financed by the Irish Film Board and an Irish public service broadcaster, with postproduction funding from the British Broadcasting Company, a slightly shorter version of Revolution was first broadcast on television in Venezuela, Ireland, Canada, Japan, Germany, England, Holland, Finland, and Denmark in 2003 before the film circulated at film festivals and was distributed theatrically in the United States in 2004 (Stoneman, 2008, p. 2). In the United States, Revolution grossed more than $200,000, a significant sum for a documentary but not enough to yield a net profit for the theatrical run (Stoneman, 2008, p. 35). Although Revolution forms only part of a
complex panoply of forces shaping how people around the world and particularly in Venezuela understand the coup and its turnaround, both critics and advocates of the film agreed that *Revolution*, and the debate it sparked, constituted a remarkably important contribution to shaping how people, both in Venezuela and beyond, understood the 2002 coup. One Caracas-based journalist, who staunchly criticized the film as a fabrication, argued that the film’s narrative became the prevailing interpretation of the 2002 coup and its reversal (Gunson, 2004). In his analysis of the circulation and controversy around *Revolution*, Rod Stoneman, the film’s executive producer, asserted, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the screening and discussion of this single film had a significant effect on that pivotal moment of Venezuelan politics (p. 3). This article explores distributors and activists’ efforts to grant *Revolution* a wide reach and shape its reception.

*Revolution* reveals that the framing of an image is vitally important to how it will be understood. Yet the filmmakers’ efforts to encourage audiences to question the interests of the producers of media and the manipulation of visual evidence cuts both ways. Bartley and O’Briain inadvertently raise pressing questions about their own role as documentary filmmakers in contextualizing images for particular ends. As one film reviewer in the *Chicago Tribune* asserted,

Most powerful is the film’s examination of how images can be shaped to create political momentum—how truth can be manipulated and re-edited for propaganda purposes. It’s done so well, we’re left to wonder how the directors, obvious admirers of Chávez, choose to present their documentary (Elder, 2003).

After the film first screened on Venezuelan public television, groups in the political opposition to President Chávez began to organize a well-coordinated campaign against the film, challenging *Revolution*’s explanation of who was responsible for the violence and reversal of the coup. The contestation concerning the footage of Chávez supporters shooting their guns beyond the frame of the film serves as a metonym for the larger debates that characterize the broader “media world” of the documentary (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002). Those who support and oppose *Revolution*’s narrative contradictorily depend on *and* undermine the indexical relationship between image and reality. *Revolution* and the debates concerning its veracity thus highlight the ironies and complexities of using media to question media’s truth claims.

In this article, I argue that whether audiences understood *Revolution* as an important corrective for manipulative commercial media or as biased propaganda depended substantially on the discursive “frames” distributors and activists created around the film (Goffman, 1974). Exhibitors and activists worked to assemble audiences or publics with particular political perspectives and life conditions that shaped how viewers received the film.
Although compelling, *Revolution*'s narrative required the work of distributors, exhibitors, activists, and media makers to bolster its authority. Like Bartley and O’Briain, the social actors who produce *Revolution*'s media world attempt to provide a clear and transparent interpretation of issues and events that are highly contested.

At stake, therefore, was a well-worn question regarding documentary’s complex pledge to audiences that “what we will see and hear is about something real and true—and, frequently, important for us to understand” (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 56). Filmmakers must, Patricia Aufderheide notes, “use a wide range of artifice in order to assert that claim [of importance and veracity], and many of them do their work in a commercial or semicommercial environment that constrains their choices” (p. 56). How media can be used to represent and construct truth and the impacts of political economy on mediation are questions that lie at the heart of politics in many places, but have become particularly pressing in the context of Venezuela. Underlying discussions about *Revolution*, whether framed by supporters or critics, were questions concerning how media organizations and producers do not simply report the truth, but rather play a fundamental role in producing truth.

In what follows, my focus is not *Revolution* itself but “off-screen” (Ginsburg, 2003) in the world of theatrical and activist film screenings of the documentary in New York City and in community television studios of Caracas, Venezuela. In this multisited account, I argue that the work of activists and distributors to frame the importance and authenticity of *Revolution* is central to whether the film will be understood as a corrective to media manipulation or as exemplary instance of how images can be made to lie. I trace the varied circulation and contingent social production of the significance of *Revolution* over the course of 5 years between 2003 and 2007. The shifting political context in which activists exhibit *Revolution*, including the start of the United States war on Iraq and the Chávez government’s controversial decision to revoke the broadcast license of a commercial television station in 2007, influences how people frame and mobilize *Revolution* in New York City and Caracas.

Scholars have observed the importance of distributors, exhibitors, and activists in constructing the media worlds around documentary films in order to grant or undermine meaning and legitimacy (Burton-Carvajal, 2000; Himpele, 1996, 2007; Lee & LiPuma, 2002; Moran, 1999). To trace the interpretive interventions in *Revolution*'s media world, I build on scholarship that emphasizes the work of film distribution as a form of “media agency” (Himpele, 1996). In working to move *Revolution* to certain screening venues, professional, activist, and state distributors produce discursive fields that grant the film meaning. Social actors who circulate *Revolution* depend on and presuppose the existence of particular “interpretive communities, with

In the first part of this article, I draw from interviews I conducted in 2004 with Revolution’s distributor, a programmer at a prominent art film theater in New York City, the Venezuelan Consul General in New York, and several activists I first met at Revolution screenings in New York City. I explore how social actors in this U.S. city produce or dismantle Revolution’s authority to advance their claims about reality in Venezuela. I also draw from reviews of the film published in the United States. In the second section, I draw on observations made during 13 months of ethnographic research over a period of 5 years (2003–2007) with Catia TV, Caracas’s most prominent community television station. During this period, these pro-Chávez media activists continuously contextualize Revolution in ways that highlight the stakes and possibilities of the grassroots organizing, popular power, and participatory democracy in Venezuela. Revolution forms an important part of mediated memories of the coup, even for those who directly participated in the events depicted in the film. Community media makers assemble new filmic texts by reusing footage from Revolution and use the film as a teaching tool to understand how filmic narrative is constructed.

This multisided account draws attention to the importance of context in shaping what kind of work activists and distributors perform. Anthropologists who conduct multisited fieldwork recognize that although depth of engagement in multiple fields may be uneven when a researcher studies several sites, “following a thing” such as Revolution nevertheless highlights the contingency of meaning (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995). Following this film to disparate locations including an art film house, an activist meeting ground, a stately theater, and a community television station brings added insight into how an image must be authenticated according to its viewing context. This multisided account, moreover, draws attention to how Caracas and New York are interconnected sites of struggle over meaning and political futures. Before turning to examine how activists and distributors shaped the conditions of Revolution’s reception in New York City, I provide a brief background of the political conditions that surrounded Revolution’s production and the charges made against the film.

SETTING THE STAGE

The 2002 Venezuelan coup d’état and its reversal was the fastest overthrow and return of a government ever documented (Coronil, 2005). Irish
filmmakers Bartley and O’Briain recorded the unprecedented turn of events from within the presidential palace, as the coup was unfolding. The filmmakers arrived in Venezuela 7 months before the April 2002 coup. “We wanted to get beyond the layers of myth and rumor that surrounded this larger than life Latin American figure,” the male narrator—one of the filmmakers—explains in an Irish accented English at the opening of the English language version of the film. Bartley and O’Briain assert they were intrigued by Chávez’s anti-corporate globalization discourse and his Bolivarian movement, which takes its name from the famed 19th-century “liberator” of Latin America, Simón Bolivar. With two DV cameras, they set out to make what the film’s executive producer characterized as a “broadly supportive” documentary about Hugo Chávez (Stoneman, 2008, p. 13). The Venezuelan government granted Bartley and O’Briain privileged access to Chávez. Their project of making an intimate and generally favorable documentary portrait of Chávez, which no doubt helped secure their privileged access to the president, was interrupted when the president was briefly ousted from power in what the filmmakers would later call “the world’s first media coup.”

First elected in 1998, Chávez, like many Venezuelan presidents before him, promised to challenge Venezuela’s traditional political elite, redistribute wealth, and improve the quality of life for Venezuela’s poor, who despite the country’s vast oil wealth make up the vast majority of the country’s 26 million people. The commercial media’s support had been vital to Chávez’s first electoral victory in 1998, but between 1999 and 2001, Chávez radicalized his administration and consequently alienated that base. After the collapse of Venezuela’s traditional political parties in the 1990s, private commercial media outlets not only provided a terrain for political debate contained within the parameters of elite discourse, media owners and spokespeople emerged as key politicians who shaped political debates. At the time of the 2002 coup, private commercial television broadcasting on the open-air electromagnetic spectrum was monopolized by two large corporations, the Cisneros group (Venevisión) and the IBC group of Phelps-Granier (Radio Caracas Televisión [RCTV]).

From early on in his presidency, a growing opposition accused Chávez of concentrating power and being hostile to the business community, the media, the United States, and the Catholic Church. In November 2001, the Chávez government passed a controversial package of 49 “special laws” that asserted greater state ownership over key sectors of the economy.

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1This group of corporations continue (as of 2009) to have a major presence on radio and the national press, although the Chávez government has greatly expanded its communications capacity since 2002. The government did not renew the terrestrial broadcast license of RCTV in 2007, as I discuss next.
Chávez began to aggressively reorganize Venezuela’s oil company Petróleos de Venezuela, violating what many critics of the president felt was the “meritocracy” that ordered the state company. Fernando Coronil (2005) noted, “Opponents of Chávez, at the beginning of 2001, in great measure thanks to their control of the media, established as common place that the fact that it was impossible to live in a country dominated by chavismo” (p. 92). In the months leading up to the coup, several dissident military officials publicly expressed their lack of confidence in Chávez’s commitment to democratic procedures. Chávez’s authoritarian leadership style alienated sectors of the population. Yet, his Afro-indigenous roots, colloquial manner of speaking, and stated commitment to altering fundamentally the power structure in Venezuela continued to appeal to much of the nation’s historically disenfranchised. Nevertheless, Chávez’s popularity sunk from 80% in 2001 to 30% in 2002 (Coronil, 2005, p. 92). There is general agreement that the private media played a significant role in this decline. The major television station’s in Venezuela aligned against Chávez and launched vociferous campaigns to delegitimize his government’s policies and promoted various forms of opposition.

The country’s largest trade union federation, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers together with the business federation, Fedecámaras, led several general strikes against the government. On the morning of the day the coup took place, opposition leaders rerouted a massive anti-Chávez march toward the presidential palace. A calamitous and confusing few hours ensued during which 19 people, among them both pro-Chávez and opposition aligned individuals, were shot and killed around the palace. Immediately, the opposition-aligned commercial media lay blame on Chávez, calling for him to resign and justifying the installation of an interim government. Commercial media repetitively broadcast the images of the Chávez supporters shooting their guns during the period of the coup and circulated this footage to news outlets around the world. There are widely disparate accounts of who was responsible for the deaths (Coronil, 2005). If snipers were responsible for the gunfire and who might have deployed the snipers remains unclear. My aim is not to enter the fray of speculation of who was responsible for the violence. Rather, my concern is how people—on all sides of the controversy—frame media representations of the events of the coup in an attempt to shape the course of history.

\footnote{For a wide range of perspectives and analyses of the events, see written accounts including Jones (2008), Nelson (2009), Stoneman (2008), Toro (2004), Wilpert (2007) and the documentaries X-ray of a Lie (2004) and Llaguna Bridge: Keys to a Massacre (2004).}
In addition to 200 hours of film that Bartley and O’Briain shot themselves, they drew from Venezuelan state television, citizen media makers, commercial television, and official footage shot within the presidential palace to assemble their film. Revolution combines the immediacy of cinema vérité footage, direct-address interviews, and voice-over narration from the point of view of the filmmakers who assert themselves as authoritative participant–witnesses of the coup. The film uses short clips of Venezuelan commercial television and statements made by U.S. government officials to establish the national commercial media’s lack of objectivity and the increasing U.S. pressure to challenge the legitimacy of the Chávez government. Revolution describes the political polarization in Venezuela almost exclusively from the perspective of Chávez supporters. Revolution argues that Chávez’s opposition, led by the corporate media, planned and orchestrated the 2002 coup with complicit support of the U.S. government. The film depicts a nation starkly divided along lines of class and race. Revolution represents the mass mobilization by Caracas’s dark-skinned poor as the key factor that pressured the coup-leaders to reinstate the president. In addition to the filmmaker’s voice-over, Revolution uses visual cues and music to portray Chávez as a popular hero and his supporters as noble and brave, whereas the government’s opposition is depicted as light-skinned, well heeled, and aggressive.

A group of Venezuelans based in Caracas who oppose the Chávez government called Gusano de Luz (literally worm of light) launched a campaign to discredit the film as deliberately misleading publicity for the Chávez government.3 The film’s detractors highlighted a number of inconsistencies in Revolution’s composition and elisions of what they argued was important information that shaped the trajectory of the coup. Many of their accusations concerned Bartley and O’Briain’s use of stock devices of documentary filmmakers. For example, a scene of a pro-Chávez rally the day of the coup is constructed through a montage of film clips that the filmmakers shot at a number of different rallies. The filmmakers, moreover, use parallel editing to weave together two sequences: the dissolution of democratic governance structures by the interim President and police repression against pro-Chávez demonstrators. This intercutting of footage gives the viewers the impression that these events were happening at the same time. In addition, a crucial scene of members of an opposition-neighborhood organization learning how to protect themselves against their servants was placed

3Venezuelan filmmakers affiliated with Chávez’s opposition participated in the production of a counterfilm called X-Ray of a Lie (2004), which examines Revolution scene by scene to uncover the film’s narrative strategies and use of artifice.
in the film before the coup took place, although it was filmed several months afterward. Most egregious, from the point of view of the film’s detractors was the pivotal scene concerning the violence. The film detractor’s insisted that Chávez supporters were indeed shooting at opposition protesters. They argued that it was not the commercial media but Revolution’s filmmakers who had misconstrued and inaccurately contextualized the footage of the group of Chávez supporters firing guns.

Thus, supporters and detractors either undermined or championed Revolution based on standards of fidelity to a time–space continuum. In their film, Bartley and O’Briain assert that they rescued the “truth” in the face of manipulated accounts by the Venezuelan private news media because their film correctly placed images of Chávez supporters shooting their guns in the time/space continuum of history. Yet, at the same time, Bartley and O’Briain justify their combination of footage from disparate contexts and times in several of the sequences of Revolution, following practices of most documentary realist films (Bartley & O’Briain, 2004). The legitimacy of the film’s narrative rested in part on being able to assert authority about the relationship of two images to the surrounding historical world. Activists’ struggle over this footage successfully demonstrates Bill Nichol’s insight that the indexical image cannot guarantee its own meaning (Nichols, 1994, p. 33). The instability of visible evidence required aggressive framing on the part of distributors and activists.

Distribution and Framing in New York City

Distributors, activists, and representatives of the Chávez government worked separately and at times collaboratively to bring Revolution to audiences in New York City. Although the film had received widespread critical acclaim at film festivals, the filmmakers struggled to find a distributor or a television company that would be willing to screen the film in the United States (Stoneman, 2008, p. 33). David Schultz, the president of an alternative California-based film distribution company called Vitagraph Films, first saw Revolution at an Irish Film Festival at the American Cinematheque in Los Angeles in March 2003 where a VHS copy of the film played to fewer than 100 people. Schultz agreed to release Revolution theatrically in the United States. In an interview, Schultz described Revolution as the most amazing “action documentary” he had ever seen. Vitagraph Films quickly made a deal with the filmmakers Bartley and O’Brien to release Revolution in the United States and Canada.

To distribute the film, Schultz needed what he called “exhibitor support” of film houses to guarantee venues to screen the documentary once Vitagraph undertook the costly process (upwards of $30,000 in 2004) of
converting the video of *Revolution* to a film print. Schultz explained the difficulty he faced encouraging exhibitors to run *Revolution* when he first obtained the rights. The United States government had just launched the preemptive “shock and awe” attack on Iraq. Schultz’s conversations with art house theaters about the possibility of screening the film took place amidst heightened attention to U.S. intervention across the globe, a politicized geopolitical struggle over oil resources, and a growing concern among many about the deleterious impacts of media monopolization. According to Schultz, art house theaters such as the Landmark Corporation—an alternative niche market exhibitor company, which owns film houses throughout the country—was not willing to take the economic gamble of showing *Revolution*. Those responsible for the programs of these theaters assumed the environment was not hospitable for the film because audiences would not respond favorably to a film critical of the United States at the beginning of the Iraq war. After the initial months of the war, however, according to Schultz, the political climate changed to the extent that it became acceptable to screen *Revolution*. Venezuela, the fourth largest supplier of petroleum to the United States, gained new importance to U.S. audiences in light of the Iraq war, which many critics at the time argued was launched to establish control of Middle East oil.

Schultz attributed his eventual success in securing screening venues for *Revolution* not only to the prospect that the film would be economically successful, but more importantly to particular film programmers at certain film houses who “really believed in the film at a time when a lot of people didn’t” (Schultz, 2004). Schultz identified Mike Maggiore, a programmer at the Film Forum in New York City, as one of key “believers” who worked hard to ensure *Revolution*’s theatrical release. Film Forum is a nonprofit screening space for independent premieres and repertory programming launched in 1970. Schultz sent Maggiore a tape of *Revolution* with the hope that Film Forum would agree to release the film.

Maggiore explained to me that he was immediately enthusiastic about *Revolution*. He noted, “It resembled and seemed to remind me of the [television] networks in this country . . . . I think they [the filmmakers] create a very convincing portrait of how television can manipulate and distort events and really change history” (Maggiore, 2004). For Maggiore, the film resonated with his own observations and experiences of media concentration in the United States. He referenced what he felt was the deciding influence that U.S.-based commercial television played in shaping the outcome of the disputed 2000 presidential elections in George W. Bush’s favor. Drawn to the film’s focus on media monopolization and manipulation, Maggiore believed, based on his own reaction to the film that *Revolution* would resonate with Film Forum audiences.
Maggiore’s work to circulate specific information about *Revolution* was crucial to attracting a particular audience and shaping the conditions of reception. He assembled and distributed an extensive press kit for potential film reviewers that contained short essays about the political situation in Venezuela taken from *Revolution’s* (now defunct) Web site, an interview with the filmmakers, and glowing reviews of the film from Irish publications. Press kits provide important context, which can help shape a reviewers’ understanding of the film. The film’s debut at this well-respected art film house in the culturally influential site of New York City framed *Revolution’s* narrative as important and legitimate.

Maggiore’s efforts to market the film to reviewers paid off. *Revolution* was widely reviewed by newspapers in New York, renewing attention to the 2002 coup and the polarizing changes taking place in Venezuela. At the time of the coup, most major newspapers in the United States hailed the unconstitutional overthrow of Chávez as “pro-democracy” (FAIR, 2002). In the days following Chávez’s removal, the *New York Times* labeled him a “would-be dictator” a “ruinous demagogue,” and a “mercurial strongman.” Stephen Holden’s review of *Revolution* in the *New York Times*, in contrast, casts Chávez as a popular leader and the victim of a corporate media and oil-interest conspiracy. Holden (2003) definitively asserted, “The [opposition’s] attempt to seize control never would have gotten off the ground without the fervent support of Venezuela’s five private television stations, all politically aligned with oil interests that had hounded Mr. Chávez from the moment he took office.” Previous “facts” reported in the *New York Times*, for example, were reframed as inaccurate manipulations. Thus, the reviews of *Revolution’s* contradicted the same news outlet’s coverage of the coup itself. Although most film critics in local and national newspapers in the United States noted that Bartley and O’Brien “aren’t neutral” (Musetto, 2003), overall, the film reviews legitimized *Revolution* as a serious and worthwhile documentary that, although biased, presented a revised historical account and a riveting narrative. These reviews make evident how news media institutions are internally incoherent and themselves struggle to construct truth narratives.

The November 2003 theatrical debut of *Revolution* at the Film Forum was accompanied by small demonstrations organized by activists in support of and in opposition to the film. Both groups attempted to influence audience reception of the film as people entered and exited the theater. A few weeks before the film debuted at the Film Forum, a screening of *Revolution* was cancelled at an Amnesty International film festival in Canada as a result of pressure from opposition-aligned groups. The pro-Chávez demonstrators at the Film Forum passed out a flier that encouraged theatergoers to denounce censorship of the film and to sign an on-line
petition in support of Revolution. Meanwhile, an anti-Chávez opposition group passed out pamphlets that questioned the “impartiality, precision, veracity, editorial integrity and ideological independence of the documentary.” Both fliers directed people to a long list of Web sites for news and analysis about Venezuela.

Pro- and anti-Chávez groups literally framed the entrance to the cinema, adding an element of excitement, importance, and tension to the air. The Film Forum theater, located on the periphery of an upscale neighborhood in lower Manhattan, was at full capacity. At this screening, I noted that the animated audience laughed and clapped throughout the screening. After a hearty round of applause, we exited the theater to find a group of about 10 opposition protestors patiently waiting to talk to audiences about the film and raise doubts about what we had just seen. A middle-age man handed me a printed copy of an online petition, which at that point he told me had been signed by 10,000 people. The petition stated that film experts had confirmed that the additional footage used by Bartley and O’Briain to repudiate the claim that Chávez supporters were firing on unarmed opposition demonstrators was taken several hours after the footage of Chávez supporters firing their weapons (El Gusano de Luz, 2003). An older man wearing a vest covered in antiwar buttons, returned the flier to a younger opposition protestor, explaining that their efforts to undermine the film were simply further evidence of the length that the “Venezuelan bourgeoisie” would go to regain control of the their country. A young couple, however, was not convinced that the opposition’s claims could be so easily dismissed. They engaged in a 10-minute conversation, asking the opposition protestors to discuss both the contentious claims of Revolution and their perspective on Chávez.

Cristina, a woman in her mid-20s who helped organize the opposition protest later explained to me in an interview that she had very mixed feelings about greeting theatergoers outside the Film Forum. Cristina felt that the “Film Forum crowd” coming to see Revolution was aggressive and had already formed positive opinions about Chávez based on politically left-wing news sources. In her attempts to shape audiences assumptions about the film, she experienced theatergoers as un receptive. Yet several of the conversations I heard outside the Film Forum also demonstrated that some theatergoers were eager to hear the opposition’s perspective on the conflict. The protest outside the theater alerted many theatergoers that the narrative of the coup described in Revolution was not universally

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4With the exception of people who are readily identifiable, all names of activists and community media producers have been changed to protect my informants.
accepted. Opposition protests like the one at the Film Forum were replicated in Canada, Australia, and France, as reported on the opposition Web site 11abril.com.

The controversy provoked by opposition protestors and their attempts to limit its distribution resulted in greater media attention to the film. However, Schultz, Revolution’s official distributor, noted that it was difficult to know how many people had seen the film because it “has been played and unfortunately bootlegged” at a number of “non-theatrical venues” (Schultz, 2004). The film’s theatrical debut at the Film Forum proved to be economically successful, taking in $26,495 in the first week, far more than the $20,000 that Maggiore considered a good showing. For the Film Forum, which only runs premiers of contemporary films, the value of the film is directly related to its exclusive release in New York. Maggiore, Film Forum’s programmer, explained that if he discovered unofficial screenings he would attempt to stop them. Despite his “belief” in the message of the film, the economic necessity of recuperating the costs of screening led Maggiore to want to restrict Revolution’s noncommercial circulation.

Nevertheless, while Revolution circulated through theatrical venues, activists organized alternative circuits of distribution unimpeded. In a crowded room at the New York headquarters of the Committee in Solidarity with People of El Salvador (CISPES), 35 people gathered to watch a free screening of Revolution on a small television. The walls were covered with posters about the atrocities committed by School of the Americas and colorful banners protesting the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement. CISPES’s interest in the film was evidence of leftist political organizations’ increased attention to Venezuela. At a time in the United States when right-wing voices blatantly dominated politics and the media, many left-leaning activists were looking elsewhere for inspiration and models for popular mobilization.

Carlos López and Marlena Alvarado, two pro-Chávez Venezuelans introduced the film, providing a brief background of Chávez’s rise to power and the polarized political context in Venezuela. López and Alvarado were active in an organization called the New York Bolivarian Circle. Bolivarian Circles are Chavez-government-sponsored neighborhood and community organizations developed in Venezuela.5 In their introduction to the film, López and Alvarado championed Chávez as a radical revolutionary leader committed to social justice. They argued that the pro-Chávez movement was antiracist and feminist. López described what he asserted was the

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5See Hawkins and Hansen (2006) for an evaluation of the impacts and purposes of these groups in Venezuela.
continued complicity of the U.S. government with anti-Chávez forces, a familiar story for people involved in solidarity organizing around El Salvador. Thus, these activists framed *Revolution* by linking it to the local political issues that they assumed were important to their audience. Toward the end of the meeting, Alvarado accepted donations in exchange for VHS copies the New York Bolivarian Circle they had made of *Revolution*, furthering the chain of informal distribution.

Alvarado, a Bolivarian Circle activist and unofficial *Revolution* distributor, explained to me that seeing *Revolution* for the first time was a personal turning point in her own commitment to political activism. At the time Alvarado was 26 years old. She moved to the United States from Venezuela when she was 14. On trips to visit family in Venezuela over the previous few years she became increasingly interested in Venezuelan politics. She explained that although her family was politically active in support of Chávez, she never viewed political events in Venezuela as connected to her own life in New York. However, a few months before this CISPES screening, a Venezuelan friend in New York lent her a VHS copy of *Revolution*. Alvarado sat taller in her seat as she described the first time she saw the film.

You see the first images and the dancing [of *Revolution*'s opening sequence] and it gets you going. And you’re like oh! But then you see the film and you realize exactly what happened and why it happened. From that point on, I was like I have to do something. I was like, I can not just sit around and hope that things will get better. Especially here in the U.S. where things are so manipulated and if I’m here, I’ve got to get off my butt and do something…. Ever since then I’ve been very active. I try to do as much as I can in support (Alvarado, 2004).

For Alvarado, the bodies dancing, shouting, and protesting in the film, inspired her to take action in her own life. She describes her excited physical response to the film, what Gaines has called “the visceral pleasure of political mimesis” (Gaines, 1999, p. 100). After seeing the film, Alvarado became involved in the New York Bolivarian Circle to promote solidarity in the United States with Chávez and his political movement.

Alvarado felt that *Revolution* was a invaluable tool to counter the U.S. commercial media’s anti-Chávez bias. Alvarado explained, “Every time we show the film, people just get so inspired.” She noted, “The kind of people that come to see this film—I’m talking about the American populations that are of course very liberal—they become enraged! *They turn into Venezuelans!*” Alvarado reflected that although she felt that U.S. audiences came away from the film with a better understanding of Venezuela and Chávez, she believed that activists in New York would never be as revolutionary as people in Venezuela. “People who see the film always ask us,
what can we do? But people have to be fed up. People have to be really at the point where they are dirt poor and at the bottom and there is no other choice to organize. They have to be ready to say, it doesn’t matter if they kill me.” Although Alvarado expressed that Revolution produced in progressive audiences a desire to become involved, she noted that the conditions of their lives would not encourage serious movement or organizing. Nevertheless, Alvarado was satisfied with the production of outrage and hoped that it could be turned to strengthen criticism of U.S. intervention in Venezuela.

Based on her experience screening the film in the United States, Alvarado and members of her circle had come to understand the importance of framing the film for the audience. She acknowledged that the life conditions of CISPES audience, in particular its “liberal” political perspective, influenced how they understood and responded to Revolution. Although she emphasized the film’s capacity to produce outrage, she noted that where that outrage would be directed depended in part, on how the film had been framed politically. Alvarado and López used their authority as pro-Chávez Venezuelans to legitimize Revolution’s message. Their own racial features, darker skin and hair, further legitimized the film’s claim that Chávez supporters have darker complexions and that the country is split along race and class lines. Revolution provided a narrative of a successful people’s struggle against corporate media that many in the CISPES audience found particularly important in the political context of the commercial media’s lock step with the Bush administration in support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Official representatives of the Chávez government joined official and activists distributors in framing and circulating Revolution in New York City. In February 2004, at Lincoln Center’s Walter Reade Theater in New York City, a diverse crowd filled more than 250 seats to see the benefit screening of Revolution hosted by an activist network called Peace Action New York. For a small fee, Schultz, the official distributor, granted Peace Action the rights to show the film as a fundraiser for their organization. For $35 a person, audience members watched the film and participated in a question-and-answer session with invited guests, including Leonor Granado, who at the time was the Venezuelan Consul General in New York. A murmur of approval spread through the audience when the Venezuelan Consul announced that the Venezuelan Consulate office would be happy to give a DVD of the film to anyone who wanted a copy. The Venezuelan Consul explained that distributing Revolution and speaking at screenings was important in order to “spread the word and promote the truth.” However, the question-and-answer period following the film did not touch on how the filmmakers themselves depend on the artifice of editing to
produce particular representations of truth. In an interview, Consul Granado highlighted the importance of the film to building support in the United States for the Chávez government. She explained to me that she carried around copies of the film together with mini reprints of the Venezuelan Constitution to give to whomever was interested (Granado, 2004).

The overlapping circuits of distribution were mutually beneficial, working to fulfill the goals of both Vitagraph and political activists. Vitagraph was able to advertise theatrical screenings through the Venezuelan governmental e-mail networks and activists and the Venezuelan government enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to expand the film’s audience. However, the involvement of official Venezuelan government representatives in the distribution and framing of the film threatened Revolution’s authority. Opposition activists pointed to the Venezuelan government’s involvement in Revolution’s circulation to undermine the film’s independent status. The circuit of distribution itself communicated meaning about the interests and bias of the film.

This case confirms that community engagement or outreach to groups that care about a documentary’s subject has indeed become a vitally important method for increasing the viewership and impact of a documentary (Aufderheide, 2003, p. 21). At stake for both pro-Chávez and opposition activists in guiding the perception of the film and coup was the future claim to social and political legitimacy of the Chávez government on a national and global level as well as the broader politics of media monopolization. The controversy produced around the film, moreover, revealed the contradictions of using media to establish or discredit mediated truth claims. The filmmakers drew attention to how media producers can shape public opinion through the use of editing. Yet, to make this case, Bartley and O’Brien depend on the very artifice they criticize. Whether the filmmakers’ own use of artifice would be discussed and challenged depended on who was framing the meaning of the film.

Circulation and Meaning-Making Among Media Activists in Caracas

What about the historical actors involved in the revolutionary events depicted in Revolution? How do they experience both the contingency of the reality that is represented in Revolution? In this section of the article, I shift focus to examine how activists in Caracas respond to and engage the film. The repeated broadcast and reuse of Revolution on community television in Venezuela influences not only how the community media activists engaged in ongoing political struggles approach documentary form and production, but also contributes to how they understand themselves as revolutionary protagonists.
In the aftermath of the 2002 coup, during which the only state television channel went off the air and the private commercial media devoted little coverage of pro-Chávez perspectives, Hugo Chávez quickly recognized the potential for community media to unite his supporters and counter commercial media’s hegemony. Community media was first made legal in Venezuela in 2000. Catia TV, the most prominent community media outlet in the country, began broadcasting to a small region of west Caracas in 2001. After the 2002 coup attempt, Catia TV leaders found it far easier to gain funding from state institutions. Increasing numbers of Chávez supporters, moreover, followed Catia TV’s lead and sought to make their own media to counter the commercial media’s anti-Chávez perspective. Chávez’s government was eager to fund these initiatives. Today, Catia TV is 1 of 27 legally recognized television stations in Venezuela. The station has 30 paid staff members and more than 100 volunteers. Catia TV continues to receive funding from the Venezuelan state oil company and other state institutions.6

Catia TV staff have repeatedly broadcast Revolution over the station’s airwaves during the many contentious political conjunctures in Venezuela over the past several years, including the 2004 Presidential Recall Referendum, the 2006 presidential election, the 5-year anniversary of the coup, and during the period of the Chávez government’s controversial 2007 decision to “not renew” the terrestrial open air broadcast license of RCTV, a prominent commercial television station. Revolution takes on new meaning as it is contextualized and mobilized during these disparate periods. In addition to broadcasting the film in its entirety, community media producers often use images and entire sequences from the film in their own video productions, which they also broadcast on their station’s airwaves.7

The disputed significance of Revolution’s narrative in Venezuela involves not only who was responsible for the violence but also the role of the popular uprising to challenge the coup. Although critics charge that the Bolivarian revolution is a “top–down” government effort to win popularity through hand-outs and centralize power in the executive branch (Penfold-Bencerra, 2007), government aligned activists and politicians consistently highlight the role of the popular poor in the coup’s dramatic reversal to substantiate the notion that the Bolivarian revolution is a social movement

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6 Elsewhere (Schiller, in press), I discuss Catia TV’s relationship with state institutions and the staff’s ongoing negotiation of notions of autonomy and objectivity.

7 A closely related documentary, Keys to a Massacre (2004) by Venezuelan filmmaker Angel Palacios, focuses exclusively on analyzing the “visible evidence” to challenge the commercial media’s assertion that an armed group of Chávez supporters were shooting at opposition demonstrators. Catia TV producers have also drawn liberally from Keys to a Massacre for their own video productions.
catalyzed “from below.” For the Chávez government and its supporters, the popular mass mobilization to reverse the 2002 coup is a “key symbol” (Ortner, 1973) of the Bolivarian revolution. The consistent reassertion of this narrative is critical to maintain Chávez’s moral and political authority that he embodies the will of “the people.” Scholars continue to dispute the importance of the popular mobilization to reversing the coup. Coronil, for example, attributes the coup’s reversal to the infighting among the coup-leadership and a divided military that ultimately reasserted support for Chávez (Coronil, 2005).

The impact that the distribution of Revolution has had in the United States as described above was palpable in Venezuela. Would-be filmmakers, mostly from Europe and the United States, have arrived en masse, visiting Catia TV to request footage of the period of the coup, hoping to make their own documentaries. Catia TV is a well-liked stop for tourists on “solidarity trips” organized by a left-wing political tour groups. Many of the tourists explained that they first became interested in Chávez and the social changes in Venezuela when they saw Revolution. Several tourists at Catia TV expressed to me that the film inspired them to travel to Venezuela to investigate the Bolivarian revolution for themselves. The global attention that Venezuela has attracted as being on the forefront of revolutionary change in Latin America has become an everyday part of people’s lives at Catia TV. Producers at the station often noted that they were in the “global spotlight” and that their actions had worldwide significance.

Chávez supporters at Catia TV identify the experience of the coup as a critical emotional and political turning point in their lives. Most of Catia TV’s founding members participated in demonstrations during the coup and worked hard to mobilize people from their barrios to demand Chávez’s return. Several Catia TV producers stated they felt that they had rightly risked their lives to defend the leader of their movement. Remarkably even staff and volunteers at the station who were not personally involved in the mobilization to demand the President’s return emphasize the personal importance of the coup. Many of Catia TV producers grew teary-eyed, even 5 years later, when they remember the traumatic and uplifting 3 days of the coup and its reversal. Perhaps of equal importance to people’s actual experience of the coup is the way that the coup has been represented by media producers to organize support for Chávez, encourage skepticism of the commercial media, and embolden people in poor neighborhoods of Caracas to believe that they have the power to shape Venezuela’s future.

González Gregorio, a young producer at Catia TV, was 22 years old at the time of the coup. During the 5-anniversary of the coup in 2007, he shyly admitted to me that he did not participate in the mobilization outside Miraflores, the presidential palace, to demand Chávez’s return. The coup
took place just a year before Gregorio became involved with Catia TV. At that time, Gregorio, a tall, mild-mannered patient young man, explained that he had little familiarity with issues of media democratization.

Schiller: During the coup, what did you think when you were watching television?

Gregorio: I didn’t understand that there was a manipulation. I knew that something had happened but I didn’t understand it. I had a friend who was going to Miraflores and he told me “Let’s go to Miraflores.” But I didn’t go. . . . I didn’t recognize the process as part of my life and well, that things were going to change. I only recognized that if I worked hard, I could feed myself and have what I wanted . . . . But I didn’t feel like the [political] process was mine. When I saw him [Chávez] return I said, “Wow, damn, this guy is awesome!” I mean, they had him and they had to let him free. That’s phenomenal stuff. But nevertheless, it wasn’t until I got involved in the television station that I understood the role that the media had played . . . . I simply saw the media as media and that was it, that they broadcast what there was (Gregorio, 2007).

Gregorio explained that he was shocked the first time he saw Revolution on Venezuelan state television in April 2003 just a few months after he began working at Catia TV. I first met Gregorio during this period. He recommended that I see Revolution, which had not yet been screened in the United States. I easily obtained a bootlegged VHS copy of the film for $1 from a street vendor in a poor neighborhood of Caracas. During the period he first saw Revolution, Gregorio was learning how to use a small camcorder and the editing program Final Cut Pro. He explained how he began to view television differently, suddenly aware of how audio-visual material could be manipulated and the possible drastic consequences. Gregorio noted,

It wasn’t until then that I understood the problem of the media, how they play with people, how they manipulate and make you believe lies according to their own interests. They aren’t impartial. To be partial doesn’t make you bad, it’s only that the system tells you that it’s impartial (Gregorio, 2007).

Gregorio, like many staff at Catia TV, has developed an analysis of the role of the commercial media in the 2002 coup in dialogue with a range of people and influenced by multiple factors, including the repeated viewing and use of Revolution.

The experience of the 2002 coup and its mediated memory through Revolution (as well as other similar films made subsequently) has influenced
how moments of heightened political confrontation were approached by Catia TV producers. A major lesson many Catia TV producers learned from the coup and its representation was that the private media could not be trusted and would go to any length to fulfill to their political ambitions, even if this meant deliberately manipulating the representation of events. The mediated memory of the coup created the impetus to monitor and document carefully the commercial media’s broadcasts during particularly tense political periods. Catia TV described how they might catch the commercial media’s missteps, very much like Revolution’s filmmakers. Revolution as well as other documentaries made about the coup have created an appreciation for the value of documentation of mass media portrayals as potential “visible evidence” for Catia TV producers’ own media productions.

This was vividly illustrated by the manner in which Catia TV prepared for the 2006 presidential election. Catia TV staff decided to create a record of all the media coverage in the days surrounding the election. Staff gathered all the television sets in the station and connected them to the four available DVD recorders. For 3 days they recorded the television coverage on the major commercial networks. Gregorio explained to me, “We already know what the media is able to do, as they usually talk crap. So now we’re just waiting for them to do this. But this time we are prepared.” Gregorio felt that activists had been caught off guard during the 2002 coup. Now that they had the resources to monitor the private news media, Catia TV staff intended to ensure that this would not happen again.

In the next year, Catia TV producers used Revolution to help build support for the government’s direct confrontation with the commercial media. The urgency of Revolution’s message was mobilized extensively during the period surrounding the Chávez government’s decision not to renew the broadcast license for RCTV, a prominent commercial television station. To mark the fifth anniversary of the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez and justify RCTV’s removal from the public airwaves, community and state-run media outlets broadcast images of the 2002 coup, many of which appear in Revolution. Although there had been significant changes to the composition, organization, and commitments of both the opposition and Chávez’s supporters since the 2002 coup attempt, government and community media discourse conveyed a continuity of practices and interests of both the opposition and popular support for Chávez. Under the slogan “the pueblo continues in the street,” advertisements featured images featured in Revolution as well as from other sources of the mass demonstrations outside the presidential palace at the time of the coup. These images from 2002 were used to call for a mass gathering in support of Chávez, once again outside the presidential palace.
Particular images from *Revolution* appeared repeatedly during this period in video productions produced by Catia TV staff and volunteers in support of RCTV’s removal from the public airwaves. The most striking of these images include a male Chávez supporter grasping the metal gates of the Presidential Palace, overcome with emotion, he weeps for Chávez; a group of men run down a Caracas street, draped in the Venezuelan flag, they chant, “we want/love Chávez”; and Chávez’s triumphant return to Caracas, he is thronged by a mass of supporters who seem to sweep him back into the Presidential Palace. These iconic sequences, together with footage of the coup-period shot by Catia TV founders, were repeated countless times in community media productions and have become part of the collective memory of community media activists. Mediated memories of the coup are mobilized to move bodies to vote, march, or demonstrate in support of Chávez. These recurring images are framed to evoke powerful emotions about the role and potentiality of mass popular action.

During this period, Catia TV staff, moreover, employed *Revolution* as a pedagogical tool during video production workshops they teach to neighborhood volunteers. In 2007, during the first workshop he taught on his own, Gregorio struggled to explain how narratives are created by juxtaposing different images that are not necessarily shot in the same time and place. His students, men and women from the surrounding barrios of west Caracas, stared at him blankly.

“Ah!” Gregorio said, smiling, “the most obvious example is one you have all seen.” Gregorio referenced the controversial shooting scene from *Revolution* to provide an illustration of how audiovisual material can be manipulated. He asked his students to recall how the film had exposed the way in which the commercial media juxtaposed one image of Chávez supporters firing guns with another image of opposition protestors being shot at in order to create a particular narrative that ascribed blame. “The media told a whole story with just two images,” Gregorio explained to his students. He encouraged them to begin to watch television more carefully and to think about how particular ideas are communicated. “As you begin to notice that there’s an ideological message embedded in the media, you can go image-by-image decoding (*descifrando*) what they are doing on an audio-visual level.” Several people around the room nodded their heads enthusiastically. Gregorio emphasized the political import of the technical process of television production. Coups could be justified with the help of audio-visual editing. Gregorio and his colleagues at Catia TV aim to encourage not only barrio-based filmmaking, but particular kinds of media-savvy barrio-based activists. *Revolution* was mobilized as a helpful tool in the effort to explain how media truths are produced.
CONCLUSION

The often acrimonious discussion about Revolution that accompanied its global circulation in 2002–2003 and the ongoing importance of the documentary in Venezuela underscore not only the importance of televisual representations to Venezuelan politics but also the political urgency of debates about the instability of the relationship between image and reality in Venezuela, the United States, and beyond. The political stakes of the abstract theoretical battle over the status of documentary film’s claims to “the real” (Winston, 1995) become urgent in the polarized context of debates about Venezuelan politics.

Scholars acknowledge that in and of themselves, documentaries may not on their own exert the authority to influence their interpretation; rather, it is the connections that the people who circulate and experience the film draw to broader social movements, the political climate, and life experience and conditions of the audience that encourage people to view the historical world in a particular way, and perhaps engage in political action themselves (Chanan, 1990; Gaines, 1999, 2007; Juhasz, 1995; McLagan, 2003). Official and activist distributors are themselves producers who mobilize the immediacy and passion of the images of Revolution to encourage solidarity or criticism of the Chávez government and its supporters. Although the potential political potency and instrumentality of documentary is not new, the interest and passion that Revolution has sparked reveals much about the centrality of questions of the ethical role of media producers in Venezuela and elsewhere. In this article, I have highlighted how activists use Revolution as an organizing tool in the United States and Venezuela. The filmmakers as well as the supporters and detractors of Revolution simultaneously expose and rely on the artifice necessary to use media to construct narratives of truth. This paradox makes the social practice of framing vitally important to encourage and challenge the film’s ability to persuade audiences.

Despite the global attention and festival awards that Revolution has garnered, the film currently (2009) has no commercial distributor in the United States, although a blurry digital version can be viewed on the Internet via YouTube. An activist solidarity group called the Venezuela Solidarity Committee located in the United Kingdom has committed to distribute bootleg copies of the film, despite protest from the film’s official distributor Power Films in Ireland. Stoneman, the film’s executive producer, has taken the usual step of including a DVD of Revolution in his book about the film’s production and circulation.

Much is at stake in Revolution’s distribution and framing. As I have demonstrated, the meaning of a film is shaped not only by its composition but also by who is responsible for its circulation, when and where the film is
screened, and the contextual information provided to the audience. As Nichols (1991) argued, the “distinguishing mark of documentary may be less intrinsic to the text than a function of the assumptions and expectations that characterize the viewing of a documentary” (p. 24). As part their struggle for international and local support and political legitimacy, pro-Chávez and opposition activists continue to shape how viewers understand *Revolution* in an effort to engender action in accordance with their hopes for Venezuela’s political future.

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