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Venezuela in U.S. public diplomacy, 1950s–2000s: The Cold War, democratization, and the digitalization of politics

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Abstract: This article addresses how U.S. public diplomacy, in educational, cultural, and media-focused projects, has influenced the development of Venezuela's civil society and democracy during three eras. First, during the Cold War, to contain communism, U.S. public diplomacy prioritized educational projects targeting Venezuela's military and youth. As military coups occurred across Latin America, the U.S. government sought to educate and spread information among military officers who could promote anti-communist political development, especially in Venezuela. Second, in the 1990s, U.S. public diplomacy began shaping the development of political structures and democratization in Venezuela by training leaders of political parties, civil society, and media groups. Until the mid-2000s, the United States also sought to influence political parties and elections by establishing non-governmental organizations and interacting with a new generation of politicians. Third, in today's era of digitalized international relations, U.S. public diplomacy has mobilized digital diplomacy to sway Venezuela's political development, notably in the 2015 parliamentary elections and 2018–2019 political crisis. Although the United States has cooperated with independent Venezuelan media organizations and broadcast across local social media networks, the 2015

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Although the growing use of soft power and the Internet’s impact on political life are readily apparent, the essence of those phenomena are not. The politics of soft power refers to public diplomacy, which encompasses projects in the fields of culture, education, and media that seek to promote various goals related to broader political and cultural objectives. In those projects, the Internet-related policies of various countries influence the political life in others as part of so-called “digital diplomacy” and the global digitization of international politics. Addressing those trends as they have unfolded in Venezuela, the paper illustrates how public diplomacy and social media affect target audiences in the country. In so doing, however, it clarifies that the digital diplomacy and international broadcasting of the United States and other actors in Venezuela have had limited impact there.
elections and recent political crisis revealed that local media are more popular among Venezuelans than their U.S., European, and Russian counterparts.

Subjects: American Studies; International Relations; Politics & the Media; Politics

Keywords: public diplomacy; digital diplomacy; Venezuela; United States; Maduro; Juan Guaidó; Nicolás Maduro

1. Introduction

From U.S. President James Monroe’s December 1823 address to the U.S. Congress, in which he stated that “the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers,” (Monroe, 1823) to current U.S. President Donald Trump’s endorsements of military operations in Venezuela that support self-proclaimed president Juan Guaidó, Latin American nations have been a major focus of U.S. diplomacy, foreign policy, and economic interests during the past two centuries. The United States has often exploited public diplomacy, or soft power, not only to sustain its economic and political interests in Latin America but also to contribute to the region’s development in different eras.

In general, public diplomacy, encompassing projects in the fields of culture, education, media, and digital diplomacy, aims at promoting various goals related to broader political and cultural objectives. In U.S. public diplomacy concerning Latin America, for example, after the Spanish–American War in 1898, when Cuba became a political and diplomatic protectorate of the United States, the U.S. Department of State engaged students on the island in academic exchanges in order to make them be more pliable. During the 1930s, as Germany aggressively spread the ideas of Nazism throughout Latin American countries, the United States responded by disseminating pro-democracy films and literature as well as by engaging local elites on special visits to familiarize them with the U.S. political system and the American way of life. Following the real, visible successes of cultural diplomacy in halting the spread of Nazi ideology in Latin America, the Cold War was marked by U.S. investments in Latin America totaling millions of dollars, all to similarly halt the circulation of revolutionary ideologies such as communism in the region. During that era, when the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the popularity of leftist leaders became sore concerns for U.S. public diplomacy, the U.S. government began targeting social elites in the region who could mold public opinion or otherwise influence the political development of Latin American states. In time, as frequent military coups continued to suggest the need to protect Latin American militaries from pro-communist ideas, the United States prioritized the development and implementation of projects such as military training programs more than ones involving cultural and academic exchanges. Although the end of the country’s ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union significantly reduced the number of U.S. public diplomacy programs in the region, when anti-Americanism began flourishing again among political groups on the left and right alike, the U.S. government mobilized public diplomacy programs aimed at strengthening civil society, political parties, and fair elections in Latin America. Since then, the Internet and social media have afforded new opportunities for U.S. public diplomacy to support liberal political movements, independent media organizations, and pliable leaders in Latin America.

Against that background, in this article we examine how U.S. public diplomacy has contributed to promoting the priorities of U.S. policy in Venezuela since the 1950s. In particular, we first reveal how training programs for Venezuela’s military elite and youth, as cohesive parts of U.S. public diplomacy, were mobilized amid the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. After that, we examine U.S. programs geared toward developing political structures in order to sustain democratization in Venezuela during the 1990s and 2000s. Last, we discuss present-day social media networks in Venezuela and their roles in two recent political events there—the 2015 parliamentary elections and the political crisis of 2018–2019—as a means to shed light on aspects of digital diplomacy currently practiced by the U.S. government.
We have selected Venezuela as a case study for two reasons. On the one hand, the country has long been a special milieu for U.S. policy in Latin America. During the Cold War, Venezuela received staggering amounts of military and economic assistance from the United States, after which projects of U.S. public diplomacy began to openly engage Venezuelan political parties and media groups, even despite criticism from the Venezuelan government during the 1990s and 2000s. Since then, the Internet in Venezuela, operating independently of state control, has created innumerable opportunities for international actors, including the United States, to engage local audiences in their digital media projects.

On the other hand, the study of U.S. public diplomacy in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, during the Cold War versus the contemporary era has been lopsided. Whereas some scholars have thoroughly investigated the 1950s and 1960s as a golden age of U.S. public diplomacy in Latin America, media-focused projects initiated by the U.S. government in social media networks have not been studied at all, and consequently, current historiographers know little about the work of international broadcasting channels in the region (Alarcón, Álvarez, & Hidalgo, 2016; Jacobs, 2018; Loayza, 2013).

At the same time, researchers have examined Latin America and Venezuela in studies addressing democratization, often to underscore the controversial role of the U.S. government in political transformations that have clashed with the national identities of Latin American countries (Emerson, 2012; Scott & Carter, 2016). The discourse on human rights and aid as the imperative of the US foreign policy and its public diplomacy is widely represented in the scholarship. The scholars review the details of both US development policy and the promotion of human rights introducing the thesis about the correlation of the soft power and public diplomacy to the new US shifts in the foreign policy towards the countries of Latin American and around the world (Regilme & Fulo, 2018a, 2018b; Schoultz, 2014). The scholars connect the message on human rights with the public diplomacy concluding that the policy of the human right promotion was successful in some countries of Latin America including Venezuela (Sikkink, 2018, pp. 211, 213). William Robinson revises the scholarly discourse on the democracy promotion introducing the concept of polyarchy as a broader process of exercise the hegemony and democratization in the context of transnationalization (Robinson, 1996, p. 4). The public diplomacy is referred as the instrument for the democratic promotion and support of the opposition in the number of the counties in Latin America. Definitely, the previous scholarship has elaborated a strong conceptual grounding for the analysis of the US public diplomacy. However, the proposed discourses and methodology are appropriated for the research of the public diplomacy during the periods of 1940s–1990s, but not for the period of 2000s, when the digital diplomacy and data-driven diplomacy have revised the strategic imperatives of the US public diplomacy in terms of building a wide social and digital activism among target audience.

In response to both trends, in four sections in this article we offer new findings about post-Cold War U.S. public and digital diplomacy in Venezuela and Latin America. In the first section, we detail our methods and the data that we used from documents that served as primary sources. After that, in the second section, we analyze U.S. public diplomacy programs in Venezuela during the Cold War, most of which targeted elite members of the Venezuelan military as a means to counter the spread of communism in Latin America. Next, in the third section, we examine U.S. public diplomacy projects in Venezuela active during the 1990s and 2000s that sought to promote democracy in order to ensure U.S. interests in the region. Last, in the fourth section, we investigate how independent media in Venezuela and U.S. digital diplomacy have influenced political events in the country, especially the 2015 parliamentary elections and the 2018–2019 political crisis.

2. Methods, data, and sources
To not only manage historical documents but also process data from social media networks, our approach to the research involved qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Our document analysis, case study, comparative analysis, and other traditional qualitative methods of analysis
allowed us to reconstruct the measures taken by U.S. administrations to exert political influence in Venezuela and throughout Latin America from the 1950s to the 2000s. For those methods, our primary sources were reports from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI), among other organizations, all of which have operated as chief drivers of U.S. public diplomacy programs in terms of training party leaders as well as other political and military elites. The reports of the Office of International Broadcasting, recently renamed the U.S. Agency for Global Media, were also key to our understanding of facets of American television and radio broadcasting in the region. Last, records of hearings held in the U.S. Congress about trends related to U.S. public diplomacy in Venezuela rounded out the corpus of primary sources that we qualitatively analyzed.

Data from social media networks and the accounts of U.S. and Venezuelan media groups, politicians, and other organizations that play active roles in the Venezuelan Internet cluster were also primary sources for our study. We subjected those sources to big data analysis in order to define the primary influential actors in Venezuela and the most influential messages disseminated via social media networks in the country. In particular, we analyzed data from social media platforms, especially Twitter, which has become one of the most popular forums for political discussions in and about Venezuela. The dataset from Twitter comprised all tweets containing #Venezuela, posted either in English and Spanish, which we selected given the informal rule that the use of the country’s hashtag indicates information being conveyed to specific audiences about specific developments in Venezuela. The dataset represents the period from 1 November 2015, to 31 January 2016, during which Venezuela held historic parliamentary elections that afforded new means of political power in the country to oppositional parties. It also includes the period from 1 December 2018, to 31 March 2019, when President of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó proclaimed himself president of Venezuela following presidential elections in which confrontations unfolded between his supporters and followers of the current president, Nicolás Maduro. Focusing on social media data from the time of those events allowed us to elucidate the impact of U.S. digital diplomacy on political transformations in Venezuela. In total, the dataset comprises 5,018,478 tweets about the parliamentary elections and 9,706,330 tweets about the political crisis. To organize those data, we identified the 250 most popular tweets and the 100 most influential Twitter accounts in the dataset, which helped us to determine the relative influence of U.S. government accounts among other public opinion makers in Venezuela. The results of our analysis of the dataset appear in the fourth section of the article.

2.1. U.S. engagement of Venezuela’s military and youth during the cold war

The expansion of the communist ideology across Latin America became a major problem for the United States beginning in the late 1950s. Since that time, Latin America has endured more military coups than any other region in the world. During the Cold War from 1945 to 1990, the region experienced 80 military coups in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Lehoucq & Pérez-Liñán, 2014). For the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union, the politically volatile context in Latin America became a premise for developing special forms of foreign policy and public diplomacy that prioritized the engagement of the region’s militaries. In response to Soviet pro-communist acts of influence in the region, U.S. countermeasures sought the establishment of alliances by way of the Act of Bogota in September 1960 and the Alliance for Progress, initiated in the following year. To undermine the popularity of leftists in Latin America, those and similar strategies by the U.S. government awarded economic and military assistance to the region’s countries with the aim of forging an ideological consensus between the United States and Latin American societies. To that end, the primary strategies employed were ones of public diplomacy—namely, cultural and academic exchanges as well as programs to train leaders of the military and shapers of public opinion.

Problems with national defense in all Latin American countries at the time, especially Venezuela, spurred U.S. public diplomacy to concentrate on influencing the region’s militaries. Indeed, such problems explain why the number of military personnel consistently exceeded that of other groups
The training of military personnel from Latin American countries in the United States has a long history. In 1939, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that the United States would train members of Latin American militaries at American universities and U.S. military academies, as well as send U.S. military experts to the region (Brawn & Opie, 1955, p. 8; Gellman, 1979, p. 154). Since 1940, the U.S. government has intensely funded military training programs throughout Latin America in institutions such as a training center built in the Panama Canal Zone, the Institute of Military Assistance in South Carolina, and the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island.

Unsurprisingly, during the 1960s, military training became the largest project in U.S. public diplomacy. In programs intended to realize that project’s objective, participants studied not only military skills but also civics and English, and by the mid-1960s, roughly 600 training camps had been established throughout Latin America to engage local military personnel. Likewise, senior officers engaged in brief training programs at U.S. military academies, including the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado, the U.S. Naval Academy in Maryland, and the U.S. War Academy in New York, and also by the mid-1960s, more than 60 senior officers from most Latin American countries had been trained in the United States. Venezuela and officers of its military became primary targets of those training and development programs. In the early 1960s, Venezuela received the bulk of U.S. assistance funneled into Latin America, including in the form of military education programs, which received $376 million in 1962 and $280 million in 1963.

At the same time, U.S. public diplomacy also targeted the youth of Venezuela. Of all people, the U.S. government believed, youth were not only the most susceptible to the looming influence of procommunist movements but also prone to develop misconceptions, potentially dangerous ones, about the United States. Guided by that thinking, Washington introduced cultural and educational projects to eradicate anti-Americanism among Venezuela’s youth. Beginning with the Eisenhower administrations, the U.S. government elaborated a plan for conducting large-scale cultural diplomacy in order to dissuade young people from allying with communists. To prevent Venezuela and Latin America in general from being drawn into the Soviet sphere of influence, the United States considered international exchange programs, exhibitions, and films to be the most effective means of strengthening friendly relations with Venezuela and its youth.

In education, the number of scholarships for students and of grants for the construction of new centers of education, linguistic institutes, and libraries in Venezuela increased, and American universities received support from the U.S. government to increase and expand the lecture tours of their faculty in Venezuela. Added to that, nearly all universities in Latin America entered into contracts with the U.S. government to modernize their curricula, libraries, and teaching methods. Perhaps the most ambitious educational project of U.S. public diplomacy in Latin America was the establishment of 120 bilingual education and information centers across the region, which proved exceptionally useful in increasing the number of visits by young people who did not know English. In Venezuela alone, more than 18,000 students studied basic English in 15 centers in a single year (Department of State, 1965, pp. 19–20). Another strategy of the U.S. government to engage the youth was to train leaders of youth organizations, whose representatives matriculated into American universities to gain exposure to student life and the ideals of self-governance and democracy. Along with that effort, transformations to modernize higher education to align with patterns of American life, which included the introduction of pro-democracy perspectives in various disciplines, effectively made an impression on youth in the country (U.S. Congress, 1958, p. 11).

Beyond education, international broadcasting channels such as Voice of America expanded their broadcasts into Venezuela, and the United States Information Agency, a primary actor in public diplomacy, disseminated books and films for consumption in Venezuela. The U.S. government even hosted prospective leaders in the field of academics, politics, army, and etc. from the country in the United States during the era. To further support efforts of public diplomacy, the Foreign
Assistance Act of 1961 granted most of the mentioned projects massive financial support from the U.S. government.

However, U.S. officials occasionally recognized that its public diplomacy targeting youth and other groups in Latin America were not as effective as expected. Some programs did not improve the positive image of the United States, and according to government reports, targeted individuals such as writers, scholars, teachers, journalists, and artists frequently and fiercely accused the United States of exploiting Latin American countries and their people. Among other findings, such reports concluded that the intelligentsia of Venezuela should be excluded from the list of target audiences of U.S. public diplomacy (U.S. US Advisory Commission, 1963, p. 23). In time, the realities of the Cold War would also shift U.S. public diplomacy from cultural exchanges with academia’s elite to the military as well as young leaders in order to control the political life of the region. Large-scale training of military personnel became the unparalleled priority of U.S. public diplomacy, and that approach distinguished Latin America from all other regions in which the United States sought to exert influence.

2.2. Developing political structures in Venezuela, 1990s–2000s
Following the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, as the spread of communism waned, U.S. funding redirected to public diplomacy projects in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union sidelined Latin American countries from their former priority in U.S. public diplomacy. No longer regarded as vulnerable to Soviet influence or as threats to the United States and the American way of life as they had been for decades, Latin American societies, Venezuela’s in particular, experienced the de-escalation of U.S. programs of public diplomacy. Although such programs providing military training most visibly declined, funding for international American broadcasting in Latin America also diminished, even to the point of being inadequate to support their operations. Any problems in the region that once seemed to urgently require the mobilization of a robust policy of soft power now seemed to pale in comparison to opportunities for concentrating U.S. public diplomacy elsewhere in the world. In the view held by U.S. experts and officials, the countries of Latin America had emerged from decades of U.S. public diplomacy during the Cold War as testaments to the success of such diplomacy and now marched toward democracy hand-in-hand with a system of open, transparent, fair elections. Indeed, whereas only three of the region’s countries in early 1980s had held free elections, by the early 2000s every country had achieved that milestone except Cuba (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005).

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, as once-prominent programs and projects were ushered out of the region, USAID, the NDI, and the IRI entered as the principal institutions of U.S. public diplomacy, the aims of which were to continue supporting democratization and prospective political transitions in Latin America. Interestingly, all three institutions pinpointed Venezuela as the key target for democratization efforts, especially ones that could support open elections and a new generation of young, impressionable politicians. The top reason for their interest was the political activity of Hugo Chávez, an emerging leader among Venezuelans whose political activity the United States increasingly monitored, even to the point of organizing public opinion polls to evaluate his popularity compared to that of other national political figures. In response to Chávez’s appeal, USAID, the NDI, and the IRI worked closely with Venezuela’s National Electoral Council in order to persuade Venezuelan officials to be more transparent about their elections. Not only that, but the institutions also cooperated with alternative presidential candidates as well as members of the National Assembly and Venezuela’s military. As time would tell, such projects laid the foundation for the construction of a new strategy of U.S. public diplomacy that entailed supporting certain political campaigns by training candidates in preparation to become leaders (International Republican Institute [IRI], 1998).

In the early 2000s, however, a sharp decline in the popularity of liberal ideas in Venezuela and throughout the region became visible. Only about 43% of Venezuela’s population supported democracy, whereas 55% were in favor of an authoritarian regime, as long as such a regime’s politicians could resolve economic and social problems. Likewise, minimal trust was extended to
elements of a democratic state such as a variety of political parties and courts, whereas positive attitudes toward security and policy agencies were registered among citizens (Katel, 2006; U.S. House of Representatives, 2005). In Venezuela, the number of people, especially in the underserved population, who supported Chávez, made president in 1999, grew. At the same time, an opposition movement in Venezuela rapidly and openly developed that rendered the country’s political landscape one of the most divided in terms of citizens’ ideological preferences. Such a dynamic created a unique political situation in Venezuela, whose political system then seemed open to nearly every sort of influence.

In response, as the United States reduced its projects aimed at engaging the military, it also expanded programs for developing political structures and transforming political events such as elections. With programs comprising projects in civic education, the establishment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties, U.S. public diplomacy began targeting other individuals in Venezuela—politicians, opinion leaders, party leaders, journalists, and civic activists—who were believed capable of sustaining the country’s democratic development (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005). In 2002, for example, focused on fostering U.S. interaction with governmental and oppositional parties, media groups, and NGOs in Venezuela, the United States began pursuing a new program of public diplomacy with the aims of supporting political campaigns, establishing new independent media, fostering public political discussions, developing NGOs, and nurturing a new generation of leaders (U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID] 2010). To those ends, the U.S. government has spent $10–20 million annually on implementing the project, compared to annual USAID investments of more than $300 million to support military programs and youth training in Venezuela during the Cold War (USAID, 2019a).

Prior to Venezuela’s 2015 National Assembly elections, U.S. public diplomacy sought to open and sustain channels of communication with both the regime in power and the opposition. The United States relied on maintaining a broad political forum and elections in which parties of all political wings could participate, and in those unique efforts of public diplomacy, Venezuelan television and its numerous political talk shows played a key role. The approach became particularly vivid in 2004, when a referendum on the power of President Chávez was arranged. In the frameworks of various television programs, seminars, and conferences, American experts engaged both supporters of Chávez and his opponents in a bid to ensure the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power from one party to another without any military coups. Similarly, the discussions among different parties were introduced to create a consensus in Venezuelan society that a peaceful transition of power could and would be executed that respected democratic procedure. Of the three major U.S. institutions involved, the IRI worked closely with different political parties in Venezuela by conducting training courses for political candidates, public observers, and consultants. The IRI also coached the advisors for both the ruling and oppositional parties in such fields as advertising and political advocacy. Meanwhile, the NDI provided technical and financial support to various parties in Venezuela as well as trained their advisors in the ways of political dialogue and coalition building that could triumph in parliamentary elections (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005).

Although such projects undoubtedly intensified the competition between the pro-government and opposition parties, U.S. public diplomacy did not seek to support a certain party or coalition of pro-liberal opposition parties (USAID, 2005). On the contrary, the projects assisted a variety of parties in an effort to reinforce the diversity of Venezuela’s political landscape in the early 2000s. As a case in point, the leadership of the popular democracy movement Democracia Entre Nosotros (“Democracy Among Us”) received training at U.S.-led seminars, and perhaps as a result, many of its candidates gained votes in local elections in 2005 and 2006. At the same time, more than 4,000 bureaucrats and politicians loyal to Chávez’s government were also trained in the frameworks of those seminars (USAID, 2006). The idea of sustaining a dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition took support from a USAID project that involved arranging 1,500 meetings at various levels of Venezuelan society in which more than 100,000 activists participated. All the while, the NDI and IRI scouted for
new young leaders of pro-liberal parties to replace politicians in Caracas and run in the next presidential elections (JRI, 2005; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2006).

However, as Chávez’s anti-Americanism and his pressure on U.S. projects in Venezuela mounted, U.S. public diplomacy somewhat altered its course by increasingly favoring the opposition. As president, although Chávez restricted but did not prohibit the activities of U.S. government organizations, his criticism of Venezuelans and political parties who collaborated with the United States gradually intensified. Consequently, numerous political campaigns began using the rhetoric that government parties should struggle not only for the people of Venezuela but also against other parties supported by the U.S. government (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2006). Tensions came to a head following the 2007 referendum to increase the presidential term from 6 to 7 years, when a substantial number of citizens voted against the constitutional reform. In response, Chávez proclaimed the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, Patrick Duddy, to be a persona non grata due to his interference in the domestic affairs of Venezuela (USAID, 2008a). In time, the event would prove to be a major juncture in U.S. public diplomacy in the country. As expert observers concluded, collaborating with Venezuela’s National Assembly had emerged as a potentially effective vehicle for political transformation, if only a majority or even a sizeable majority of seats could be gained by winning parliamentary elections (National Endowment for Democracy [NED], 2015). Accordingly, the new goal of U.S. projects of public diplomacy geared toward political transformation in Venezuela was to make the National Assembly a strong democratic institution (USAID, 2019b).

In the years that followed, U.S. public diplomacy aimed at supporting free elections and the participation of opposition parties therein by drastically strengthening the media-based component of its policy in Venezuela. In particular, Voice of America became a widespread digital platform including not only various FM channels on Venezuelan radio but also Internet TV and direct communications with audiences that was able to attract more than 20 million people in the region to its programs (Broadcasting Board for Governors [BBG], 2014). Voice of America even managed to establish a partnership with local channels to disseminate news from the United States that included American views on the events in Venezuela. Approximately 100 channels in Venezuela disseminated the information of the American broadcasting channel that, in comparison with other countries, seemed to be a clear success of public diplomacy in the country (BBG, 2015, 2019).

When Venezuela began sinking into the global financial crisis that boosted the popularity of opposition parties in the country, public opinion polls gave American experts an understanding of the preferences of ordinary Venezuelans about candidates for the National Assembly (USAID, 2008b). With such information, U.S. public diplomacy generally provided broad political advocacy for pro-liberal parties in a few important ways. For one, before the elections, a new organization for the counting of votes and training of observers was created called the Center for Electoral Assistance and Promotion. The Center published polls and organized a conference about the elections that not only attracted the attention of the international community but also limited possible coercive actions by defeated authorities against newly elected members of the National Assembly.

Moreover, the NDI conducted more than 10 workshops for 67 friendly journalists who studied ways in which an interactive digital platform could be used for counting votes and tracking voter fraud. The journalists received more than 70 templates of prospective, attractive new headlines for use during the elections. About 1,202 volunteers were trained to disseminate information and footage via social media networks about voter fraud, while 9,000 trained observers were able to control roughly 500 polling stations were such fraud had previously been recorded (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening [CEPPS], 2016; Palau-Sampio, 2018).

Last, the substantial amount of independent media groups that had cooperated with the United States in educational projects created conditions for the rapid spread of information. The most well-known monitoring digital platform, Distrito Capital, managed to accumulate information from
all polling stations, which raised public awareness of what was happening in the elections in real time. For its part, the NDI mobilized local journalists working at 40 broadcast channels to report instances of voter fraud, disparage the image of pro-government parties, and maintain a ceaseless flow of information from polling stations. In support, a so-called “electoral media alliance” was formed of various webpages that broadcasted about one hundred different stories related to the elections that proclaimed the victory of the opposition. As part of that alliance, popular voices aired on social media via interviews with ordinary voters and observers who discussed violations at polling stations. When such information was covered by radio and television outlets alike, pro-government channels could not ignore the situation. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were also mobilized, and more than 1,200 posts were published about acts of voter fraud and the victory of opposition candidates. The alliance of the communication networks in both traditional and digital dimensions worked exceedingly well, as the cooperation of oppositional leaders, observers, bloggers, and journalists emerged as having played a decisive role in the victory of opposition candidates (CEPPS, 2016).

In that way, projects of U.S. public diplomacy in Venezuela contributed to the victory of the coalition of democratic parties at the 2015 National Assembly elections. When the coalition won seats and the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela lost control of the parliament, the victory marked the first after the 16-year reign of the Chavismo movement (NED, 2014).

2.3. The digitalization of politics: communicating #Venezuela on Twitter

The contribution of U.S. programs of public diplomacy to Venezuela's political transformation has also surfaced in its digital diplomacy (Adesina, 2017; Gainous, Wagner, & Gray, 2016). Also known as “Twitter diplomacy” and “Internet diplomacy,” digital diplomacy has become a cohesive part of public diplomacy, soft power, and sharp power that has contributed to phenomena such as the digitalization of international relations. In response, a range of experts have questioned the impact of the planned actions of states using social media that could amplify social and political discussions in other states. The 2011 Arab Spring, the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, the endless war in Syria, and other events have all been incisively discussed in terms of digital diplomacy (Tsvetkova, 2019).

The analysis of tweets, or posts on Twitter, related to Venezuela has revealed a highly specific picture: that the international broadcasting of the United States and other states has not directly affected the community of social media users in Venezuela. It also reveals that U.S. public diplomacy has long cooperated with oppositional, independent radio stations as well as mass media and local television channels that have relayed messages from the United States into foreign states. In Venezuela in particular, the influence of pro-liberal, online broadcasting channels skyrocketed during two events in Venezuela’s political life: the 2015 National Assembly elections, in which members of the opposition scored notable victories, and the political crisis of 2018–2019, when President of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó declared himself Venezuela’s new president. However, in both cases, no direct informational impact came from international U.S. channels officially involved in public diplomacy.

Such cases warrant investigation to identify whether and, if so, then how their chief influencers and primary popular messages have contributed to shaping political discourse in Venezuela. As mentioned in the introduction, we applied big data analysis to examine all tweets containing #Venezuela in both Spanish and English on Twitter from before, during, and after the National Assembly elections (i.e., from 1 November 2015, to 31 January 2016) and from the period surrounding Guaidó’s announcement of his presidency (i.e., from 1 December 2018, to 31 March 2019). Since Twitter has become a source for analyzing political stances and politically significant information, we explored Twitter discussions regarding both cases. The datasets comprised 5,018,478 tweets from the first period and 9,706,330 tweets from the second. The analysis allowed us to identify the most influential Twitter accounts that had addressed Venezuela and the
most popular tweets in terms of reaching an audience that could influence the political preferences of citizens.

On the one hand, regarding the elections to the National Assembly, political mapping of Venezuela’s social media networks revealed several trends. First, in early November 2015, the activity of broadcasting channels on the liberal, independent media spectrum dramatically intensified. Such channels criticized the economic policy of President Nicolás Maduro and illustrated the horrors of the country’s situation. Independent media such as DolarToday, the El Nacional, and the Columbian channel NTN24 surfaced as the most popular among Twitter users and framed the core of the discussion and of information that was “trending,” so to speak, on social media. Their posts called for democratic change in response to details revealed about the economic crisis in Venezuela. The channels interpreted future parliamentary elections as advantageous for the opposition and attracted citizens with statements about the corruption of Venezuela’s current government.

Second, the digital diplomacy of pro-government blogs, mass media, and activists was poorly organized. Some tweets blamed the United States for all of Venezuela’s troubles or else highlighted the people’s love of Maduro; neither type of tweet was especially popular. However, each post from Maduro’s personal account was more popular than the posts of independent media groups, as shown by the greater number of retweets and “likes” that they received. Despite the possible activity of bots, the number of tweets from Maduro’s official and personal accounts was fewer than that of posts from oppositional media outlets. In the context of the unpopularity of pro-government media, an information rivalry developed between the president and the broad movement of oppositional media. The result of the confrontation was predictable in terms of the victory of the oppositional information channels, which attracted increasingly more readers with each passing day.

Third, the Unidad Venezuela movement, a coalition of oppositional parties that would win seats at the National Assembly during the parliamentary elections, gained popularity among social media users only a month before the elections. The popularity of the coalition’s posts began to mount when the opposition promised the improved national development of Venezuela were it to emerge from the elections victorious.

Fourth, there was no strong informational activity on the part of any U.S., Russian, or other foreign-state channel in Venezuela’s Internet cluster. That phenomenon is a rather unusual and thus fascinating one compared with the Syrian case, for example, in which local mass media outlets and bloggers have been relatively inconsequential, thereby leaving a vacuum to be filled by a variety of foreign media organizations and bloggers from the United States, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, among other countries, who have actively disseminated posts to users of the Syrian online community. Although state media in Venezuela cooperate with foreign actors, they consistently pursue the state’s agenda. Only in mid-November 2015 were media outlets such as CNN and RT in Spanish able to break into the market of social media networking in Venezuela and, in turn, offer attractive political messages. However, in most cases, foreign media have simply reproduced the messages of Venezuela’s state media. While CNN aired the thesis of the deterioration of the country’s economic situation in supporting the oppositional channels of the country, Russia Today, broadcasted in Spanish, aired the chief messages articulated by Maduro about U.S. interference in the elections. For example, CNN reported “¿Enfrentará Venezuela la crisis económica más larga de su historia? (‘Will Venezuela face the longest economic crisis in its history?’), while RT broadcasted “Crece la campaña informativa del exterior para afectar las elecciones en Venezuela” (“The information campaign from abroad grows to affect the elections in Venezuela”), as shown in Table 1.

Although Maduro’s personal account remained popular among the Venezuelan population, the scope of activity of independent media was significantly greater than that of the president and his supporters. Even if bots were not exploited, the presidential account alone could not compete with all of the accounts of independent media. In addition, the agenda of those independent media was reproduced by media in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other states that broadcast...
similar posts. By contrast, a Russian channel supported the political discourse articulated by the ruling party and Maduro. Consequently, the unpopularity of pro-government channels in social media networks seems to have affected the audience and its voting tendencies.

The information of U.S. government-sponsored channels such as Voice of America was not popular among audiences in Venezuela, however. In fact, no single tweet or post of the channel ranked among the most popular tweets. Such findings suggest that during the 2015 election season, no direct impact of information from international American broadcasters was affiliated with the U.S. government’s public diplomacy. It should be noted that CNN is not part of official U.S. government public diplomacy. Nevertheless, strong cooperation with local media broadcasters that have been partners of Voice of America since the early 2000s allowed the United States to maintain public discussions about the future of Venezuela and contributed to the popularity of the oppositional coalition in the context of the global economic crisis.

On the other hand, the self-proclamation of Juan Guaidó as president of Venezuela at the end of 2018 revealed an entirely different political disposition of social media networks, for a new, unique digital confrontation of individual politicians replaced the information war between oppositional media and the Venezuelan government. As the U.S. government openly supported the opposition against Maduro and developed more active digital diplomacy, Washington became part of the political discourse in Venezuela’s social media networks. In fact, the most popular tweet from the account of the U.S. Embassy regarded possible assistance to Venezuela by the United States in the case of total economic collapse: “Estados Unidos está listo para ofrecer asistencia de emergencia en alimentos y medicinas al pueblo de Venezuela, si tan sólo el gobierno de Maduro lo aceptara. Nuestras sanciones lo permiten” (“The United States is ready to offer emergency assistance with food and medicine to the people of Venezuela, if only the Maduro government would accept it. Our sanctions allow it”).

Table 1. Most popular Twitter accounts and tweets, November 2015

| Account            | Tweet (Spanish with English translation)                                                                 | Likes | Responses | Retweets |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|----------|
| Nicolás Maduro     | Tremenda jornada en la Cumbre UNASUR y países Árabes, y en Venezuela se mantiene la Ofensiva de Calle con el Pueblo. (“Tremendous day at the UNASUR Summit and in Arab countries and in Venezuela that have maintained the Street Campaign with the people”). | 305   | 161       | 1,583    |
| NTN24 Venezuela    | “Ya está bueno ya” la campaña opositora que toca la fibra de la peor crisis de Venezuela. (“It’s good now, the opposition campaign that touches the fiber of the worst crisis in Venezuela”). | 35    | 3         | 136      |
| CNN en Español     | A pesar de hacer recortes grandes en importaciones, Venezuela tiene que usar ahorros y liquidar activos. (“Despite making large cuts in imports, Venezuela has to use savings and liquidate assets”). | 42    | 9         | 67       |
| RT en Español      | Venezuela logra un acuerdo bi-regional contra el intervencionismo de EE.UU. (“Venezuela achieves a bi-regional agreement against U.S. interventionism”). | 22    | 4         | 91       |
| BBC News Mundo     | Piden en La Haya que se investigue al gobierno de #Venezuela en muertes de opositores. (“They ask in The Hague to investigate the role of the government of #Venezuela in the deaths of opponents”). | 31    | 3         | 77       |
| Unidad Venezuela   | Transparencia electoral no está garantizada en Venezuela. (“Electoral transparency is not guaranteed in Venezuela”). | 6     | 1         | 60       |
then, U.S. digital diplomacy has become more offensive and emphasized the unacceptability of hard policies toward the opposition and its leaders. Tweets about the possibility of military support by politicians such as U.S. Senator Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor John Bolton began growing in popularity, just as numerous other tweets damaged Maduro’s image. All of those trends along with a broad international coalition for the recognition of Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president assured audiences about Maduro’s impending surrender of power. In that context, Venezuelan media of both pro-Maduro and pro-Guaidó wings did not create popular or significant tweets, which left social media networks open to external forces that allowed foreign voices to shape trends in the spread of information. Various channels of the United States, European countries, and Russia clashed to attract users in the Venezuelan online community, and that state of affairs resembled the situation of the previous six years in Syria, where tweets from Saudi Arabia, United States, Turkey, and Russia have been far more influential than the voices of Syrians themselves.

However, the situation began to shift in January 2019, when an information confrontation between Maduro and Guaidó became visible and, in turn, formed a unique political discourse. Both politicians mobilized resources of their personal digital diplomacy by promoting their agendas on social media on a daily basis and soliciting support from their target audiences. As the popularity of both figures changed from day to day, Maduro sought to explain to Venezuelans that he was the legitimate president and had always abided by the Constitution, then Guaidó sought to explain the legitimacy of his political stance. However, the situation was unstable in terms of their popularity among the users, and at times, tweets from Maduro were more popular than ones from his opponent (Table 2). Moreover, since February 2019, a decline in the activity of foreign channels, oppositional media outlets, and bloggers also became observable, as the crisis became prolonged to the point of seeming stagnant and as no real action had been taken except the vocalization of threats from Washington, Moscow, and Brussels. Consequently, it seemed that the crisis was too complicated to resolve via mediate, information-laden campaigns.

Table 2 reveals that whereas Maduro sought to assert the legitimacy of his power via tweets, Guaidó sought to encourage the people to listen to the opposition. However, the political

| Table 2. Popularity of tweets by Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó on Twitter, January 2019 |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Politician         | Tweet (Spanish with English translation)         | Likes | Responses | Retweets |
| Nicolás Maduro    | En un acto que reafirma la paz y la fortaleza institucional de Venezuela ... cumpi con la Constitución y asumí el cargo de Presidente de la República 2019–2025, para conducir democráticamente el destino de nuestra patria hacia un futuro mejor. (“In an act that reaffirms the peace and institutional strength of Venezuela ... I complied with the Constitution and assumed the Office of President of the Republic 2019–2025, to democratically lead the destiny of our country to a better future.”). | 2,384  | 448   | 2,708  |
| Juan Guaidó       | Al pueblo de Venezuela y a la Comunidad Internacional, los invito que a través de las medias digitales ... vean y escuchen el pronunciamiento que emitiremos desde la Directiva de la @AsambleaVE. (“I invite the people of Venezuela and the International Community to see and hear the pronouncement that we will issue from the Directive of the @AsambleaVE [National Assembly].”). | 1,956  | 481    | 2,600  |
amplification of their messages and the watershed moment remained strong, even if the audience’s loyalty was visibly divided between Maduro and Guaidó, both of whose tweets achieved roughly the same number of retweets, likes, and responses.

3. Conclusion
U.S. public diplomacy in Venezuela has always responded to challenges facing the country with an eye to mitigate perceived threats to U.S. national security. During the Cold War, in response to a series of military coups in Venezuela, U.S. projects of cultural exchange and propaganda targeted groups of military officers who could influence the country’s political development, contribute to the rollback of communism, and strengthen the position of the United States in Venezuela and, by extension, throughout Latin America. The context of the Cold War and the ideological rivalry of the United States with communists thus encouraged the U.S. government to limit programs geared toward the development of democracy in Venezuela in favor of ones that involved influencing its military.

In the 1990s, by contrast, the United States abandoned its large-scale project of influencing Venezuela’s military by shifting its projects of public diplomacy to the political arena by seeking free, fair elections that could transform the country into a full-fledged democracy. In those efforts, the establishment of NGOs, interactions with a new generation of politicians, and the cultivation of coalitions became the main facets of U.S. public diplomacy in Venezuela, where the United States sought involvement in various political developments supporting parties of regimes in power as well as of the opposition. Even before the 2015 National Assembly elections in the country, however, full U.S. support of the liberal opposition, including with training and information-focused campaigns, surfaced as the priority of U.S. public diplomacy. As the global economic crisis and decline in Nicolás Maduro’s popularity cultivated conditions for the support of liberal political movements, hundreds of new independent media were created to mobilize Venezuelans to vote and to provide political advocacy campaigns in anticipation of the elections, and ultimately, both sorts of public diplomacy contributed to the opposition’s victories.

Both then and now, the development of social media networks has allowed the United States to disseminate its stance through numerous local channels of information in Venezuela, even if local mass media have recently been more influential than international American broadcasting by, for example, Voice of America. In particular, the 2015 parliamentary elections in Venezuela revealed the effectiveness of cooperative work by oppositional, independent media efforts that have achieved popularity among Venezuelans. Later, the political crisis of 2018–2019 was marked by straightforward, open appeals and tweets on the part of U.S. officials amid the relative weakness of messages from local media. Similar to tweets from other foreign influencers, those from American broadcasters achieved some popularity. Nevertheless, local audiences were more engaged in the information rivalry between two figures, Maduro and Guaidó, both of whom claimed to be president of Venezuela. Consequently, as our results show, social media networks that shape the unique landscape of the dissemination of information, whether in Venezuela or elsewhere, can generate unpredictable consequences in the political life of states at home and abroad.

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Note
1. We used a computer program written in the programming language Python with Beautiful Soup, a package for analyzing documents, to collect and analyze data obtained from the “Twitter Advanced Search” webpage, a publicly open source of information about previously published tweets.

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