

2021 Venezuelan Elections and BBC’s “Due” Impartiality: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) is a major source of information for the public in the United Kingdom, and as a public broadcasting company, it is often perceived to be neutral or impartial and to objectively report news and other information. However, their coverage of the 2021 Venezuelan election results appeared biased. This essay analyses an article about the Venezuelan election published on its web news service on 22 November 2021 using Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It pays close attention to semantic choices around social actors and their actions concerning this event and attempts to elicit what is told, or not told, in this ‘story’ to assess how ‘impartial’ the coverage actually is.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis, BBC, 2021 Venezuela elections, due impartiality

Introduction

On 21 November 2021, regional elections were held to select governors and mayors across Venezuela, and the results of the elections were reported by media agencies including the Reuters, the BBC and Al Jazeera the following day. The significance of this set of elections was that the main opposition parties took part for the first time in four years after boycotting previous ballots, as they questioned the fairness and transparency of the country’s electoral process. Furthermore, an EU observer mission of 130 members was present across the country for this vote.¹

Different media outlets showed a stark difference in their reporting of the event. For example, Al Jazeera reported on the same election results with a different tone from the BBC. The fact that it was covered with

¹ Al Jazeera, “Venezuela ruling socialist party, allies sweep regional elections”, 22 November 2021.

some difference in itself may not be so surprising to many, given the agencies' widely perceived differing political alignments which, for some, may be explained as a reflection of their geopolitical locations. However, what is noticeable is the extent of the differences.

This essay examines a news article by the BBC on the results of the elections, focusing on Fairclough's three dimensions of critical discourse analysis, namely description, interpretation, and explanation,² drawing particular attention to semiotic choices. Semiotic resources include individual words and visual elements,³ which allow discourse participants to describe, interpret, and explain any particular instance of natural and social phenomena, and semiotic choices are made so that discourse performs certain functions. The relationship between social actors and their actions in discourse, as well as which information is included, or omitted, is of particular interest, as they can express attitudes and ideologies. The results of the analysis bring into question the level of impartiality, real or perceived, which the BBC has pledged to adhere to.

Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary study of language and has its origin in Critical Linguistics, which sought to show how language can be used as an *ideological instrument*,⁴ and is based on the premise from which Systemic Functional Linguistics operates, that "language structure is integrally related to social function and context"⁵ and that "linguistics, as well as language, has different functions."⁶ Critical discourse analysts not only see language and grammar as an abstract set of organizing principles that enables the use of language, i.e., knowing what form it takes, but are also concerned with knowing how it functions.⁷ Critical discourse analysts look at language as a system of choices and seek to develop methods and theory that better capture the interrelationship social functions and contexts. They strive to draw out and describe the practices and conventions in, and behind, texts that reveal political and

² Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 2015, pp58-59.

³ David Machin and Andrea Myrr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2012, pp30-32.

⁴ Machin and Myrr, *ibid.*, p5

⁵ Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, "Genre in Linguistic Traditions: Systemic Functional and Corpus Linguistics," 2010, p29.

⁶ Roger Fowler, "On critical linguistics," 1996, p3.

⁷ H.G. Widdowson, *Linguistics*, 2003, p27.

ideological investment. The primary focus in analyzing public discourse such as advertising, marketing, and political and media discourse, is on how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse,⁸ and to address the importance of patterns of access to discourse.⁹

Critical discourse analysts regard discourse as a communicative event, and the analysis of such events as the analysis of the relationships between three dimensions or facets of that event, which Fairclough calls “*text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice.*”¹⁰ Texts can be written or spoken, and they may or may not include visual elements such as photographs or other images. Their analysis involves linguistic analysis including the analysis of vocabulary, grammar, semantics, the sound system and writing system,¹¹ focusing on description, or style, and possible interpretation (see figure 1).

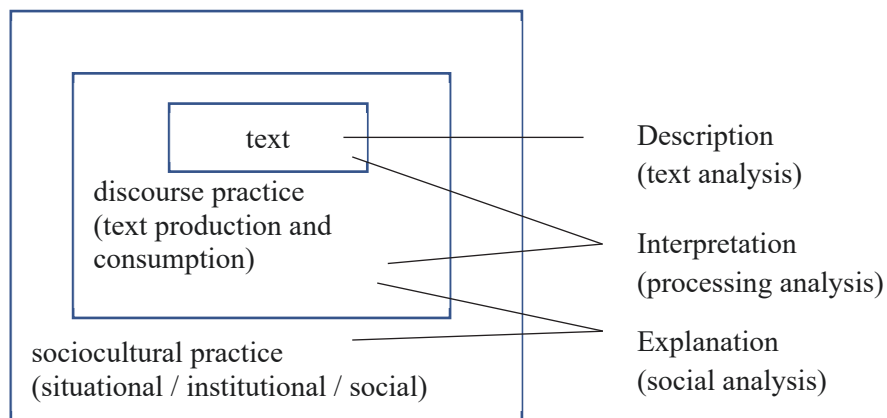


Figure 1: Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse and discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995)

Texts are seen to be multifunctional, namely, *ideational, interpersonal, and textual*.¹² Ideational function is about what information is or is not contained in the text. It refers to particular representations and recontextualizations of social practice, which perhaps carry particular ideologies. Close attention is paid to the relationship between actors and actions, which SFL refers to as *processes*, and social actors can be both actors and beneficiaries of *processes*. Interpersonal function focuses on a particular construction of the relationship among participants, which influences, and is influenced by, texts. It is concerned with how the

⁸ Machin and Mayr, *ibid.*

⁹ Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse, power and access," 1996, p.84.

¹⁰ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 1995, p57.

¹¹ Fairclough, *ibid.*, p57.

¹² Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, p58.

text enacts attitudes and social relations. The process in which such lexical choice is made is guided by this relationship and any conceivable interpretations by recipients. The choice is also reflective of its context. Textual function determines how the text is structured and linked to other texts and the wider discourse outside the text itself, so that it makes sense and is cohesive.

Discourse practice refers to the processes of text production and text consumption, some of which have a more institutional character such as editorial procedures involved in the production of media texts, while others are discourse processes in a narrower sense, for example the transformations which texts undergo in production and consumption.¹³

Interpretations are generated through description in the text and “what is ‘in’ the interpreter,” or background knowledge that the interpreter has, which shapes and is shaped by sociocultural practice.¹⁴ Sociocultural practice refers to the social and cultural surroundings which the communicative event is a part of.¹⁵ Its analysis is at a norm level and is concerned with the standards of the society where the text is produced and consumed, which provides the texts with their context. It may be an immediate situational context, the wider context of institutional practices in which the communicative event is embedded in, or even wider frame of the society and culture.

Like any other field of study, CDA is not without criticism, one of which points to its internal inconsistencies among researchers associated with CDA and the failure to establish an objective standpoint for research.¹⁶ It has also been claimed that it fails to satisfactorily integrate context and audience into the analytical framework, resulting in “naively deterministic assumptions about the workings of discourse and social reproduction.”¹⁷ It must also be noted that its use of analysis of change works differently from culture to culture, depending on whether discourse is taking place in a high or low context culture. With

¹³ Fairclough, *ibid.*, pp58-59.

¹⁴ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p155.

¹⁵ Fairclough, *Ibid.*, p62.

¹⁶ Ruth Breeze, “Critical Discourse Analysis and Its Critics”, *Pragmatics*, 2011, pp493-494.

¹⁷ Breeze, *ibid.*, p494.

these criticisms in mind, critical discourse analysts endeavour to understand and illuminate how power is exercised in a mediatized world.

The BBC and Its Editorial Guidelines

The BBC has been a major source of news and other information in the United Kingdom since its inception in 1922. As a public broadcasting company, the BBC is subject to broadcasting standards and guidelines enforced by Office of Communications (Ofcom).

The BBC, in its editorial guidelines, declares its commitment to "due impartiality" which is fundamental to their "reputation, [their] values and the trust of audiences."¹⁸ It is claimed to involve "more than a simple matter of balance between opposing viewpoints" but to be inclusive, to consider the broad perspective, and to ensure that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected. It does not require absolute neutrality on every issue. However, the BBC pledges to "always scrutinise arguments, question consensus and hold power to account with consistency and due impartiality."¹⁹

It follows the broadcasting code presented by Ofcom, which states that "due impartiality" does not mean either "an equal division of time has to be given to every view" nor "every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented," and that the approach to "due impartiality may vary" depending on "the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience as to content, and to the extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience."²⁰ In applying due impartiality to news, the BBC stipulates, that it gives "due weight to events, opinion and the main strands of argument."²¹ Ofcom additionally states that "broadcasters should not give undue prominence to the views and opinions of particular persons or bodies on matters of political or industrial controversy."²² However, the BBC states that its application of due impartiality on all output "exceeds this requirement."²³

¹⁸ BBC, Editorial Guidelines, Section 4.

¹⁹ BBC, *ibid.*

²⁰ Ofcom, The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, Section Five: Due impartiality and due accuracy, 05 January 2021.

²¹ BBC, Editorial Guidelines, Section 4.

²² Ofcom, The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, Section Five.

²³ BBC, *ibid.*

Analysis

This 442-word article was published on 22 November 2021 on BBC online²⁴ (Image 1). At the first glance, the redness of the photograph, with a dark tint, of President Nicolás Maduro and his supporters is prominent along with the headline “Cuba congratulate Venezuela on poll before result was out.” The colour red is often associated with communism and socialism, which is not widely endorsed in countries like the United Kingdom. Six individuals wearing red, which is often seen as a signature colour for socialist parties like the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, are included in this photograph increasing the prominence of this colour over others. The second photograph in the article, on the other hand, is predominantly blue, with a female EU election observer in a blue vest and other figures in similar coloured clothing in the background, makes a striking contrast with the previous image. The first photograph is unsaturated and appears dark, which gives an unfriendly look to the people in this picture. The caption of the photograph reads that President Maduro said the result was “a good triumph, a good result, a good victory, a good harvest” (Appendix, Image 1), emphasizing Maduro’s victorious mood by repeating the word “good” accompanied by words “triumph,” “victory,” and “harvest,” all of which have an overwhelmingly positive and celebrative tone.

The headline reads, “Cuba congratulates Venezuela on poll before result was out.” The actor in this instance is Cuba, a nominalization of the Cuban president, Miguel Díaz-Canal, and his administration. This sentence is active and declarative, and its process “congratulates” has a beneficiary, Venezuela, which is a nominalization of President Nicolás Maduro and his government. The information contained in the headline is, without any hedging, that Cuba congratulated Maduro’s victory prematurely, insinuating that the Cuban government knew the results even before they were announced, and thus the election was somehow rigged. The same sentence is repeated in the second paragraph of the article, with an additional clause describing Maduro as “a close ally” to Cuba, providing an immediate situational context which implies that the Cuban administration is in position to know something others may not. The article does not include any additional information on Cuba, but its political alignment is assumed to be widely known in a wider frame of society. The BBC does not clarify whether the “result” they refer to in their article is

²⁴ BBC, “Cuba congratulates Venezuela on poll before result was out,” 22 November 2021.

either an official or exit-poll result. The information is not available for readers to verify and is left to assumption.

The body of the article begins with a sentence in bold type face but in the same font size as the rest of the article, stating that "Venezuela's ruling party has won 20 out of 23 state governorship in regional elections", and that the elections were "the first in four years in which the main opposition parties took part." The mood of the heading is declarative and plainly reports the election results. However, it is followed by a sentence stating that opposition candidates "only won three governor's posts" and that the turnout was "low at 41.8%." The qualifying adverb "only" suggests that the writer expected Venezuela's opposition parties to win more than three seats and the results seem to be attributed to "low turnout," which is restated in the second part of the article.

The article continues that "The US said the elections were not free and fair." This statement, presented as indirect speech, is declarative and expresses a clear attitude about the election by negating the predicate adjectives, "free" and "fair," which are subjective and carry positivity and righteousness. It is followed by a comment from Anthony Blinken, with his name framed by his title "the US Secretary of State," rendering the statement official. He is quoted saying that the Venezuelan regime "grossly skewed the process to determine the result of this election long before any ballots had been cast," accusing Maduro of "rob[bing] Venezuelans of their chance to shape their own future." Strong words of criticism such as "skewed the process... long before any ballots had been cast" and "rob[bing] Venezuelans of their chance" are used and are qualified with a negative expression of "grossly." His view on both Maduro and this set of elections is explicitly conveyed without any hedging.

The second part of this article (Image 2) has a large heading, "No boycott but low turnout." The first paragraph plainly reports that this is the first election which Venezuela's main opposition parties have participated in for almost four years, but the process in the heading is described as "not boycotted" rather than being participated, with the expression of negativity. It goes on to explain the reason behind previous boycotts with an argument that the 2018 election, in which Maduro was re-elected, was "not a fair contest," and was "marred with vote-rigging claims." It states that more than 50 countries "refused to

recognise him as Venezuela’s legitimate leader.” The verb “refuse” suggests a strong will of the countries that have not endorsed the election result.

Furthermore, the article cites Maduro’s continued presidency as the motive for Venezuela’s main opposition parties “to change strategy and take part” in this set of elections as well as the European Union sending electoral observers. His presidency is described as Maduro being in the presidential “palace,” a synonym of a royal residence, stately home or mansion of an unelected sovereign, which carries an air of luxury and prestige, where only certain individuals are entitled to be, and not the presidential “office,” which sounds more democratic, professional, and official.

The article reports that “many opposition voters questioned” the change of strategy from boycotting to taking part, which appears to be attributed to the “low turnout.” It is presented to be a popular opinion among opposition voters in Venezuela, with the qualifying adjective “many,” although it does not clarify who, if anyone, was interviewed. It continues that the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (USPV) has developed such a “tight grip” over the electoral authorities and other institutions that “free elections are not possible.” The claim that “free elections are not possible” is justified by the strong expressions of “arguing” about a “tight grip” of the USPV over electoral authorities and state institutions.

The next part of the article (Image 3) reports on the “preliminary results” which show that the opposition “did not manage to dispel the distrust” in the validity of the electoral process in Venezuela. This “distrust” is also presented as a widely held emotion among people in Venezuela with the qualifying adjective “many,” and the choice of verb for the process, “did not manage,” expresses disappointment in the results. It continues to report on the number of seats won by the opposition and the “government-allied candidates” respectively.

Despite being in the headline of the article, Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel is finally mentioned in the fifth from last paragraph of the article. He is reported to have “congratulated his ally, Mr Maduro” on “the convincing victory” in his tweet “even before Venezuela’s electoral authorities had announced the first result.” The description “his ally” again implies that the Cuban president was aware of the outcome of the

election, for which he is quoted to use the phrase “convincing victory,” before it was made public. The article reports that “many” Venezuelans commented on this tweet, although, neither does it include what those comments were nor if an exit poll was, or was not, conducted.

The low turnout is also attributed to “apathy” among many voters who are “worn down” in the economic crisis in Venezuela. This opinion is presented as an expert discourse, with “[a]nalysts”, professional individuals, being the social actor, who are seen to be more knowledgeable than the general public, and therefore, more credible as a source of information. It references data from “a national survey” on poverty with a link to a separate article,²⁵ which verifies the content. The depiction of economic crises and the extreme poverty from which many Venezuelan citizens suffered contrasts the earlier image of President Maduro in the “presidential palace.”

The article claims that the National Electoral Council, which is reported to be under the control of the ruling Socialist Party, has downplayed the intimidation by members of “violent pro-government gangs” as “small and isolated problems,” despite that “[g]overnment-critical media” had reported it. The use of term “gangs” to describe government supporters has a criminalising effect and it simultaneously delegitimatises the government. It ends with a statement that a report by the EU electoral observer mission was due in two days.

Britain and Venezuela

Britain is one of approximately 50 nations that have not endorsed Nicolás Maduro’s presidency as it questions the fairness and validity of the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election and the current Conservative government recognises the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, as the interim President of Venezuela, “in line with the Venezuelan constitution.”²⁶ This official statement in 2019 from then UK Home Secretary clearly demonstrates the government’s attitude towards Nicolás Maduro and his

²⁵ BBC, “Venezuela crisis: Three in four in extreme poverty, study says,” 30 September 2021.

²⁶ Jeremy Hunt, Government Press Release, “UK recognises Juan Guaido as interim President of Venezuela,” 4 February 2019.

presidency. This stance against Maduro was confirmed more recently after the election in December 2021 in the BBC's coverage on the High Court ruling over Venezuelan gold held in the UK.

At the time the Bank of England (BoE) was holding £1.3 billion of Venezuelan gold reserves, following British and US sanctions on Maduro's government. The board of the Venezuelan Central Bank, Banco Centrale de Venezuela (BCV), appointed by Maduro, sued the BoE in May 2020 to recover control of the bullion in order to fund the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic. The UK High Court, however, ruled against the claim in July 2020, upholding the demand by the Venezuelan opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, for Her Majesty's Government recognised him as "the constitutional interim president of Venezuela"²⁷ and again, in December 2021, overturned a prior Court of Appeal ruling.²⁸ The BBC reported that it meant that "only opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who the UK considers the legitimate leader, can decide what happens to the gold."²⁹ If this provides enough justification for the obvious bias as "main strands of argument" and "the likely expectation of the audience as to content," it is hardly impartial.

Conclusion

The BBC remains the biggest source of information for people in the United Kingdom across TV, radio and online, albeit its overall reach is in decline.³⁰ In 2011, when asked which one source, if any, they trusted of all the news sources (TV broadcaster, radio, newspaper, magazine, or website) almost 60% of all adults above the age of 18 in the UK chose the BBC.³¹ In the list of reasons given for this trust in news media, impartiality and being unbiased came sixth, in the same survey, as the quality that influenced their choice of news provider the most with 46% of all UK adults, following accuracy (58%), providing up-to-date news (56%), trustworthiness (54%), providing high quality news coverage (51%), and reputation as a

²⁷ BBC, "Venezuela gold: UK High Court rules against Nicolás Maduro," 2 July 2020.

²⁸ BBC, "UK Supreme Court denies Maduro claim to Venezuelan gold," 21 December 2021.

²⁹ BBC, *ibid.*

³⁰ Ofcom, "Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC 2019/20," 25 November 2021, p25.

³¹ Ofcom, "Public opinion on the BBC and BBC and BBC news," November 2011, p5.

news provider (49%).³² Among those who trusted the BBC the most for news, impartiality and being unbiased came second (23%) after accuracy, reliability, and truthfulness (29%).³³

The BBC enjoys the trust of some people because it is a public broadcasting company without commercial interests,³⁴ and the presence of Ofcom reinforces the image of the BBC's compliance with broadcasting codes and editorial guidelines. However, in its annual report, Ofcom noted that "the BBC faces challenges in audiences' perception of impartiality" and recommends that the BBC "must build on its reputation as an accurate news source and serve the broadest range of audiences" and "should be able to represent the whole country authentically."³⁵

The mood of texts used in news articles are typically declarative, which suggests factuality of the content. From this article, the picture that emerges is a victorious image of President Maduro of Venezuela being congratulated by his socialist Cuban ally, who is alleged to have known the result of the election before voting even took place in an undemocratic electoral system, while the nation suffers from dire poverty. Given the image of accuracy, reliability, and truthfulness that the audience have towards the BBC as a news provider,³⁶ the report can be convincing. It will be even more so, should it match the perceptions and presupposition that their audience already has of Venezuela, Cuba, President Maduro, or socialism. This, in turn, will affirm their perception and becomes a part of the sociocultural context, through which the audience interpret descriptions in the texts.³⁷ This particular news article, for one, seems to carry anti-Maduro ideology and lack impartiality in its description of certain social actors and their actions. The BBC, therefore, should seek to improve its reportage on issues which do not agree with the dominant and popular ideologies among its audience in order to meet some of the recommendations in Ofcom's annual report.

³² Ofcom, *ibid.*, p4.

³³ Ofcom, *ibid.*, p6.

³⁴ Ofcom, *ibid.*, p6.

³⁵ Ofcom, "Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC 2019/20," p27

³⁶ Ofcom, "Public opinion on the BBC and BBC and BBC news," p5.

³⁷ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p155.

Appendix

Image 1

Cuba congratulates Venezuela on poll before result was out

🕒 22 November 2021



| President Maduro (centre) said the result was "a good triumph, a good victory, a good harvest"

Venezuela's ruling party has won 20 out of 23 state governorships in regional elections, the first in four years in which the main opposition parties took part, official results show.

Opposition candidates only won three governor's posts in Sunday's poll. Turnout was low at 41.8%.

Cuba congratulated Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, a close ally, before the results were announced.

The US said the elections were not free and fair.

"Fearful of the voice and vote of Venezuelans, the regime grossly skewed the process to determine the result of this election long before any ballots had been cast," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"Maduro robs Venezuelans of their chance to shape their own future," he said.

Image 2

No boycott but low turnout

The election was the first in nearly four years which was not boycotted by Venezuela's main opposition parties.

In previous elections, these parties had told their voters to refrain from casting their ballots arguing that it was not a fair contest.

The election which saw Mr Maduro re-elected as president in 2018 was marred by vote-rigging claims and more than 50 countries refused to recognise him as Venezuela's legitimate leader.

But with Mr Maduro still in the presidential palace and the European Union sending electoral observers, the main opposition parties decided to change strategy and take part in Sunday's polls.

However, many opposition voters questioned this move, arguing that the Socialist party - which has been in power for the past 22 years - has developed such a tight grip over the electoral authorities and other institutions that free elections are not possible.



| The European Union sent an observation mission to the election

Image 3

Preliminary results suggest the opposition did not manage to dispel the distrust many Venezuelans had in the voting process.

The opposition only won in the states of Zulia, Nueva Esparta and Cojedes, while government-allied candidates swept to power in the remaining 20, according to preliminary results.

And while a government victory was widely anticipated in most states, many Venezuelans commented on a tweet by Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel, who congratulated his ally, Mr Maduro, on the "convincing victory" even before Venezuela's electoral authorities had announced the first results.

Analysts said apathy also contributed to the low turnout with many voters worn down by Venezuela's deep economic crisis.

Three out of four Venezuelans are living in extreme poverty, according to a national survey.

Government-critical media reported that some voters had been intimidated by members of violent pro-government gangs, but the National Electoral Council said that there had only been "small and isolated problems".

The EU electoral observer mission is due to present its report on the election on Tuesday.

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