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The Show Is Called “Maduro and January 3”

The spectacularization of political fact is an inescapable phenomenon in today’s communication landscape. Drawing on authors such as Debord, Sartori, Castells, and Bourdieu, we can describe this communicational manifestation based on five main characteristics. First, the primacy of the image; second, the intensive use of social media; third, the personalization of power; fourth, the simplification of complex problems; and, finally, emotional polarization. All of these explain the communicational event embodied on January 3, 2026, following the capture of Nicolás Maduro by the government of the United States.

1. Primacy of the Image and the Expectation of Evidence

The photo, a video. That was what everyone expected once Donald Trump’s message was posted on his social network Truth Social, announcing that Maduro and his wife had been captured and taken out of Venezuela to the United States. Both the government and the opposition wanted evidence. The former, to draw a communicational line and define strategy; the latter, above all, to mitigate the thirst for justice. With the exception of the poorly-pronounced “Happy New Year” by the captured man, the communication derived from those images –of a Maduro dressed

in gray athletic clothing, with a blindfold and handcuffs— shook the international public opinion, but especially Venezuelans.

The meaning of the image unfolds into a differentiated analysis between the domestic and the international. For foreign public opinion, the image awakens the morbid interest of seeing a powerful man captured by a “foreign power,” even, for some, by “North American imperialism.” This interpretation was especially common in European media, where the refrain that U.S. action was a “violation of sovereignty” was repeated frequently. Europe—resentful toward the American president— took the opportunity to criticize Trump.

In this sense, it is worth raising the problem of post-truth, understood as the comprehension and description of reality based on subjective evidence (emotional process) rather than objective evidence (rational process). The concept of “sovereignty,” even though it exists within legal frameworks and international rules, becomes relativized and confusing in Venezuela’s case when interpreted emotionally rather than rationally. Sovereignty? The kind that Venezuelans lost when Hugo Chávez handed it over to Cuba, China, Russia, and Iran. Chávez was the one who eroded any rational or legal sense of sovereignty, transforming it into political rhetoric, revolutionary narratives, and utopian myths that did not solve but deepened Venezuela’s problems. Maduro, in turn, leveraged the consequences of that distortion. As a result, linking the image of Maduro to the abstract idea of sovereignty loses objective and rational meaning. The balm produced by justice turns sovereignty into a variable subject to debate and shaped by emotional stimuli.

2. Intensive Use of Social Media: Ordinary Citizens' Networks Anticipate Official News

The image –the trigger for the emotional reaction– quickly found a home and momentum on social media. Ultimately, the feeling is given legitimacy by the online sphere.

“People are uploading these videos online –does anyone know what’s going on?” Around 2 a.m., messages like this flooded WhatsApp groups among people in Venezuela and those living abroad. Social networks and websites –as has become routine– beat traditional media to the story, they get there well before news broadcasts announce urgent information, before the “breaking news.” They beat the radio and, of course, the printed newspaper to the scoop. Today, every citizen can function as a reporter, and traditional outlets have come to treat street witnesses –often the very people who filmed the events– as valid sources.

That anticipation, in itself, is more powerful than the information transmitted by a traditional media outlet. Why? Because there are no filters, and the middleman holding a microphone –who might easily be serving a pre-set media agenda– is removed from the equation.

A special mention goes to memes, which emerge organically on social media and often with the help of artificial intelligence. Their power comes from depicting reality in simplified, mostly satirical, but highly suggestive ways. Once again, memes paradoxically feed the emotional appetite that began with the image in question. In this way, memes contribute to the –certainly risky– insatiability of the news event. The hunger to keep watching and keep digging is unlikely to find a limit.

3. Personalization of Power: It’s Not the Government, Not Chavismo, and Not Even the PSUV that Makes the News –It’s Maduro

And the news centers above all on Maduro. In this sense, the personalization of politics –a phenomenon born from political disengagement, the discrediting of political parties, and rejection of an establishment that fails to address people’s problems– also finds purchase in extraordinary situations like what happened on January 3. The communicational impact generated by an individual who is already highly newsworthy is stronger than that caused by events involving a government, a political party, or a power structure.

Whether due to dissociation or questionable marketing strategy, Maduro decided to take advantage of the moment: to make himself the main character of the story. He knew that “the world’s eyes” would be on him, and with a certain audacity –and to the surprise of many– he smiled, joked, waved, and posed for photos with his guards giving thumbs-up signals of reassurance. For fleeting moments, Chávez’s protégé tried to position himself as the hero of the plot rather than the villain. He chose not to elicit pity, but to project the image of a man who seemed to be saying: “This is temporary, I’ll be out soon.” In those brief moments, Maduro managed to capture attention and take over the news cycle, even displacing the White House and its hawks from the media spotlight.

4. Simplification of Complex Problems: Maduro's Fall Has Not Brought Freedom to Venezuela

"We are finally free."

A hasty and recurring conclusion once Trump confirms the capture. However, what happened –framed in the spectacular– pushes us toward and feeds a false conclusion. The image represents a dream fulfilled, but insufficient. As the days passed, Venezuelans confirmed that the problem of Chavismo is as deep as it is complex –something already known. Yet the news uproar stoked a natural feeling of temporary liberation and assumptions about future scenarios involving the reconquest of democracy, a process that, by its very complexity, requires time and patience.

The appearance of Diosdado Cabello with a group of armed civilians behind him; Delcy Rodríguez's statement on the state channel *Venezolana de Televisión*; and the strange, singular presentation by the Minister of Defense, Vladimir Padrino López, condemning what happened all made it clear that the end of the kleptocracy was not consummated. It was proven that the power structure was always larger than Maduro. With that media response, born of fear and entrenchment, Chavismo demonstrated that its structure had captured an entire state. January 3 confirmed that institutionality does not exist, because they are the institutions. That day made clear that the Venezuelan problem is unprecedented in many ways, dispelling conclusions that might seem logical or by drawing supposed truths from other countries' experiences.

5. Emotional Polarization: From Libertarian Euphoria to the Fear of the Oppressor

Walter Lippmann argues that people react to the images conveyed by the media: symbols, narratives, and visual or narrative representations. For that reason, a representation translated into an image or symbol may exert more influence than a rational explanation. In this sense, the image of Maduro carries a meaning for Venezuelans that surpasses the crime of which he is accused; in other words, the legal axis centered on drug trafficking, in this case, is secondary. The emotion expressed as euphoria does not stem from celebrating justice for the harm that will cease to be inflicted by a politician accused of drug trafficking by the American justice system. The joyful outburst occurs because a new opportunity seems to open for Venezuela to return to normality, to finally be free, and because, on the horizon, there appears to be some glimpse of reunion for the Venezuelan family in a country that today urgently needs to be rebuilt.

The other emotional side is summarized, ironically, in fear. Precisely one of the most powerful weapons Chavismo has used to entrench itself in power is what they now suffer most. In this context, social media widely display the hesitant faces and speeches, as well as measured words by the most important figures in the government. Fear invaded the system like a destructive virus. What they themselves built ultimately fed a Frankenstein that is difficult to control. The fear of losing privilege, the anxiety of being betrayed, the panic of being exposed and paying the consequences are untamable elements of the regime's own making.

This emotional polarization will thaw when the country recovers democracy and freedom. A hyper-volatile pendulum does not build a nation, does not make a country, and makes it impossible to lay the foundations for an institutional system.

“Stability,” as a prelude to transition, must also include stability in the social mood, in relationships among those who differ, in understanding between adversaries; in other words, Venezuela also needs “stability” in its social structures: family, social classes, roles, and norms. The country needs “stability” in shared values and patterns of behavior that do not change abruptly. Venezuela needs a “stability” grounded in social cohesion in which rational discourse prevails naturally.

Caine’s Storytelling

For ten minutes, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine transformed the January 3 press conference into a crafted piece of storytelling. How is it composed? Of a hero, a villain, a narrative frame, a solution or guide, and a call to action. All of this to achieve a concrete objective: in this case, the capture of Maduro.

His account is an idea turned spectacle, constructed as though for a Hollywood script. In that format, the audience’s attention is secured through tension, suspense, threat, or danger, and through what appears to be an inevitable, extraordinary outcome. In emotional terms, the description that gradually unveils the plot and its sequence seeks the very elements of spectacularization: nervousness, anxiety, intrigue, adrenaline, and a curiosity that feeds itself and grows like a snowball as information and details.

In other words, Caine’s speech amounted to the artistic blueprint of a future thriller.

The Challenge of Moving Beyond Justice as a Sentiment

For Saint John Paul II, peace is the work of justice. The two are inseparable. The image of Maduro captured serves as a

reminder of what the Polish pope affirmed with precision. And it is not about the momentary peace that followed the event —that uneasy, temporary calm that reigned in the country in the days afterward. It is about a real peace, grounded precisely in a legal framework that protects citizens' rights and provides justice to every Venezuelan. For now, peace is not possible because what occurred with Maduro is merely a sign —certainly a hopeful one—that justice is attainable; nothing more than that. Fully achieving it will remain a pending task in the years ahead.

The impact generated on January 3 must serve to reaffirm that the free Venezuela we all long for is a project that must go beyond the photograph and the emotion derived from that date. The fleeting spectacle should function as a wake-up call. The photograph turned into history must serve as a reminder, immortalizing the belief that democracy is a value that must be cultivated and nurtured. In this way, the ordinary rather than the spectacle, rationality rather than sentiment, will become the predominant forces in rebuilding the nation.