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The Other September 11th: El Mercurio Media Coverage after the Chilean Coup of 1973

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INTRODUCTION

El Mercurio is the oldest, best known, most influential and popular newspaper in Chile, and for the most affluent Chileans, it is the foremost source of news and information. For those who try to understand the history of Chile without reading El Mercurio, it is an almost impossible task. El Mercurio is also a very controversial newspaper; it has been known to have conservative tendencies, and according to Peter Kornbluth (2003), documents prove that El Mercurio received funds from the United States, namely, the CIA, beginning in the early 1970’s, in efforts to overthrow the socialist government of Salvador Allende (p.6).

The focus of this thesis is on El Mercurio’s front page on one particular day, over the course of many years. The starting point for this examination is the historic coup that ousted the democratically elected Allende government that took place on September 11, 1973. The examination continues to show the role played by El Mercurio on each of the subsequent anniversaries throughout the military regime of Augusto Pinochet, from 1973 to 1990; the examination also further tests the influence of the conservative leaning paper’s face during the transition to democracy, from 1991 to 2007.

BACKGROUND

Forty years ago on September 11 of 1973, the military ruled by General Augusto Pinochet in Chile, withered the democratically elected “Popular Unit” government of Salvador Allende.

The ‘Popular Unit’ was a coalition of Chilean political parties, movements and social groups of the center and left, formed in 1969. The Popular Unit’s candidate Salvador Allende won the presidential election in 1970. Allende’s socialist government came to an end three years later when the military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet removed the democratically elected socialist government in September of 1973. Pinochet assumed control of Chile by closing the Congress and declaring a “State of Siege.”

This led to serious abuses of human rights throughout the country. People were detained, disappeared, tortured and murdered. Many of the victims were part of the ‘Popular Unit,’ causing many people to seek refuge in foreign embassies and to escape the country into exile.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The methodology used for this study is a content analysis of a purposive sample. The units analyzed were select newspaper articles related to the coup, published on the front pages of El Mercurio, Santiago de Chile edition. A purposive sample is a non-probability sampling, in which the units to be analyzed are chosen according to the researcher’s judgment. The articles most relevant [to the coup] were considered the best examples for the purposes of the study (Babbie, 2011, p. 207).

The study includes 50 articles and 40 images of a total of 34 covers from El Mercurio of Santiago (the capital of Chile) edition were chosen. The articles were dated September 11, 1973 to 2007. The newspaper observed the anniversary of the coup every year with different articles.

The images, texts and headlines from the cover page articles was examined according to the general principles of a standard content analysis. [The coding of the images is explained below.]

El Mercurio newspaper covers are primary sources that were selected from a collection that were available in The National Library of Chile.

PRIORI FINDINGS

The most interesting finding from this study was that the headlines, texts and images changed drastically from one period to another. From 1973 to 1990, during the military regime the coup was portrayed as peaceful; from 1991 to 2007 it was shown as having been violent. These differences are shown by the pie charts below.

CONCLUSIONS

The covers under examination on September 11, 1973 to 1990 reveals that the editors and writers seldom used words or images in opposition to the government: The coup was remembered and extolled by the repeated use of the word “celebration”; Pinochet was proclaimed “His Excellency”; many pictures purport to show large crowds “celebrating” the “cult of the flag” was portrayed as an ever present expression of nationalism. Members of the armed forces were always presented as “national heroes”; and other themes were presented that led the reader to believe that the regime was extremely positive and popular. The country as a whole was portrayed disciplined, orderly, stable, and developing. The coverage of El Mercurio apparently was to show that the country was united and moving toward change.

This mirage of National Pride fluctuated slightly once Pinochet resigned his presidency. The media coverage of September 11, 1991 to 2007 during the country’s transition to democracy. These later articles showed for the first time a commemoration not only of Pinochet’s Armed forces, but also of Allende’s government, the families of the “missing people.” For the first time after 17 years, El Mercurio’s front page on September 11 of 1991 featured a picture of college students, violently protesting with “Molotov cocktails.” Images like that of this riot, continued to appear in the years that followed. The language used in the articles changed as well; writers called for “national unity.” The newspaper often announced measures taken by the police, to prevent vandalism and the destruction of property. Eventually, El Mercurio’s coverage on September 11th, was not of an anniversary to be “celebrated,” but as a tragedy.

REFERENCES


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