



# Venezuela's private media wither under Chávez assault

*A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists*



Committee to Protect Journalists

## In Venezuela, a media landscape transformed

In more than a decade in power, President Hugo Chávez Frías has overseen the transformation of nearly every aspect of Venezuelan society, including the media. When Chávez came to office in 1999, he enjoyed the support of the country's established private media. But the relationship soon soured, and in April 2002 he was briefly deposed in a coup that he alleges was carried out with the support of key media owners. Today, several of the most critical media outlets are either gone or scared into silence, and a vast state media presence echoes the government's positions. **By Joel Simon**



Hugo Chávez at a campaign rally in Maracay, Venezuela, on July 1. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

The highly polarized presidential campaign under way in Venezuela pits Chávez against former Governor Henrique Capriles Radonski. The polarization is dramatically reflected in the press, with the private media largely backing Capriles and the state media mounting a full-throated appeal in support of Chávez. The cacophony drowns out meaningful debate, and in the context of the electoral campaign the public is the loser. Through its massive state media presence and its use of censorship, legal harassment, and administrative sanctions, the Chávez government sets clear limits on public dissent, as this report shows.

This is CPJ's fourth special report on Venezuela since Chávez took office; reading them in sequence paints a clear picture of just how dramatically the media environment has declined during this period. The first report, "Radio Chávez," published in February 2001, described a vibrant media scene in which the president with increasing frequency took over the airwaves to deliver long-winded diatribes on everything from "the joys of having a girlfriend to 'the revolutionary process in the universities.'" It ended by noting ominously, "[I]f all revolutions eat their young, Venezuelan journalists had better hope that Chávez doesn't get too hungry."

The second report, called “Cannon Fodder” and published following the failed 2002 coup attempt, described a series of physical attacks in which beat reporters “caught between Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías’ inflammatory rhetoric and the active political role that media publishers and editors have taken find themselves victims of attacks from the public.”

CPJ’s third report, 2007’s “Static in Venezuela,” recounted in detail the government’s failure to renew the license of critical broadcaster RCTV and demonstrated how the deepening media crackdown was provoking sweeping self-censorship. In the years since that report was published, RCTV has been silenced along with dozens of other critical broadcasters; journalists have been jailed for allegedly defaming officials; and regulators, together with a judiciary closely allied with the executive, have imposed censorship on sensitive coverage.

The decline of Venezuelan journalism has broad implications not only for the country, but for Latin America as a whole. Nearly all of Chávez’s strategies to rein in and isolate critical journalists have been emulated by sympathetic governments across the region, from Nicaragua to Ecuador. Today, Venezuela is part of a bloc of countries within the Organization of American States looking to dismantle its system of human rights protection, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its special rapporteur for freedom of expression.

In the 1980s, as Latin America turned to democracy after a decade of brutal dictatorships, electoral politics took hold across the region. Chávez himself won at the polls and took office with widespread support from the Venezuelan public. But he has used his time in office to undermine rather than develop the institutions of democratic government.

With Chávez battling cancer, he must confront his legacy. While he focuses on consolidating the Bolivarian Revolution, Chávez’s failure to support and nurture independent institutions—including the media—has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the upcoming elections. Regardless of who prevails at the polls, rolling back a decade of media repression and fostering a climate that is more open and more tolerant will be a key challenge for the next administration.

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## Venezuela's private media wither under Chávez assault

The Chávez administration has used an array of legislation, threats, and regulatory measures to gradually break down Venezuela's independent press while building up a state media empire—a complete reversal of the previous landscape. One result: Vital issues are going uncovered in an election year. **A CPJ special report by Monica Campbell**



Hugo Chávez at a December 2011 press conference. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

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### CARACAS

It seemed like a routine story. In March, José Gregorio Briceño, governor of Venezuela's southern state of Monagas, appeared on national television and complained that federal officials were not addressing claims of contaminated water in his state. An oil pipeline managed by the state-run oil company PDVSA had recently burst in the Guarapiche River, which runs through Monagas. News accounts followed with testimonies from independent experts and families with ill children.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías vowed to act—not to investigate potential water contamination, but to counter the “media terrorism” threatening the country. Federal officials complained of political manipulation and a media conspiracy in an election year; Chávez is up for a third six-year term in October. Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz announced a new federal injunction requiring journalists to base reports on water quality on

a “truthful technical report backed by a competent institution.” Otherwise, journalists risked “destabilizing” public order, and could incur fines or jail time.

“So what happens if a woman comes out of her house with a glass of brown water or a child with diarrhea? We can’t transmit it. And what if the community protests over dirty water? We still can’t transmit it?” said Silvia Alegrett, president of the local journalists’ group Colegio Nacional de Periodistas. Alegrett and other Venezuelan journalists said that while the government cites water quality studies, obtaining copies of such studies can be difficult. “Officials will wave the studies in the air and say, ‘What the press or activists say isn’t true.’ But then we won’t see the reports,” Alegrett said.

The injunction on water reporting is only the latest addition to a minefield of legislative changes and presidential decrees put forth by Chávez’s administration to restrict the independent media since he took office in 1999. To sidestep the potential fines or prison terms, many journalists and publications censor their own coverage.

The administration has also blocked critical coverage, closed broadcasters, sued reporters for defamation, excluded those it deems unfriendly from official events, and harassed—with the help of government allies and state-run media—critical journalists. The result is that key issues—Chávez’s health, rising unemployment, overcrowded prisons, and the condition of Venezuela’s vital state-run energy sector—are not receiving in-depth, investigative coverage at a critical moment for the country, as Chávez grapples not only with cancer but with an unprecedented challenge for his office from Henrique Capriles Radonski, the governor of the state of Miranda.



Henrique Capriles Radonski poses an unprecedented challenge to Chávez. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

The gradual dismantling of Venezuela’s more critical and independent press and the building up of a vast state-run media empire is a remarkable reversal of the media landscape prior to Chávez’s rule. Then, major newspapers and television and radio stations were dominated by a private-sector, business-oriented elite determined to shield its audience from leftist and socialist views. When critics accuse Chávez of a media power grab, his loyalists counter that the government effectively democratized the press by wresting control from a powerful oligarchy with its own agenda.

The resulting polarization is reflected in the news coverage leading up to the elections. In February, Venezuela held a primary that resulted in an unexpectedly high turnout and a strong win for Capriles as the opposition coalition candidate, although Chávez still leads most polls. But polls favoring either candidate are questioned, while violence at campaign rallies is often blamed on agents planted by the other side.

As much as the independent press shines its light on Capriles, the vast government-friendly network of television, radio, and print pushes ahead with coverage either negative to Capriles or, at best, superficially informative about his campaign. Meanwhile, nuanced and comprehensive coverage of the Chávez campaign and his party's proposals is largely absent within the private press. A balanced, probing look at either candidate is hard to find.

"As Chávez has made his presidential power more permanent, we've seen more disrespect for the rules of the game," said Carlos Correa, executive director of Espacio Público, a local free expression group.

## Legal and regulatory threats intimidate

Years of legislation that tightened Chávez's grip on the media are paying off. In 2004, lawmakers loyal to Chávez passed a new broadcast law banning content before 11 p.m. that could be considered too violent or sexual for children or could "incite or promote hatred or intolerance" or "disobedience of the current legal order." In December 2010, legislators in Chávez's United Socialist Party broadened this statute and extended it to the Internet. Government officials can now order Internet service providers to restrict websites that violate the controls.

Reporters criticized the legislation as vague, noting that it could apply to subjects ranging from sexually transmitted diseases to Venezuela's escalating violent street crime. While the laws have yet to land a journalist in jail, the threat of prosecution and fines are enough to make most hesitant to test the government's tolerance, local journalists said.

In 2010, the legislature granted Chávez power to rule by decree, ostensibly to help flood victims, but the move came just weeks before a fresh slate of opposition politicians were to take their parliamentary seats, preempting any plans to limit Chávez's powers.



On June 27, 2009, some demonstrators, left, marched in support of regulators investigating Globovisión, while others, right, marched in support of the broadcaster. (AP/Fernando Llano)

One reporter for a daily newspaper in the coastal city of Maracay told CPJ that her editors have closely heeded the harassment of independent television station Globovisión and the closing in 2007 of RCTV, a popular broadcaster and Chávez critic, and that they make decisions accordingly. "Most of the media in Maracay prefer

to just publish what official sources say,” and this is demoralizing to local journalists, said the reporter, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal by her editors. For example, newspapers highlighted a government official saying a damaged highway to the Atlantic coast would be fixed in time for an upcoming holiday. Independent photos showed a collapsed bridge, but editors refrained from publishing those or reporting on the road’s decrepit state. “If you write that, it will not be published,” the reporter said. “You give up fighting.” An editor at one of the four dailies in Maracay countered, “That pressure [to go soft on the government] does not exist,” and said any lack of in-depth reporting is a matter of time and resources.

“The threat of lawsuits and insults is working,” said Miguel Henrique Otero, editor of the Caracas-based daily *El Nacional*.

Regulatory obstacles also play a role. In 2009, the telecommunications regulator Conatel, whose members can be freely appointed or removed by Chávez, shut down and seized equipment at more than 30 radio stations, with reasons ranging from administrative technicalities to broadcasts about illegal squatters in the face of a housing shortage. Officials said more stations were on their watch list, but did not specify which ones. “The messenger is punished whether or not the information is true,” said Andrés Cañizalez, a professor and media expert at Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas. “It’s tough to prove at times. A radio presenter is suddenly off the air, or a station closes, and you later learn that the government had pulled its advertising.”

Meanwhile, public information has become increasingly difficult to access. The list of reporters allowed at official press conferences is shrinking. Reporters from Globovisión, the country’s last remaining critical TV broadcaster, are often excluded. “If you’re not on the list of approved media outlets—and Globovisión is definitely not on that list—then you’re left standing in the hall,” said Lysber Ramos Sol, who heads Globovisión’s investigative reporting team. She said her reporters only learn about official events through colleagues at other outlets.

A complaint often repeated by independent journalists is that when they are allowed to attend press conferences, government officials ridicule them. Amira Muci, an opinion show host on Radio Victoria in Maracay and the secretary-general of the local branch of the Colegio Nacional de Periodistas, said disrespectful treatment is the norm. “When your questions are uncomfortable or when they don’t have answers, they try to embarrass the reporter,” Muci said. “Or they say you are disrupting the revolutionary process. So many journalists give up and become, in effect, government stenographers. They think it is the only way to survive.”

Julio Rafael Chávez Meléndez, a representative of the National Assembly and vice chairman of its Commission on Media and People’s Power, countered that statement, saying, “Why should the government tolerate so-called journalists who are agents of the opposition and have no real desire to inform the public [and] are bent on serving their own agendas? Why should President Chávez stand for their constant ridicule? Don’t we have a right as a government to stop irresponsible coverage intent on upending Venezuela?”

In February, limitations were set on journalists’ access to the floor of parliament during debates. Once allowed to view proceedings from the parliament gallery, now they must follow on television monitors in the halls outside. The live audio of this transmission is prone to sudden silence, however, with an onscreen explanation that the session is private.

## Violence and crime are touchy topics

Crime is an especially sensitive subject. Recent polls found that more than 80 percent of Venezuelans nationwide list crime as a top worry. However, law enforcement officials are slow to publish homicide statistics, with the most recent figures dating to 2010. The head of Venezuela's police force recently told state media that the murder rate in Caracas had dropped in 2012, but he did not provide specific homicide figures—instead, he cited the number of arrests on murder charges. Often, reporters publish their own data based on police reports or compilations by non-governmental groups such as the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, which says there are about 60 murders per year per 100,000 Venezuelans—one of the world's highest rates.

The newspaper reporter in Maracay said crime statistics that used to receive prominent display in her paper are downplayed, with most such news published in the community section, where local residents write to denounce problems.

Journalists have also been hampered by court rulings to limit publication of photos showing death or violence. In August 2010, the privately owned *El Nacional* published a photograph showing an overwhelmed Caracas morgue, with naked bodies piled on the tables and floor. A court then issued a temporary injunction banning the newspaper from printing images that contain “blood, guns, alarming messages, or physical aggression that could alter the psychological and moral well-being of children and adolescents.” In response, *El Nacional* ran the word “Censored” in a blank space on its front page. In a show of solidarity, the independent newspaper *Tal Cual* reprinted the photograph and incurred a similar court ruling. Injunctions on both papers have since been lifted.



Teodoro Petkoff (AP/Ricardo Moraes)

Teodoro Petkoff, editor of *Tal Cual*, a former Communist guerrilla and later a government minister, said the incident was just another attempt by the government to control the media. “We are not sensationalistic,” Petkoff said. “We print what we see as important, and right now in Venezuela, we have a serious problem with escalating crime.”

*El Nacional's* Otero, who said threats of lawsuits are a permanent fixture at his newspaper, insists that while he does not engage in self-censorship, his reporters will need to be careful with the new restrictions on the issue of water contamination.



At Globovisión, reporters now use terms like “not appropriate for drinking” instead of “contaminated.” “We are saying the same thing with other words. Obviously, this constitutes a certain degree of self-censorship,” said Ricardo Antela, Globovisión’s lead lawyer.

Correa of Espacio Público does not expect much progress on the issue. When his group requested water quality test results for Caracas last year, the environmental ministry responded curtly, saying water in Caracas “is drinkable according to parameters established by the World Health Organization.” A review of the environmental ministry’s website, where reporters are directed for information, shows data only through 2009. The lack of information forces media outlets to rely heavily on pundits and speculation. As a result, the credibility of journalists is suffering. “You can’t believe the state-run media because they might not be telling you the full story,” said Elides Rojas, managing editor of the daily *El Universal*. “But then you also can’t believe the private media because their views can be so biased, too. In the end, nobody is fully informed.”

### **Ties to Chávez, rather than laws, offer protection**

Eleazar Díaz Rangel, the editor of *Últimas Noticias*, the highest-circulation daily in Venezuela, strongly disagrees with complaints about press freedom. “I always ask for people to show me what can’t be published in Venezuela, and I never get examples,” he said. “Just look at my paper,” he said, flipping through a recent edition of *Últimas Noticias*, which featured a rally led by opposition candidate Capriles, news of teacher-led protests against unpaid salaries, and updates on Chávez’s cancer treatment. An opinion piece by a local professor argued for the end to Chávez’s rule.

Yet *Últimas Noticias* is also stacked with government advertising—income that other leading dailies such as *El Universal* and *El Nacional* lost long ago. Díaz Rangel’s longtime, cozy relationship with Chávez largely explains the paper’s cushy position. Díaz Rangel has authored books about Chávez that were published by Venezuela’s Ministry of Culture. He is considered a public advocate for views that Chávez endorses. Critics say Díaz Rangel is part of a pro-government media elite, members of which are allowed scope for a certain amount of criticism and then upheld as examples of press freedom.

Another member of this group is Mario Silva, host of “La Hojilla” (The Razor), a state-run nightly television show that largely consists of Silva at his desk with a sheaf of press clippings from papers such as *El Nacional* (which Silva nicknames “El Nazional”). The camera zooms in on bylines and columnists’ photos circled in yellow highlighter. In one episode, Silva held up an article that included complaints about the government’s housing program for low-income citizens and asked, “Why do these reporters have such tremendous hate for our country?” During Silva’s monologues, wall-size photographs of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara—the heroes of Chávez’s socialist revolution—are projected in the background.

“The rules are clear,” said Alegrett of the journalist association. “There are the untouchables and the rest of us.” For journalists willing to challenge rulings and investigations in court, confidence in a fair trial is low. Chávez appointed the majority of Supreme Court justices, who in turn have increasing influence over lower-level judicial appointments. In a case that United Nations special rapporteurs say breached judicial independence, María Lourdes Afiuni Mora, a judge in Caracas, was arrested in 2009 minutes after allowing the release on bail of a businessman and Chávez opponent whose detention she declared arbitrary. The next day, Chávez appeared on state television and called for “toughness” against Afiuni. Within days, she was charged with

crimes including corruption and abuse of authority. She was imprisoned for more than a year awaiting trial, and remains under house arrest.

The Afiuni case served as a warning to journalists hoping that the courts might enforce their press freedom rights, said Carlos Ayala Corao, a constitutional lawyer in Caracas and the former president of the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). “They cannot expect a judge to base her decision on the facts at hand—she must consider how the presidency will view the rulings. Go the wrong way, and it’s not just risking dismissal, but jail.”



Julio Rafael Chávez Meléndez in his office. (Monica Campbell)

Some journalists have chosen to take their concerns abroad. In March, a group of reporters and press freedom groups, including Espacio Público, detailed the Chávez government’s use of the judicial system to curtail press freedom at a hearing of the IACHR in Washington, the human rights monitoring body of the Organization of the American States. The hearing coincided with the IACHR annual report, which highlighted allegations of human rights abuses in Venezuela. After the visit, *Correo del Orinoco*, a government-backed paper, published an article citing only Germán Saltrón, Venezuela’s representative to the IACHR, who accused the non-governmental organizations of preparing to “justify whatever invasion or act of violence to prevent the president from continuing to govern” after the October elections. In July, Chávez announced plans to withdraw Venezuela from the IACHR, its sister court, and the American Convention on Human Rights, claiming the commission was biased.

Meanwhile, Julio Chávez, who pushed forward the 2010 law allowing the president to rule by decree, will continue to promote legislation favoring the administration. He recently won funding for a new “alternative and united” network of state-controlled community radio and TV stations that, he hopes, will become a leading news source. New journalists will be trained and certified at a state-run school and will be obliged to transmit “accurate information.”

“I believe in freedom of expression, but I also don’t think that means there can’t be oversight over information. For years, the private sector had a monopoly on our media, and I’m happy to see that finally change,” Julio Chávez said.

The change, however, has been the pushing of the pendulum from one partisan extreme to another, critics say. “The government is becoming an expert in propaganda,” said Rojas, managing editor of *El Universal*. “It’s very good at controlling the message.”

During an election year, this means a lack of meaningful reporting on the airwaves and in newspapers, leaving voters ill-informed. But the media landscape is likely to be Hugo Chávez’s legacy well beyond the election.

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## CPJ's recommendations

### To the Venezuelan authorities:

- Guarantee the independence of broadcast regulators and ensure that they are not subject to executive pressure or interference.
- Require regulators to publish the process and criteria for granting, renewing, and revoking broadcast licenses. Give broadcasters an opportunity to present their cases for renewal in a fair and transparent process at a neutral venue.
- Repeal legal requirements on private media broadcasters to carry presidential speeches and official statements.
- Repeal criminal defamation and desacato provisions in the penal code in the National Assembly, in line with international standards on freedom of expression.
- Amend the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio and Television in the National Assembly so its broad and vague language cannot be used to punish or intimidate broadcast or digital media with charges of incitement to hatred or intolerance, fomenting public anxiety, incitement to disobedience, or refusal to recognize authority.
- Ensure that Venezuelans have broad access to information by granting all journalists and news outlets equal access to government events, buildings, institutions, and sources.
- Ensure that state media are not manipulated or used to launch personal attacks aimed at discrediting critical journalists and news outlets.

## Globovisión besieged by investigations, fines, violence

The recent regulatory probe into coverage at Globovisión, the only TV broadcaster critical of the Chávez administration, is the latest in a long string of investigations and other harassment. The network is struggling to stay afloat. **By Monica Campbell**



Globovisión advertisements in Caracas. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

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### CARACAS

In Venezuela, there is one television broadcaster critical of the government that is still standing—but just barely. The private network, Globovisión, is contending with regulatory fines, a steady stream of government scorn, and even direct violence against its staff. It is being forced to defend itself in court and still push out coverage during a critical election year.

Nobody expects Globovisión to have an easy ride in a country where state-run media dominate and the licenses of several independent broadcasters have been revoked under the rule of President Hugo Chávez Frías. But the past year has brought unprecedented challenges. In October 2011, following a deadly riot in June at the El Rodeo Prison outside Caracas, Conatel, the national media regulator, imposed a fine of 9.3 million bolívares (US\$2.16 million) on Globovisión for its coverage of the crisis.

Although other national and international media covered the riots, interviewing witnesses and worried relatives, regulators singled out Globovisión, claiming it aired excessive footage of weeping relatives and spliced in the sound of gunfire. The broadcaster, regulators concluded, promoted a climate of “hatred and intolerance.” Globovisión countered that it had reported the story fully, speaking to families of those involved and working

within the limitations placed on the press, which included keeping journalists cordoned off a half-mile away from the prison.

The fine is the latest addition to the government's file on Globovisión. Chávez had previously accused the station of backing a failed 2002 coup attempt against him. In that case, Globovisión met with the same government scrutiny as other private channels, including Radio Caracas Televisión, or RCTV, whose broadcast license was pulled in 2007. In 2010, RCTV was withdrawn from cable and satellite broadcasts after the station refused to air Chávez's lengthy and impromptu speeches.

Conatel also investigated Globovisión in 2009, after the station reported on an earthquake that struck Venezuela before officials had issued a public statement about it. Regulators complained that the station relied on information from U.S. seismological authorities instead of from Venezuelan officials, and that it risked sparking public panic. Globovisión's director said the country's authorities were slow to react to the quake and that reliable information was found elsewhere.

In their many administrative investigations into Globovisión, regulators have accused the network of "inciting rebellion" and creating "panic and anxiety in the population," CPJ research shows. A sanction in any one case could lead to the station's suspension for up to 72 hours; a second sanction could result in the revocation of its broadcast license.



Guillermo Zuloaga leaves the Palace of Justice in Caracas on July 17, 2009. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

In 2010, Guillermo Zuloaga, Globovisión's president, fled the country to escape a series of charges, including spreading false news and offending Chávez in public remarks, and usury and conspiracy in connection with car dealerships he owns. Zuloaga denied any wrongdoing and said the charges had been fabricated as a way to close the station. He remains in exile in the U.S.

"We are the last independent broadcaster standing, and the government is doing what it can to shut us down," said María Fernanda Flores, Globovisión's vice-president, in an interview from the station's headquarters in Caracas.

The government maintains that Globovisión's story is one of sensationalism and manipulation. "It's a public disservice," said Julio Rafael Chávez Meléndez, a representative of the National Assembly and vice chairman of its Commission on Media and People's Power. "Even still, they are allowed to air their stories, which clearly

fulfill the opposition's political goal. But we also can't just let them run wild and trample over our laws without consequence. So while they can defend their right to exist as a supposed news broadcaster, we must defend our right to apply the law. This is not about silencing the opposition."

Carlos Ayala, a constitutional law expert in Caracas and the former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), disagrees. He said people watching Globovisión may get the impression that the Venezuelan media are free to criticize the government, but the station is paying a very high price for airing its views. "We're seeing how far the government can go—threatening the very existence of a broadcaster by imposing huge fines." The US\$2.16 million penalty for Globovisión's prison coverage is equivalent to 7.5 percent of its gross income for 2010.

Still, some critics say the station exacerbates polarization of the press and is as guilty of one-sided coverage as its pro-Chávez counterparts. While he is sympathetic to Globovisión's lone standing, Andrés Cañizalez, a professor and media expert at Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas, says Globovisión spends "less time on investigative journalism and more resources on pointing out the government's errors."

Lysber Ramos Sol, who heads Globovisión's investigative reporting team, said objective, journalistic probes are part of the station's mission, but that hard-hitting reports are "nearly impossible" to conduct given Venezuela's lack of transparency. Globovisión reporters also say that they are blacklisted. Very often, they say, officials deny their requests for information and government interviews. Entry to government press conferences is also routinely blocked.

"What's typical is to show up at a news conference and be stopped at the door for not being on the 'authorized' reporters list," said Sasha Ackerman, who joined Globovisión's reporting team three years ago. "So we wait outside with the rest of the excluded reporters and get information from colleagues or in some other roundabout way."



Journalists at Globovisión's studios. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

Globovisión reporters also face physical threats and intimidation. In March, a group of unidentified armed men, wearing red, pro-Chávez United Socialist Party T-shirts, attacked and stole footage from Ackerman and a Globovisión cameraman covering a rally for opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski. At home that evening, Ackerman's husband asked whether reporting on this year's presidential elections would be safe. "I've thought hard about it," said Ackerman. "I've never faced direct violence for reporting. But it's also made me more determined to go and report."

Meanwhile, ski-masked members of the pro-government group “La Piedrita” (Little Rock), gathered outside the Globovisión offices in March to hurl insults and wave guns, the station reported. In previous years, the group claimed responsibility for tear gas attacks on journalists and news outlets and threatened to “take up arms” against Globovisión—all while accusing the station of promoting violence against Chávez.

In 2009, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Venezuela must provide protection to the station and its reporters, but the government never implemented the court’s recommendations. The Venezuelan government, along with that of Ecuador, has proposed restrictions on the power of the court’s sister organization, the IACHR, and in particular the special rapporteur for freedom of expression, whose office has issued damning reports of both countries’ climate for press freedom.

How long Globovisión will be tolerated is hard to predict. “RCTV’s ratings went up when it was about to be closed,” said Carlos Correa, director of Espacio Público, a nongovernmental organization that promotes free expression and journalism ethics in Venezuela. “Picking on Globovisión could make it more popular.” Globovisión said its advertising rates have remained steady.

In late June, Venezuela’s Supreme Court ordered a freeze on Globovisión assets totaling 24.4 million bolívars (US\$5.7 million). The network’s lawyer, Ricardo Antela, told CPJ that the decision was aimed at forcing Globovisión to pay the fine over its prison coverage. A few days later, the network paid the US\$2.16 million fine. A separate appeal to have the fine annulled is pending in administrative court. If that ruling is favorable, Globovisión will apply to have the fine reimbursed, Antela said. In the meantime, the company was forced to take on debt, he said, and the financial impact will be felt throughout the network.

Meanwhile, Antela said the situation is such that government regulators could point to any number of alleged Globovisión violations and shut it down within days.

*Monica Campbell is a San Francisco-based freelance journalist and former CPJ consultant.*

## Stifling debate, state media focus on opposition, critics

Many state media in Latin American are used for political propaganda, but the Venezuelan government has built an unprecedented media empire that it uses to attack critics and independent journalists and obscure issues like crime and inflation. **By Carlos Lauría**



State media accused Últimas Noticias of using this crossword puzzle in a plot to assassinate Hugo Chávez's brother. (Reuters/Últimas Noticias)

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### NEW YORK

A few answers to a crossword puzzle were soon interpreted as an alleged plot to kill President Hugo Chávez Frías's elder brother. Published May 9 in the Caracas-based independent daily *Últimas Noticias*, the puzzle included the terms “kill,” “bursts of gunfire,” and “Adán,” the name of Chávez’s sibling—and led Miguel Pérez Pirela, host of the show “Cayendo y Corriendo” (Falling and Running) on state-owned Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), to say that mathematicians and psychologists had studied it, captured coded messages, and concluded it was an assassination plot.

A day after the show, members of the national intelligence service visited the paper’s offices seeking information about the puzzle’s author, *Últimas Noticias* said. Neptali Segovia, an English teacher who has created puzzles for the daily for more than 15 years, said the accusation was absurd, and presented himself at the intelligence service to be questioned. “I’m the first one interested in having all this cleared up. I have nothing to hide,” Segovia said in *Últimas Noticias*. No charges were filed against him.



While the conspiracy theory was decried as excessive even by some in Chávez's circle, the case is an example of the perilous, polarized environment in Venezuela, in which state media are used not only to advance political goals, but also as platforms to lambaste critics, including independent journalists, and avoid a debate on issues of substance, media analysts say. Rampant violence, kidnappings, a prison crisis, and inflation are among the major concerns of Venezuelan people that have gone unreported in the weeks leading up to the October 7 presidential elections.

"The official media divert attention from social problems like crime, insecurity, and the economy," Margarita López Maya, a historian at Central University in Venezuela, told CPJ.



Chávez on La Hojilla with host Mario Silva. (Reuters/Miraflores Palace)

The diversions sometimes turn ugly. In March, host Mario Silva of the television show "La Hojilla" (The Razor), also on state-owned VTV, accused cartoonist Rayma Suprani with the critical Caracas-based daily *El Universal* of "spreading hatred" with her illustrations. Soon after, Suprani began getting insults and threats on Twitter, according to the local free expression group Espacio Público.

Venezuela has no laws mandating that the government provide information free of commercial or political influence. Instead, the Chávez administration has invested heavily to build a large state press conglomerate to further its political agenda, CPJ research shows. In other Latin American countries, state media also largely broadcast propaganda at the expense of plural viewpoints. But analysts say some state-controlled regional television stations have a more balanced approach, carrying issues in the public interest. They cite Televisión Nacional de Chile, Canal 22: Canal Cultural de México, and TV Cultura in Brazil.

When Chávez first took office in 1999, he inherited poorly financed state media consisting of two broadcasters and a news agency with limited reach. Meanwhile, the dominant, private media were well funded by pro-business elites and widely distributed. During the failed coup attempt in April 2002, the four main private television stations barely covered pro-Chávez demonstrations, instead airing cartoons and movies, CPJ research shows. Many analysts alleged that private media executives colluded to impose a news blackout, while the executives claimed they could not cover the story for fear of violence from Chávez's backers. No media owner or executive was ever charged for involvement in the coup, but Chávez realized that controlling the flow of information could only be accomplished by expanding the number of outlets owned by the state.



RCTV employees in 2010 after the station was pulled off cable television. The sign says, 'Journalists targets.' (AP/Fernando Llano)

And so he did. Since 2003, the government has financed the startup of ViVe TV, a nationwide cultural and educational television network; ANTV, which broadcasts National Assembly sessions on the airwaves and on cable; AN radio; Ávila TV, a regional channel run by the city of Caracas; Alba TV and Alba Ciudad FM; YVKE Mundial Radio; La Radio del Sur; the newspaper *Correo del Orinoco*; and the news website *Aporrea*. Venezuelan Social Television Station, known as Tves, began broadcasting on May 28, 2007, a day after the country's oldest private television station, RCTV, was pulled off the air after 57 years. According to a 2007 CPJ report, the Venezuelan government failed to conduct a fair and transparent review of RCTV's concession renewal in an effort to silence its critical coverage. In 2010, government regulators also pulled RCTV from cable and satellite for not carrying Chávez's speeches.

The formidable media presence is supported by a group of state-funded community media, added López Maya from Central University. "The balance between private media and state-owned has changed dramatically since Chávez's second mandate," she told CPJ. In fact, the government recently marshaled resources from the broadcast regulator Conatel, the Ministry of Communication and Information, and the intelligence service to draw a map of the nation's media based on their allegiances, according to *Espacio Público*. The survey concluded that more than 50 percent of media is loyal to the government, while 25 percent is sympathetic to the opposition.

In July 2005, the government launched its most ambitious initiative: Telesur, a 24-hour news network that carries no commercial advertising and is available free-to-air and via satellite in Latin America, the U.S., Western Europe, Northern Africa, and some parts of Asia and the Middle East, according to its website. Venezuela owns 51 percent of Telesur, and the rest is owned by the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Uruguay. Carlos Romero, a political scientist at Central University, said Telesur's audience is more global than local due to its international programming. "It has very limited reach among the popular sectors. But it has modern technology and deep pockets," Romero said.

In the book *Hegemony and the Control of Communications*, Marcelino Bisbal, media analyst at Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas, wrote that the Venezuelan government's media platform had no precedent in the history of the country or Latin America.

Chávez has invested time as well as money in the airwaves; he has used the state media empire to become omnipresent in the life of Venezuelans. According to *Espacio Público*, Chávez has spent more than 1,600

broadcast hours on the air since 1999, broadcasting 2,334 *cadenas*, nationwide radio and television addresses that pre-empt programming on all stations.

Yet the president's presence on the air does not necessarily mean that ordinary Venezuelans are well informed by or about him. Chávez did personally announce that doctors had removed a baseball-size tumor from his pelvis, and said in February that he'd had a relapse of the cancer, but he has not provided details and his exact health condition is a state secret. Most information about his health has come from two sources: exiled physician José Mariquina, who has lived in the U.S. since 1991, and Venezuelan reporter Nelson Bocaranda, who runs the news website *Runrun.es*. Bocaranda has proved to be so accurate in predicting Chávez's trips to Cuba that some call him the "unofficial minister of information," according to press reports.

As his television appearances have diminished along with his health, Chávez has communicated via Twitter and written statements, prompting critics to complain that the president was ruling the country from abroad by tweet.

Indeed, digital media do play a role in furthering the government's agenda and launching attacks on critics. Internet penetration has increased from 3 percent in 1999 to 36 percent in 2011, according to CANTV, the national telephone company. Chávez has called Twitter a "weapon" that can be used for the benefit of his revolution. Most Venezuelan officials use Twitter and Facebook; the state controls several news websites as well as blogs.

Local journalists and free press advocates say officials use this array of tools to denounce critical journalists for what they describe as attempts to destabilize the country, depriving Venezuelans of vital information. In May, Prison Minister Iris Varela accused the private press of exacerbating violent clashes in a Caracas prison and said the government had decided not to issue prison statistics any more to the private press. Prison unrest and crowding have become major problems for Chávez; violence is widespread, and inmates often manage to obtain guns and drugs with the help of corrupt guards. "It is not a question of hiding information," Varela said, according to the state-owned news agency AVN. "We cannot allow the private media to bolster inmates' resistance—they just want to attack President Chávez."

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## Pro-government hackers hound Venezuelan journalists

The mysterious group N33 has targeted the online accounts of journalists critical of the Chávez administration. The victims are subject to fake messages, insults, and intimidating threats. **By John Otis**



Hugo Chávez has more than 3 million followers on Twitter.  
(Reuters/Jorge Silva)

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### CARACAS

The use of social media is rising around the world, but as government restrictions on traditional Venezuelan media tighten, professional journalists and citizen reporters are increasingly turning to social media, especially Twitter, to transmit and track the news. Venezuela has about 2 million Twitter users, or about 8 percent of the population. That gives Venezuela the highest Twitter penetration in the region after Uruguay, according to research by the local research company Tendencias Digitales.

“The government tries to silence bad news, and that’s why social networks are now playing a big role,” Luisa Torrealba, coordinator of the Venezuelan branch of the Institute for Press and Society, told CPJ. “They are an escape valve to allow people to learn what’s going on.” Or, as Miguel Henrique Otero, editor of the Caracas daily *El Nacional*, told CPJ: “With so much self-censorship in Venezuela, Twitter represents freedom of expression.” Often, Venezuelans pass on information and learn about events, such as power outages and oil spills that the government is not eager to publicize, through Twitter, Facebook posts, and blogs.

But the government is also using social media to promote its agenda and to attack its critics. President Hugo Chávez Frías' Twitter account now has more than 3 million followers, while his ministers regularly announce new measures via Twitter. More ominously, prominent journalists and opinion leaders have had their Twitter accounts hacked, in many cases by a mysterious pro-government group called N33.

In 2011, the independent freedom of expression group Espacio Público documented 30 cases of hacking against journalists, writers, human rights activists, and opposition politicians. The organization reported at least another 14 cases this year. In a few cases, government or pro-government figures have been targeted. The email account of Vice President Elías Jaua was violated on February 9, 2012, with the hackers sending fake messages.

In a September 2, 2011, communiqué, N33 said it had formed to wage cyberattacks against the “irresponsible and ignorant” critics of President Chávez. The group hacks into Twitter accounts, then uses them to transmit pro-government messages or insults. N33 took credit for hacking the Twitter accounts of Ibéyise Pacheco, a prominent opposition journalist, and writer Leonardo Padrón.



Reporter Nelson Bocaranda has been targeted by hackers.  
(Reuters/Jorge Silva)

Another hacking victim was Nelson Bocaranda, a widely read gossip columnist for the Caracas daily *El Universal* who has nearly 700,000 Twitter followers. According to Torrealba, Bocaranda may have been targeted because amid a news blackout by the government, he was the first journalist to report that Chávez was suffering from cancer.

Luis Carlos Díaz, an independent journalist and blogger, told CPJ that N33 had hacked his Twitter account several times over the past year. “The attacks online can be vicious,” said Díaz, who also runs workshops to teach journalists how to protect their online accounts from hackers. “We see statements saying that critics of Chávez ... are cockroaches, the enemy, and that they need to disappear or leave the country.”

The hacking goes beyond fake messages and insults. Hackers logged into Twitter can access account profiles, which reveal the true owners' email addresses, as well as the contents of private direct messages. Thus N33 or other hackers can often gain access to personal information and other details.

“Because they also get into your email, they can get your contacts, learn your home address and telephone numbers, learn the number of children you have, or the numbers of your bank accounts,” Erika Rosales, who tracks hacking cases for Espacio Público, told CPJ. “It is a way to sow fear. It's a way for the government to

say, 'Don't do this because we can punish you. And if you keep doing it, it's going to get worse.'" She said that after having their Twitter accounts hacked in September 2011, Padrón and Berenice Gómez, a Caracas journalist, received threatening phone calls from people identifying themselves as members of N33.

Díaz believes N33 gains access to personal online accounts through collaboration with Venezuela's main government-run Internet service provider CANTV. N33 has denied any ties to the government. But its actions are often publicized on "La Hojilla" (The Razor), a state-run TV late-night program that regularly lambastes journalists critical of the Chávez government. Neither CANTV nor the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation responded to CPJ email and phone requests for comment.

Otero told CPJ that after his journalist wife's Twitter account was hacked, friendly government sources assisted him in carrying out his own investigation. Otero said his information indicated the hackers were working from the Caracas office of the national intelligence service, known as SEBIN. Neither SEBIN nor the Ministry of Justice and the Interior responded to CPJ email and phone requests for comment.

Hacking is illegal under Venezuela's Special Law against Internet Crimes. If convicted, violators face stiff fines and up to six years behind bars. Although Gómez, Padrón, and other hacking victims have denounced the violations before the Attorney General's Office, the investigations have gone nowhere and there have been no convictions, according to Marianela Balbi, executive director of the Institute for Press and Society. Gómez and Padrón both confirmed to CPJ that their legal cases have gone nowhere. These high levels of impunity, said Rosales of Espacio Público, "make people take the [threatening phone calls] very seriously." Espacio Público has published an online guide to help Internet users protect themselves from hackers.

Carlos Correa, director of Espacio Público, told CPJ, "The problem here is that government critics have very little protection. The justice system is not considered independent and has yet to respond vigorously to complaints of people who have had their accounts hacked or their websites taken down or have been defamed or threatened publicly."

Julio Rafael Chávez Meléndez, a representative of the National Assembly and vice chairman of its Commission on Media and People's Power, told CPJ that allegations of hackers going after independent voices were overblown. He shrugged off the accusations as the opposition's "resistance to the free flow of ideas." He said authorities have yet to receive evidence that N33 has hacked accounts but that "we would prosecute such crimes if the evidence was there."

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