

Chávez Promotes Robust, Uncensored News Media in Venezuela

By Andrés Izarra

As a Venezuelan, watching television news evolve here has been watching the country's history unfold. For years, we had "controlled" news networks. Not controlled by Venezuelans or our government, but by the countries that dominate international news like the United States and the United Kingdom, or by large media companies with international ownership of local Venezuelan channels. We watched Latin American news through the eyes of CNN in Atlanta or the BBC in London or people with corporate agendas, whose priorities and perspectives are not always in line with those of the average Venezuelan. This has begun to change as Latin Americans have challenged corporate and foreign-owned media and created new, indigenous alternatives for mass media such as TeleSUR—the first 24-hour Spanish language international news channel to be based in Latin America.

There are currently more than twenty major television broadcast organizations operating in Venezuela, including private, state-run and public channels. This pluralism is in contrast to the widely held

view that the media in Venezuela is stifled or lacks freedom and diversity, often purported by politicians and the media outlets that report on them. FAIR (Fair and Accuracy in Reporting) and their publication *Extra!* recently chronicled the frequent mislabeling of our media by American publications as unbalanced and "muzzled" ("The Myth of the Muzzled Media" *Extra!* November/December 2006). The advent of TeleSUR further provides the average Latin American with greater access to the airwaves, reported from the region and for the region.

A Force for Regional Integration

To understand TeleSUR and the recent changes in Venezuelan media, they must be seen in the context of the broader changes taking place in our region and in our country.

We have expressed this desire for integration through regional economic and social cooperation agreements; financial, technical and energy assistance programs; and now, through the mass media. If integration is the end, TeleSUR is the means.

TeleSUR was born of a need in Latin America to develop a means by which

all the people of this vast region could have the opportunity of spreading their own values, revealing their own images, and debating their own ideas within a forum dedicated to freedom and equality. Until now, this was not possible in our region—the 24-hour news networks available to us were CNN en Español and previously, NBC's Canal de Noticias, both broadcast to us from the U.S. TeleSUR and other advances in the media provide alternatives which serve to represent the fundamental principles of an authentic source of mass media; one that adopts as its guiding principles the foundations of truth, justice, respect and solidarity.

TeleSUR provides news seven days a week through news programs, a daytime magazine show, hourly breaking news, journalistic analysis, stories, interviews and reports. TeleSUR has established the largest newsgathering capability of any TV news service in Latin America: fulltime correspondents in Bogotá, Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, Havana, Montevideo, La Paz, Port au Prince, Managua, Lima, Quito, Washington and most recently Madrid and London, in addition to a network of contributors throughout the region. This depth guarantees broad and responsible coverage, within the framework of the network's mission – the truth without restrictions.

TeleSUR is majority-owned by the Venezuelan government (51 percent), with Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba and Bolivia owning the remaining 49 percent. While TeleSUR was a concept developed by President Hugo Chávez, we maintain complete editorial independence from the government, as with our colleagues at the BBC and other state-owned networks. Our team is comprised of journalists

committed to accuracy and integrity in our reporting, meeting every morning and as major news breaks to discuss what will be assigned, with no outside input.

TeleSUR's model is certainly not a new one. many other nations and regions have created similar programs and projects with the intent of providing an alternative to the Anglo-American perspective in the news. Al Jazeera was one of the first proponents of a network geared towards a region or affinity group, but others soon followed suit. The Russian government created in 2005 Russia Today, a global news channel from Russia that broadcasts in English and is owned by Russian news agency RIA-Novosti. France recently created France 24 to “create greater pluralism” by delivering news with a “French perspective.” In addition to French, English and Arabic broadcasts, France 24 will add Spanish in the coming years, giving even more freedom of choice within the Spanish language news landscape, something we at TeleSUR embrace.

Who Owns the Venezuelan Airwaves?

The second feature of our television news landscape involves a political change within Venezuela. Until recently, Venezuelan television news often became victim of media conglomerates with one-sided political interests. For example, the privately-owned channel Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), where I was once a journalist, failed to report on breaking news regarding the attempted coup against President Chávez in 2002. The channel ran only news that supported anti-Chávez forces, including a false resignation letter claimed to be signed by Chávez. RCTV instructed its reporters to avoid covering pro-Chávez events and opinions, and ran *Tom and Jerry* cartoons when Chávez was restored to his office. I resigned over this

failure and serious breach of journalistic responsibility. The actions by RCTV (and another TV network Venevisión) were documented by two Irish filmmakers in “The Revolution Will Not be Televised.” The film includes one of the coup leaders thanking RCTV and Venevisión for their efforts during that time.

Recent attempts to regulate the media in Venezuela therefore are not “attacks on press freedom,” as some have claimed—quite the opposite. They are efforts to diversify the air waves and overcome the oligopoly of ownership.

As the coverage of the attempted coup demonstrated, Venezuela’s media, including state TV, needs controls to insure diversity among media owners themselves, who routinely erased balance from the nightly news.

In Venezuela, television is considered a public good because it assures its people the right to information. As such, it is not to be hoarded, squandered or manipulated. The recent decision by the Chávez government not to renew the broadcasting concession granted to RCTV is another step toward the diversification and democratization of the airwaves. To many, RCTV represented the limitation of access to the airwaves by keeping it in the hands of a small oligopoly of magnates.

Therefore, the decision was a question of democracy. RCTV is still able to operate on public airwaves via cable and satellite: the government’s decision allowed RCTV to organize their own station and also allowed access to the airwaves for those traditionally excluded by the media oligarchy.

People who have long been ignored by the media finally have a voice. We can claim a robust, uncensored news media climate here in Venezuela, with Mark Weisbrot, co-director of

the Center for Economic and Policy Research commenting on our freedom of speech in the *Augusta Chronicle* on October 9, 2006: “Indeed they do, with the most anti-government media in the hemisphere.” This has been seconded by John McLaughlin of *The McLaughlin Group*. And as with many world leaders, Chávez has reacted defensively to the criticism. Not only has RCTV received censure from Chávez in speeches, but so have we, on numerous occasions.

The push for regional integration and



public access to information is driving the future of television news in Venezuela and Latin America. The result, I think, is a much more sophisticated media market, in which all people have access, in which all viewpoints are heard, and where we hope others can gain a window into our country and our region from around the world. We intend to play our role by standing by our mission of the truth without restrictions, which will be guided by values of honesty, accuracy, integrity, courage and fairness.

Andrés Izarra was news director of RCTV, the network recently taken off the air by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Izarra later served as Chávez’s communications minister and is now president of TeleSUR.