

Chávez Does No Such Thing:

Press Freedom Conditions Have Seriously Deteriorated Under His Regime.

By Carlos Lauría

The decision to take Radio Caracas Televisión, known as RCTV, off the air responds to a premeditated strategy by the government of President Hugo Chávez Frías to replace the domination of private broadcasters with state domination. Venezuela's oldest private television station was forced off the air at midnight on May 27, in a decision that thwarts Venezuelans' right to seek and receive information and represents a setback for democracy in this country.

Although he was first elected in 1998 with the support of some media outlets, Chávez soon broke ties with them after announcing plans to rewrite the constitution. As his nationalist agenda became more radical, private media outlets took an openly partisan role, and without any neutrality and objectivity, sought his ouster while embracing the positions of his political opponents.

After the coup that briefly ousted Chávez in April 2002, the Venezuelan administration came to the conclusion that the state communication apparatus was in clear disadvantage compared to the power of private media.

Until 2002, the state owned only three media outlets: Radio Nacional de Venezuela network, Venezolana

de Televisión (VTV), and Venpres, the official news agency. Since then, the Chávez administration has defied the private media's control through investment in state-owned and community media projects. According to official data, the administration has budgeted 362 billion bolívares (US\$169 million) in the last two years alone.

Since the coup, the administration has invested heavily to increase the size of the government's communications portfolio. By stacking its personnel with government's followers and supporters, Chávez has certainly influenced content while guaranteeing vast amounts of uncritical coverage.

The president himself has used *cadenas*—his nationwide simultaneous radio and television broadcasts that preempt regular programming on all stations—as a government megaphone. Chávez takes advantage of his broadcasts to argue against the private media's news coverage and to single out individuals for censure, often lambasting journalists and media owners.

The Chávez administration has not only invested in new national broadcast and cable outlets but also created a network of alternative and community media, including TV and radio stations. At the same time, it

has opened newspapers and Web sites full of government advertising. Since 2003, the Venezuelan administration has financed the creation of ViVe TV, a cultural and educational television network with coverage throughout the country; ANTV, which broadcasts sessions of the National Assembly on the airwaves and on cable; and Ávila TV, a regional television station run by the city of Caracas.

TeleSUR is the government's most ambitious media project. This 24-hour news channel, labeled a Latin American alternative to CNN and Fox by officials, was launched in July 2005. Venezuela owns 51 percent of the channel, while the governments of Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay and Bolivia own minority stakes. TeleSUR, which has several news bureaus in Latin America, the Caribbean and Washington D.C., plans to start a news agency and open bureaus in London and Madrid soon.

TeleSUR's signal is broadcast from Venezuela's capital via satellite, and can be received in Latin America, in most of the United States and in Europe. Cable systems in a number of Latin American countries have signed agreements to distribute the network's programming.

Andrés Izarra, the station's president, said that the network was "looking for greater diversity and deeper views on subjects." Critics say TeleSUR should really be called "TeleChávez," as the government funnels public funds to finance a network that is oriented to give Chávez and his supporters in the region positive coverage.

In December 2006, TeleSUR purchased the broadcast television channel CMT, which is based in Caracas. The move is intended to

expand TeleSUR's reach beyond cable and satellite subscribers.

With a strong boost of public funds, the Venezuelan government has been able to balance the influence of the private media, while investing in technology on state-owned media. However, the administration keeps pointing to the concentration of media ownership in private hands and refuses to acknowledge the drastic change of the media landscape since 2003.

Some government officials have spoken publicly on the government's media strategy. In a January 8 interview with the Caracas daily *El Nacional*, TeleSUR president Izarra clearly stated that the administration of President Chávez is building an "information hegemony." Izarra explained that this hegemony did not mean the end of dissent, and that media that criticize the government would continue to operate.

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"For the new strategic scenario that is discussed, the struggle that falls in the ideological field has to do with a battle of ideas for the hearts and minds of people," said Izarra, former minister of communications and information. In the interview, Izarra, who was news director of RCTV until the 2002 coup against Chávez, explained that "we have to prepare a new plan, and the one we are proposing is aimed at achieving the state's communication and information

hegemony.”

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In a report launched in late April after a fact-finding mission to Caracas, CPJ found that press freedom conditions have seriously deteriorated in this country. The report, titled “Static in Venezuela,” describes the decision not to renew RCTV’s broadcast concession as “arbitrary and politically motivated,” casting a doubt on Venezuela’s commitment to freedom of expression.

While Venezuelan officials insist on promoting free expression, journalists working for the private media say that they have increasing difficulties while doing their jobs. Reporters and editors are concerned that the government punishes critical news outlets by blocking access to government events and sources, withholding public advertisement, filing criminal defamation complaints and imposing content restrictions.

Since 2005, the Venezuelan administration has enacted legal measures that restrict the work of the media. In January 2005, the National Assembly drastically increased criminal penalties for defamation and slander, contradicting international standards on freedom of expression. Changes in the penal code also expanded the categories of government officials protected by disrespect provisions, which criminalize expressions deemed offensive to public officials and state institutions, and drastically increased criminal penalties for defamation and

slander. The maximum prison term for defamation, for example, went from 30 months to 48 months under the measure.

Also in effect since 2005 is the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, which had been approved by the National Assembly and signed into law by Chávez in December 2004. The Social Responsibility law has been widely criticized for its broad and vaguely worded restrictions on free expression. Under Article 29, for example, broadcasters who disseminate messages that

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“promote, defend, or incite breaches of public order” or “are contrary to the security of the nation” may be forced to suspend broadcasts for up to 72 hours. If a media outlet repeats the infractions within the next five years, its broadcasting concession may be suspended for up to five years. Article 7 of the law forbids “graphic descriptions or images of real violence” on the air from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m., except when the broadcast is live and the content is either “indispensable” or emerges unexpectedly.

The non renewal of RCTV’s

concession fits perfectly in the government's logic on the state information hegemony. The decision, first announced by Chávez before a military group in December 2006, has been clearly designed to force the main critical media off the air. Two of the three other private broadcasters, Televen and Venevisión, have softened their critics and got rid of their most critical programs. Curiously, Venevisión's concession was renewed shortly before it expired on May 27.

With RCTV off the air, there is only one broadcaster that continues to criticize the Venezuelan government. But Chávez and officials from his administration are not so worried about Globovisión because this station can be seen as a broadcast channel in metropolitan Caracas and the state of Carabobo.

Although the station's concession expires in 2015, Globovisión executives are concerned about what they describe as government intimidation against the network. The day RCTV went off the air, the minister of Communication and Information William Lara filed a complaint with the attorney general's office accusing Globovisión of inciting violence against Chávez. The action was motivated after the station aired file footage of a 1981 assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II. Globovisión Director

Alberto Federico Ravell rejected the accusation.

RCTV's frequency has been replaced by a new public-service broadcaster called Venezuelan Social Television Station (TVES). The new channel began broadcasting early on May 28. While the government said that the news station's editorial line would not be dictated by administration officials, analysts said that the broadcaster will effectively operate as a government propaganda machine.

According to a President's decree, five of the seven members of the board of directors will be appointed by the executive. The pressure that the Venezuelan administration is exerting over the private media represents a setback on freedom of expression, and indicates a serious blow to Venezuela's commitment to democratic values.

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