

Conflict and the Mass Media in Chávez's Venezuela

by

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Abstract

The mass media have been integral players in the conflict dividing Venezuela since Hugo Chávez took power in 1998. This paper explores how the mass media, more than just reflecting the problems and issues of the day, are important political actors in society and shape the public sphere in Venezuela. Specifically, the paper examines Chávez's use of the mass media, the roles of government-owned and alternative media, and the increasing politicization of the private media. The paper also highlights the status of press freedom and the challenges facing media organizations with the attendant implications this has for democracy.

Conflict and the Mass Media in Chávez's Venezuela¹

by Eliza Tanner Hawkins

As the Venezuelan crisis intensified during 2002 and 2003, the mass media were at the center of the struggle—transmitting information, actively taking sides, and mobilizing support for the different factions in society. President Hugo Chávez Frías repeatedly came before the television cameras to elaborate on his vision of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and to denounce the opposition media, calling the television stations “terrorists” and the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Opposition media provided their versions of events, criticized Chávez and the government's “acts of terrorism,” and ran hundreds of advertisements calling people to join in protests against the government. Online debates and chat sites in the country were filled with references to the media coverage; participants posted images from news organizations and local television stations to prove their points. Web sites were created to promote the various groups and facilitate communication with supporters around the world. In the streets, offices, homes, and online, people debated politics and the media's coverage of current events. However, the conflict was not limited to verbal and written debates. It moved beyond words and resulted in physical and legal attacks on media outlets, journalists, and editors.

This paper explores how the mass media, more than just reflecting the problems and issues of the day, are important political actors in Venezuelan society. In fact, to ignore the role of private and state media businesses in an analysis of interest groups and political conflict, would limit our understanding and analysis of recent events. The analysis is based on the idea that freedom of expression and press freedom are essential for democracy and that the media play an essential role in facilitating debates in the public sphere. The public sphere is that arena of society where citizens can talk, form public opinions, and ultimately shape and guide the actions of a democratic government.² Certain actions by groups and individuals in society, structural limitations, and even the actual discourse can inhibit or destroy the public sphere; thus these variables have implications for the quality of democracy in society. The research is important because it will increase our understanding of the roles media play in shaping the public sphere during times of political conflict and polarization. The data for the project was collected through a variety of qualitative methods, including historical and legal research, as well as a series of interviews with media practitioners and government officials in Caracas, Venezuela, during February 2003.

In this paper, will first provide some background on the Venezuelan mass media and relevant literature. Then I will look at three institutions or groups that are shaping the public sphere in Venezuela: Chávez's use of the media, state and alternative media, and private media. Finally, I will discuss the implications these factors have for the public sphere and democracy in Venezuela.

Setting the stage: Background and literature

Venezuela has long been known for its vibrant, competitive, commercial media dominated by several large family-owned groups. These groups include Phelps/Granier

¹ Brigham Young University supported this research in part through a Wendell J. Ashton Communications Research grant. The author thanks Leticia A. Adams for her research assistance on this project.

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

(broadcasting: Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV)), Cisneros (broadcasting: Venevisión and Televen), Armas (publishing: *El Universal*, *Meridiano*, and *Diario 2001*), Otero (publishing: *El Nacional*), and Capriles (publishing: *El Mundo* and *Últimas Noticias*). The two largest television stations, RCTV and Venevisión, each had more than 30 percent market share in 2001. The government is also active in the media with state-owned television, radio, and publishing outlets, though the reach of these outlets is much smaller—about 2 percent market share for Venezolana de TV in 2001.³

A series of surveys conducted since 1998 revealed that Venezuelans generally have a positive image of the mass media. When asked if the media are working to resolve the problems in the country, a majority said “yes.” This positive assessment is compared with other social institutions such as the national government, the armed forces, the Catholic Church, and the local government in Figure 1. Also, in the past two years as Chávez’s popularity has declined, the mass media have generally continued to maintain their positive image.⁴ (See figures 1 and 2.)

[Figures 1 and 2 about here.]

The English-language scholarly literature devoted to Venezuelan media is quite limited. A few articles and book chapters address the issues facing Venezuelan media and changes in media structure. For example, in a 1988 study of Venezuelan media, Richard L. Allen and Fausto Izcaray looked at media exposure and “agenda diversity” or the number of problems or issues citizens can identify. They found that a person’s socioeconomic status had a positive relation with newspaper exposure, high agenda diversity, and high television exposure.⁵ In the mid-1990s, the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center included a chapter on Venezuelan media in their book *Changing Patterns: Latin America’s Vital Media*. The authors argued that the media owners were quite powerful and used their clout in the many political struggles, though generally the owners saw themselves as politically unallied with major parties. The authors also reviewed the different media companies and the press freedom issues journalists were facing at the time.⁶ A more recent book included a chapter on Venezuelan media by José Antonio Mayobre who discussed the history of mass media businesses since the 1970s and criticized process of telecommunications privatization in the country. He blamed the media and the politicians for many of the problems the country was experiencing since the election of Chávez.⁷ Several other books on Latin American media mention the high levels of media development in Venezuela and some of the press freedom debates in the country.⁸

The majority of information on Venezuelan media available to English-language audiences is found in newspaper and magazine articles or in the archives of international press

³ AGB Venezuela, “Hábitos y tendencias televisivas, 2000-2001,” AGB Panamericana de Venezuela Medición [www.agb.com.ve/libro2001/].

⁴ Survey data from Consultores 21, Caracas, Venezuela, February 2003. The results are based on 1,500 face-to-face surveys conducted in homes throughout Venezuela in cities of more than 20,000 people.

⁵ Richard L. Allen and Fausto Izcaray, “Nominal Agenda Diversity in a Media-Rich, Less-Developed Society,” *Communication Research* 15, no. 1 (February 1988): 29-50.

⁶ Jon Vanden Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis, *Changing Patterns: Latin America’s Vital Media* (New York: The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1995).

⁷ José Antonio Mayobre, “Venezuela and the Media: The New Paradigm,” in *Latin Politics, Global Media*, edited by Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002: 176-195).

⁸ See, for example, pages 20-21 in Richard R. Cole, ed., *Communication in Latin America: Journalism, Mass Media, and Society* (Jaguar Books on Latin America, No 14. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996).

organizations and networks. Such organizations include the Inter American Press Association, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, Reporters without Borders, the International Journalists' Network, and the International Federation of Journalists.⁹

Works in Spanish are much more extensive, but not readily available outside Venezuela. These books include works such as an extensive outline of the mass communication businesses in the 1980s and a critique of the Venezuelan communication industry and the lack of progressive government policies.¹⁰ A recent analysis of journalism and the April 2002 demonstrations and coup found that the media became increasingly politicized and radicalized as the crisis intensified.¹¹ The Venezuela media produce an incredible amount of information on their role in the political crisis. Rarely a day passes without the media publishing reports about themselves and their situation. Some of the information is available outside Venezuela through Web sites.

The media in Venezuela have seen their legal framework change since President Hugo Chávez Frías, a former paratrooper and leader of a failed 1992 coup, swept to power in 1998 with 57 percent of the popular vote, promising to create a “New Democracy” and rid the country of corruption. Within a year, Chávez and his Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento V República or MVR) had ended the 40-year-old “Punto Fijo” democracy and drafted a new constitution, which was approved by 72 percent of the voters. Under the new constitution, Chávez was elected again as president for a six-year term. Chávez and his supporters (often known as Chavistas) see the Constitution as a quasi-sacred text that provides the blueprint for a complete restructuring of Venezuelan society. In fact, during his television broadcasts, Chávez is rarely seen without a copy of the Constitution in his hand. Two of the articles, Articles 57 and 58, of the new constitution specifically address freedom of expression:

Article 57. Every person has the right to freely express his thoughts, his ideas or opinions in person, in written form, or through any other form of expression, and to use any medium of communication and diffusion for this purpose, without censorship. Whosoever exercises this right assumes full responsibility for all his expressions. Anonymity, war propaganda, discriminatory messages, or messages that promote religious intolerance are not permitted. Censorship of or by public functionaries as they give information about their work responsibilities is prohibited.¹²

Article 58. Communication is free and plural, and brings with it the rights and responsibilities that are indicated by law. Every person has the right to timely, truthful,

⁹ See Committee to Protect Journalists [www.cpj.org]; Inter American Press Association [www.sipiapa.com]; International Federation of Journalists [www.ifj.org]; International Freedom of Expression Exchange [www.ifex.org]; International Journalists' Network [www.ijn.net]; Reporters without Borders [www.rsf.fr].

¹⁰ Lulú Giménez Saldivia and Angela Hernández Algara, *Estructura de los medios de difusión en Venezuela* (Caracas, Venezuela: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 1988); Antonio Pasquali, *La comunicación cercenada: El caso Venezuela* (Caracas, Venezuela: Monte Avila Editores, 1990).

¹¹ Caroline Bosc-Bierne de Oteyza and Leopoldo Tablante, “La Línea editorial de los periódicos *El Universal* y *El Nacional* entre el 7 y el 15 de abril,” Anuario ININCO, Universidad Central de Venezuela, *Investigaciones de la Comunicación* 14 (June 2002): 61-108.

¹² Spanish version: “Artículo 57. Toda persona tiene derecho a expresar libremente sus pensamientos, sus ideas u opiniones de viva voz, por escrito o mediante cualquier otra forma de expresión, y de hacer uso para ello de cualquier medio de comunicación y difusión, sin que pueda establecerse censura. Quien haga uso de este derecho asume plena responsabilidad por todo lo expresado. No se permite el anonimato, ni la propaganda de guerra, ni los mensajes discriminatorios, ni los que promuevan la intolerancia religiosa. Se prohíbe la censura a los funcionarios públicos o funcionarias públicas para dar cuenta de los asuntos bajo sus responsabilidades.”

and impartial information, without censorship, in accordance with the principles of this Constitution, as well as the right of reply and correction when he is directly affected by incorrect or insulting information. Children and adolescents have the right to receive information appropriate for their comprehensive development.¹³

The media and press freedom groups strongly opposed the clause establishing the right to “timely, truthful, and impartial information” since such language could be used as a pretext for government censorship if the government becomes the institution to determine what is “truthful” or “impartial.” Venezuelan journalists continue to function under the 1994 Law of the Exercise of Journalism that modified and strengthened the original requirements of a 1972 law. This law requires all journalists who work in Venezuela to have a journalism degree and to belong to the Colegio, or national journalist organization.¹⁴ This law was opposed by editors’ and owners’ groups, including the Bloque de Prensa Venezolano and the Inter American Press Association, who argued that such requirements would threaten freedom of expression.¹⁵ Many journalists saw the law as a way to further professionalize their work, raise the standards of journalism in the country, and provide a way to counterbalance the power of media owners. This law continues to stand even though the Inter-American court ruled as early as 1985 that mandatory colegio membership laws violate the freedom of expression ideas of Article 13 in the American Convention on Human Rights.¹⁶ The colegio and other professional organizations uphold ethical codes for all their members, though there may be somewhat of a gap between the actual code and the day-to-day practice of journalism. The legal framework may continue to change as a new law regulating broadcasters is now under debate in the National Assembly.

The parameters in which the media function are established by the laws and market as outlined in this brief overview. With this foundation, I will now discuss three key aspects of Venezuelan media, starting with Chávez and his powerful influence in society.

Aló, Presidente: Chávez and the media

Chávez is extremely skilled in his use of the media. His national popularity can be traced to a brief television appearance made in February 1992 as he called off his troops during a failed coup. According to Venezuelan economist Moises Naim, this television message

¹³ Spanish version: “Artículo 58. La comunicación es libre y plural, y comporta los deberes y responsabilidades que indique la ley. Toda persona tiene derecho a la información oportuna, veraz e imparcial, sin censura, de acuerdo con los principios de esta Constitución, así como el derecho de réplica y rectificación cuando se vean afectados directamente por informaciones inexactas o agraviantes. Los niños, niñas y adolescentes tienen derecho a recibir información adecuada para su desarrollo integral.”

¹⁴ “Ley de ejercicio del periodismo.” Gaceta Oficial 4,819, 22 December 1994.

¹⁵ “La SIP condena ley de periodismo,” *El Universal*, 10 October 1996 [www.el-universal.com]; Bruce Garrison and James Nelson Goodsell, “Professional News Organizations in Latin America,” in *Communication in Latin America: Journalism, Mass Media, and Society*, ed. by Richard R. Cole (Jaguar Books on Latin America, No 14. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996); Ricardo Trotti and Bill Williamson, “Should Journalists Be Required to Belong to Colegios and Have University Degrees?” in *Communication in Latin America: Journalism, Mass Media, and Society*, ed. by Richard R. Cole (Jaguar Books on Latin America, No 14. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996)

¹⁶ Colegio laws have been extensively discussed in the literature. See, for example, Jerry W. Knudson, “Licensing journalists in Latin America: An appraisal,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 878-899 or Michael Perkins, “Violence against the Press in Latin America: Protections and Remedies in International Law,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 275-290.

contributed more to destabilizing Venezuelan democracy in two minutes than all the shots fired through the night. Impeccably dressed in uniform, showing no sign of fatigue or stress, Chavez delivered a short speech, first emphasizing his Bolivarian values, then stating:

Unfortunately, for now, the objectives we sought were not achieved in the capital city. That is, we in Caracas could not take control of power. You, there in the interior, did a great job. But it is time now to avoid further bloodshed; it is time to reflect. We will have new situations. The country definitely has to embark on the road to a better destiny.

Chavez...was a compelling and uncommon sight for television viewers accustomed to the verbal and political maneuverings of traditional politicians: a public figure who acknowledged that he personally had failed while others had done a great job; who maintained an unflinching position even after failure and defeat; who faced responsibility and did not try to evade the repercussions of his actions. His televised image conveyed the possibility of change, a break from the political and economic schemes usually blamed for the country's problems. A new face unrelated to the traditional power structures and offering to guide the nation back to prosperity, equality, and integrity was an item that, regardless of its packaging, was bound to appeal to a mass audience. That the item was, in fact, a primitive army tyrant was easily concealed by the illusion that any change meant progress.¹⁷

His skill in using language and the media have grown since this first appearance. The style and rhetoric are reminiscent of early populist leaders in Latin America. An official with the MVR noted that Chávez has cultivated a specific rhetorical mannerism inspired by Jorge Gaitan, but with a military edge and a lot of “yelling.”¹⁸ Soon after he took office, a commentator wrote that “another reason why the media and Venezuelans pay attention to Chavez’s speeches and TV appearances is his mixture of impassioned populist rhetoric and his rough, unconventional style, off-the-wall expressions and colorful anecdotes.”¹⁹ He will use common language—including swear words and vulgar expressions—as well as specific images chosen to appeal to the poorer classes in Venezuela.

Chávez uses the media in a number of ways. First, as a number of scholars and observers have commented, he uses the media to broaden his charismatic, populist appeal.²⁰ To help facilitate this appeal, after he was elected Chávez created a weekly newspaper, *El Correo del Presidente*, and started weekly radio and television talk shows called “Aló, Presidente” or “Hello, President.”²¹ The newspaper and a subsequent weekly newsletter turned out to be short-lived projects, but the broadcast call-in show continued.²² The weekly radio and television broadcasts, which may last four or five hours, let him to speak directly to the Venezuelan people

¹⁷ Moises Naim, *Paper Tigers and Minotaurs: The Politics of Venezuela's Economic Reforms* (New York: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1993), 101-102.

¹⁸ Willian Lara, interview by Kirk A. Hawkins, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

¹⁹ Tony Bianchi, “Venezuela: Press Freedom and More,” *Pulso del Periodismo*, 8 June 1999.

[www.pulso.org/English/Archives/Venezuela%20Press%20Freedom.htm].

²⁰ José Antonio Mayobre, “Venezuela and the Media: The New Paradigm,” in *Latin Politics, Global Media*, edited by Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002: 176-195).

²¹ Michael Kudlak, “Face to Face with the President,” *IPI Watch List*, September 2001

[www.freemedia.at/wl_venezuela.htm].

²² Christina Hoag, “Venezuelan Journalists Under Siege by Chavez/Incendiary Attacks Stir Up Followers,” *Houston Chronicle*, 24 March 2002 [www.houstonchronicle.com].

and also allow citizens to call in and talk about their concerns.²³ The shows have enchanted certain segments of the population (especially those that Chávez sees as his base of support), changed the presidential image, and “brought them [the people] closer to the president”.²⁴ Transcripts and reports of all these shows as well as other speeches are available on the presidential web site, www.venezuela.gov.ve. A brief sample of a typical exchange between a citizen and the president is included in Appendix A. He builds a base of support among the people by having people identify directly with him, not with some intervening party organization or movement, including his own party, MVR.

Second, he uses his broadcasts to set the political agenda, to politically mobilize supporters, and to announce policies. “The program *Aló, Presidente* was marvelous for him,” said the news director at RCTV, “because he realized that in *Aló, Presidente* when he offers his interpretations, gives his opinions . . . he is generating the agenda of [public] opinion for the following week.”²⁵ For the rest of the week, all the media will address the topics covered in his speech.

Chávez uses the broadcasts as a political tool to politically mobilize his supporters. Originally, he did this directly by campaigning for his party. During the July 1999 campaigning for the National Constituent Assembly that was to write a new constitution, the National Electoral Council (CNE) “pulled the plug” on Chavez’s television and radio program because he was “violating the law by openly campaigning for his leftist Patriotic Pole (PP) coalition.”²⁶ Chávez criticized the CNE in a national broadcast and the next week his supporters protested in front of the CNE’s building and stuffed money into cardboard boxes to try and pay the US\$7,700 fine imposed on the president. However, more often, Chávez will address a certain issue and then within a few days or weeks, someone will attempt to carry out the president’s wishes. Depending on the event, Chávez and his supporters will praise the action as arising spontaneously from the people or will disavow any connection with it. Opponents see these communication patterns as ingenious techniques Chávez uses to mobilize supporters without having to become directly involved in the actions. For example, on 16 February 2003 during his weekly broadcast, Chávez, in speaking with a lawyer from Maracay, said that the “Judicial Power is still in the hands of a bunch of bandits. . . . It can’t possibly be that there isn’t a judge here that will put the golpistas in jail, nor a judge that will put the terrorists in prison. Where are the judges in Venezuela?” After a long speech about judicial problems, he finished by saying that the Judicial Power “cannot be in the hands of corrupt bandits or cowards. We need republican constitutional judges that enforce the law.”²⁷ That week, a judge sympathetic to Chávez ordered the arrest of the president of Fedecámaras, Carlos Fernández, one of the main leaders of the nation-wide strike. Chávez was extremely pleased and extensively praised the judge for her actions during the following days.²⁸

²³ Marylene Smeets, “Radio Chavez: the Press and the President In Venezuela,” *Quill* 89, no. 3 (April 2001): 48-50; Marylene Smeets, “Venezuela Radio Chávez: Populism Meets the Press as Venezuela’s Brash New President Takes to the Airwaves,” Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001 [www.cpj.org/Briefings/2001/Ven_feb01.html].

²⁴ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

²⁵ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

²⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists, “The Americas 1999: Venezuela,” Committee to Protect Journalists [www.cpj.org/attacks99/americas99/Venezuela.html].

²⁷ Hugo Chávez Frías, “*Aló Presidente*” Number 139, Radio Nacional, Broadcast from Campo Muscar, Venezuela, 16 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

²⁸ Hugo Chávez Frías, Speech from la carrera 19 con calle 25, Barquisimeto, Edo. Lara, Venezuela, *Venezolana de Televisión, Programa Especial*, 20 February 2003 [www.venezuela.gov.ve]; Hugo Chávez Frías, Speech at the “*Juramentación de la Corporación Venezolana Agraria*,” *Venezolana de Televisión, Programa Especial*, 21 February 2003 [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

In yet another example, Chávez gave a speech in which he criticized the United States, Colombia, and Spain for interfering in the country's internal affairs. Within days, on 25 February 2003, both the Colombian and Spanish embassies were extensively damaged by bombs. Although it wasn't known who was responsible, the newspaper *Tal Cual* criticized Chávez for fanning the conflict with his language, and wrote, "It is evident that at this time there are armed groups, very well armed, that drink in Chávez's language and take inspiration from his primitive politics and from these, draw out programs for direct action."²⁹

Along with mobilizing supporters or inflaming opponents, Chávez uses his speeches to announce policies, some which may be still in the idea stage. The importance of this strategy cannot be underestimated since Chávez has created a system in which all information and decisions are concentrated in the figure of the president. Ministers and other government officials have little or no power to act or speak independently.³⁰ For example, he called for the establishment of "Círculos Bolivarianos," or Bolivarian Circles, that would be a form of grassroots social organization. "The president, without saying what it [the circles] would be (because it was unknown), proposed to the country that the Bolivarian Circles be created. ... In April 2001 ... in a talk, he said, 'Well, let's create a movement that will be a social organization, the Bolivarian Circles.' But it wasn't known what type of organization it was, how it would be, nothing, only that it would be." Chávez's proposal ignited a discussion among people in the government, who then came up with a plan that "would fulfill what is written in this constitution," said the general coordinator of the Bolivarian Circles.³¹ Other times, Chávez will use the weekly addresses to enact specific policies, such as the famous (or infamous) firing of the management of the of the state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela* or PDVSA, in April 2002. In cases such as these, he does not restrict himself to his weekly program and will use "cadenas," which are broadcasts during which all the radio and television stations must link to the government signal and carry the speech by the president or other government officials. In the first part of 2003, Chávez used cadenas to announce the price controls and the fixed exchange rates. Chávez sees these talks as ways for him to combat the misinformation and lies spread by the opposition media. The director of *Tal Cual* summed up the feelings of many in Venezuela that Chávez's words are "verbal bombs," or they have the potential to inspire many different kinds of actions among his supporters, as well as reactions from opponents.³²

Finally, although the Constitution contains two articles dealing with freedom of expression, Chávez and his government's view of this right contrasts sharply with the views held by human rights groups and press freedom organizations. In an exchange during *Aló, Presidente* between Chávez and the minister of the interior, Diosdado Cabello, Cabello read article 2 of the Constitution, which lists the values on which Venezuela is founded—life, liberty, justice, equality, solidarity, democracy, social responsibility, and in general, human rights, ethics, and political pluralism—and then pointed out, "Freedom of expression is not included in these fundamental values of the Constitution. What this means is that those rights that we have as citizens are above freedom of expression, just like is established by our Constitution."³³ Cabello continued to reason, with Chávez agreeing, that is if this is the case, laws that may restrict

²⁹ "Verbobomba." *Tal Cual*, 25 February 2003 [www.talcualdigital.com].

³⁰ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

³¹ Rodrigo Chaves, interview by Kirk A. Hawkins, Caracas, Venezuela, 17 February 2003.

³² "Verbobomba." *Tal Cual*, 25 February 2003 [www.talcualdigital.com].

³³ Hugo Chávez Frías, "Aló Presidente" Number 139, Radio Nacional, Broadcast from Campo Muscar, Venezuela, 16 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

freedom of expression are constitutional since they will be supporting these “higher values” enshrined in the Constitution.

Through his extensive use of the media and political discourse, Chávez hopes to continue and deepen his Bolivarian project and transform Venezuelan society. In contrast with previous presidents, “this man occupies full pages in the newspapers and entire hours on television. In other words, the center of the world, the axis of the world, in Venezuela is called ‘Hugo Chávez Frías.’”³⁴

Taking on a political role: State and alternative media

The government has several media outlets including the television station Venezolana de TV, Radio Nacional de Venezuela, which includes FM, AM, and shortwave radio stations, the news agency Venpres, and a monthly newspaper published by Venpres. Since 1999, the function of the government broadcast stations has changed from a broad public service, educational role to a political role designed to support the government and Chávez. The idea of “public service” is now seen as transmitting the information from and about the government, with the ultimate goal being to support the Constitution and the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuelan society. This means that the station provides much more information and news than it ever did before, explained a consultant to the president of Venezolana de TV. The information programs are dedicated to combating the lies and rumors broadcast by the private television stations. As a result, the station’s content is very politicized.³⁵ As part of this project, the state media have increased their “participatory” programming in that broadcast stations sometimes invite common folk to participate on talk shows.

Some of the government’s journalists see ethical conflicts in this shift to an overtly political role, since they feel that they have become Chávez’s private media outlets. One journalist at Venpres said, “I’ve always argued that we have to cover both sides, but that’s not our communications policy.” Others mentioned “witch-hunts” inside the organizations as anyone suspected of being anti-Chávez is removed.³⁶

This political, informative role has become more important since many of the government officials have stopped talking with reporters from the opposition media and the government rarely sends out any press releases or information about government projects. Reporters from various media outlets are forced to monitor the state media and repeat what is officially broadcast or published.³⁷

Venezuelan community media predates Chávez’s presidency with some broadcasters functioning for the past decade, often as local “pirate” stations. TV Rubio and Televisora Cultural de Michelena were among the first community media in Venezuela. Radio Catia Libre 93.5 FM started broadcasting in 1996 and Radio Alternativa, Radio Perola, and Radio Activa de La Vega began broadcasts in 1998. Besides radio and television broadcasting, a few community media have also established Web pages.³⁸

³⁴ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

³⁵ Rubén Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

³⁶ Sauro González Rodríguez, “Cannon Fodder,” Committee to Protect Journalists: Special Reports, 8 August 2002.

³⁷ Valentina Lares, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

³⁸ ANMCLA, “Somos expresión de la multitude,” Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos, Venezuela [www.medioscomunitarios.org/].

The legal framework for the community broadcast stations is established in Presidential Decree 1,521 of 3 November 2001 and the Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones.³⁹ According to Conatel, the National Telecommunication Commission, Venezuela is one of the few countries in Latin America (along with Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador) where legislation specifically addresses and supports community broadcast stations. The government is actively involved through Conatel in developing not-for-profit community radio and television stations that meet the needs of their communities. The law is designed to try and erect barriers between the medium and the content in order to allow pluralism of ideas over the airwaves. Concessions or local broadcast licenses are awarded to “community foundations” formed for the purpose of creating a community radio or television station; the community media must be part of the organized civil society in Venezuela. In practice this means that many of the community stations are affiliated with the Bolivarian Circles. However, according to the law, the directors cannot be government employees, directors of political parties, labor unions, active military personnel, or people who work for other mass media. The law also details the amount of programming that must originate with community members (70%) as well as limits on the length of advertisements. Venezuelan law allows community radio stations to sell and broadcast commercials, within the guidelines specified, and to receive support from local governments. Presidential decree 1,522 exempted operators of community media from paying the taxes specified in the telecommunications law.⁴⁰ With this government support, the number of alternative radio and television stations has increased in the past year.

Many of the community or alternative media have as their goal to “transform the profound social inequalities in each community and attain their full development.” To do this, they see their function as helping increase the democratization of the access to the information media and expanding the right to information and the freedom of expression.⁴¹ During 2002, several networks of community media have formed, including the Red Venezolana de Medios Comunitarios (RVMC) and the Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos (ANMCLA). The purpose of these networks is to support local community media. RVMC declares their mission is to “promote the exercise of freedom and the consequent democratization of communication, in order to support freedom of expression, information, opinion and contribute to the equitable and sustainable development of the Venezuelan society.”⁴² ANMCLA sees as its goal to help community broadcasting “democratize communication in order to democratize society.”⁴³

The community television station in Rubio (TVCR), Táchira state, is one of the oldest community media projects in Venezuela. In 1995 a group of young people, many of them artists, decided to create a local community television station in order to support and publicize the

³⁹ Reglamento de radio difusión sonora y televisión abierta comunitarias de servicio público, sin fines de lucro, presidential decree 1,521, Venezuela, 3 November 2001. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

⁴⁰ José Brett Mundo, “Marco legal de estaciones comunitarias en el mundo y Venezuela,” Presentation in the first Foro Internacional y Encuentro Nacional de Medios de Comunicación Comunitaria, CONATEL, Caracas, August 2002. [www.conatel.gov.ve]; Reglamento de radio difusión sonora y televisión abierta comunitarias de servicio público, sin fines de lucro, presidential decree 1,521, Venezuela, 3 November 2001. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

⁴¹ ANMCLA, “Somos expresión de la multitudine,” Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos, Venezuela [www.medioscomunitarios.org/].

⁴² “Red Venezolana de Medios Comunitarios, RVMC,” presentation in the first Foro Internacional y Encuentro Nacional de Medios de Comunicación Comunitaria, CONATEL, Caracas, August 2002. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

⁴³ ANMCLA, “Somos expresión de la multitudine,” Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos, Venezuela [www.medioscomunitarios.org/].

social-cultural activities of the various non-governmental organizations, including choral, dance, and theater productions. Some of the founders had been working with these cultural NGOs since the late 1980s. They were able to put together the equipment and the first broadcast went on the air 26 August 1995, reaching almost all of the city. The main goal was to create programming in which the people participated, “extending the dialog and discussing collective social and popular norms, complaints and proposals that will receive timely responses.” The station consists of two video cameras and some other simple equipment located in the upper floor of a house. Despite the lack of resources, the station has continued to broadcast since that time and generated a following among the people of the city who will gather to watch the local news and other programs when they go on the air.⁴⁴

It should be noted that there are also a few local, religious stations, often affiliated with evangelical churches. These stations tend to stay out of politics and have a specific religious, proselytizing role. Although these stations do exist, most of the community media have specific political projects. This leaves them vulnerable to the criticism that some are becoming political voices for Chávez. Conatel allows the alternative stations to pick up the government broadcasts and news and rebroadcast it to their local audiences. In June 2002, Chávez broadcast one of his weekly speeches from Catia TV and spoke of his support of these community broadcast stations.⁴⁵ At this time, the country had at least nine community television stations and about sixteen radio stations.⁴⁶

Independent media outlets, including Web sites, in the United States, Canada, and Europe, have expressed interest in the development of the Venezuelan community media and have circulated reports about some of the events in that country. The alternative media have been part of the political conflict, as can be seen from events during the April 2002 brief coup and subsequent return of Chávez. During the time Pedro Carmona Estanga briefly assumed power, some of the community media centers were attacked and the government television station was forced to stop transmissions. Nicolás Rivera, an announcer for Radio Perola, was arrested. Personnel from Catia TV helped the government television station get back on the air as Chávez returned to power. However, the reports were unclear on who were the “police forces” attacking the community media.⁴⁷

Despite the claims that the stations are “independent community voices,” a growing number of them are joining the political debates and taking an active role in supporting Chávez and the government. As they do so, the stations are facing a number of challenges. A number of community radio stations report they are receiving opposition from the commercial radio businesses and poor coverage in the private media.⁴⁸ The people at Radio Fe y Alegría, El Pedregal, Mérida State, (a station sponsored by the Catholic Church) mentioned that in their first year of operation, they faced economic difficulties, political problems with unionization, a lack

⁴⁴ “Televisora Comunitaria de Rubio,” presentation in the first Foro Internacional y Encuentro Nacional de Medios de Comunicación Comunitaria, CONATEL, Caracas, August 2002. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

⁴⁵ Hugo Chávez Frías, “Aló Presidente” Number 109, Radio Nacional, Broadcast from Catia TV, Venezuela, 23 June 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

⁴⁶ It is not clear if these numbers include the non-political stations. Al Giordano, “Community Media, the Voice of the Venezuelan People, Under Siege,” Narco News, 29 July 2002 [www.narconews.com/communitymedia1.html].

⁴⁷ Al Giordano, “Community Media, the Voice of the Venezuelan People, Under Siege,” Narco News, 29 July 2002 [www.narconews.com/communitymedia1.html].

⁴⁸ José Brett Mundo, “Marco legal de estaciones comunitarias en el mundo y Venezuela,” presentation in the first Foro Internacional y Encuentro Nacional de Medios de Comunicación Comunitaria, CONATEL, Caracas, August 2002. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

of knowledge about the importance of community radio, technical difficulties (they didn't have a mobile unit or a computer), and some social challenges with individualism and apathy.⁴⁹ As the political conflict continues in Venezuela, it will be interesting to see if the alternative media maintain a separate identity and voice from the state-owned media, or if they become united with the government in their goal of defending the Chávez project.

From ardent supporters to bitter opponents: the private media

People within the media, academics, and even media critics all agree on one thing: since the 1989 riots, the Venezuelan mass media have effectively taken on a political (but not necessarily partisan) opposition role to the government, and stepped into the void left by unrepresentative political parties. They have become a window on society, showing the social problems and allowing people to directly call on the government to resolve the issues.

Venezuela has a history of conflictual relationships between the media and the government. The country has several large family-owned media groups that tend to pursue their own political agendas. As one academic said, "Media owners are very aware of their power, and they know how to use it."⁵⁰ In the early and mid-1990s, although the media owners generally saw themselves as unallied with specific political parties, they would cultivate close relationships with those in power and use their influence to make business deals and, more rarely, to even run for political office. Much debate and rumor surrounds the opening of the media system that started near the end of Jaime Lusinchi's presidency in 1988. Over the next ten years, successive presidents awarded radio, television, satellite, and cable franchises to political supporters.⁵¹ Various writers have documented the media owners' system of rewarding or punishing politicians, including the president, in the television and print coverage. Presidents Lusinchi, Carlos Andrés Pérez, and Rafael Caldera fought with media owners, jailed editors, withdrew government advertising, and even attempted censorship.⁵² The majority of political influence on the media, however, tended to be subtle and consisted of government officials calling editors and media owners to tell them what problems they saw and requesting that the media modify their content.

Despite the government attempts to shape coverage, "the media, in particular broadcast media, frequently and virulently denounced the faults and sins of politicians and the last forty years of democratic administrations."⁵³ In so doing, they contributed to the general dissatisfaction with the political system, which eventually led to the election of Chávez. Almost all of the media owners, with the exception of Rafael Poleo, owner of *El Nuevo País* and sympathizer of the Acción Democrática (AD) party, supported Chávez in 1998.⁵⁴ In fact,

⁴⁹ "Radio Fe y Alegría 105.7 FM, El Pedregal: Tu frecuencia comunitaria," presentation in the first Foro Internacional y Encuentro Nacional de Medios de Comunicación Comunitaria, CONATEL, Caracas, August 2002. [www.conatel.gov.ve].

⁵⁰ Jon Vanden Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis, *Changing Patterns: Latin America's Vital Media* (New York: The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1995), 75.

⁵¹ José Antonio Mayobre, "Venezuela and the Media: The New Paradigm" in *Latin Politics, Global Media*, edited by Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002: 176-195).

⁵² Jon Vanden Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis, *Changing Patterns: Latin America's Vital Media* (New York: The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1995).

⁵³ José Antonio Mayobre, "Venezuela and the Media: The New Paradigm" in *Latin Politics, Global Media*, edited by Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002: 176-195), 176.

⁵⁴ Patricia Poleo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

Gustavo Cisneros, owner of the Cisneros Group and the television station Venevisión, and Miguel Henrique Otero, the publisher of *El Nacional* group of newspapers, contributed large amounts of money to the electoral campaign.⁵⁵ Otero's wife even held a position in Chávez's government. By and large, the majority of the journalists and editors also supported Chávez and the changes he promised to bring to Venezuela.

Within about a year, this had changed. And by 2003, a majority of reporters, editors, and media owners opposed Chávez and feared for the state of press freedom. Some, including prominent newspaper and television reporters, feared for their lives. Reporters could no longer go into the streets wearing their press credentials for fear of being attacked.⁵⁶ The television station RCTV had purchased bulletproof jackets for all their employees who went out to cover stories and press groups were documenting hundreds of attacks on the media.⁵⁷ The media were also facing legal issues as the National Assembly debated a media "Content Law" with an official purpose of "protecting children," but whose thinly-veiled intent was to silence the private broadcast media in the country.

These changes can be traced to several key events. First, the "honeymoon" between Chávez and the media effectively ended by December 1999 as the media returned to their former opposition role with the news coverage of the mudslides in Vargas state and the debate over the new Constitution. Severe rainstorms in December 1999 led to massive mudslides in the coastal state of Vargas. Estimates place the number of deaths between 15,000 to 30,000 people. The Venezuelan media extensively covered the problems and criticized the government for inaction. This, in turn, produced a reaction by Chávez and his government against the media.⁵⁸

That same fall and winter, the people began to debate the new constitution. The media were critical of parts of it, especially Article 58 that required the media publish information that is "timely, truthful, and impartial." Press groups had managed to keep this article out of various press laws in the past, and once again mobilized to denounce the requirement. International freedom of expression organizations sent in protest letters saying that such a provision opened the way for the government to restrict whatever information it deemed to be "untruthful" or "partisan." Specifically, the media groups argued that giving the government this power violates the Universal Declaration of Human rights (Article 19) and the American Convention on Human Rights (Article 13).⁵⁹ However, when the constitution was adopted with this "timely, truthful, and impartial" phrase, academics and some in the media began to realize the Bolivarian Revolution was based on a different view of press freedom and freedom of expression, a view that might directly clash with accepted international norms.

With these and other events, the media began to criticize Chávez and broadcast the views of others who opposed him. Chávez saw it as his right to lash back. He singled out media owners, journalists, publications, and broadcasts for criticism on his weekly broadcast programs. As a populist leader, his discourse privileged the poor classes and he identified anyone who attempted to find fault with his project as an enemy to Venezuela and the Bolivarian ideals. The problem was compounded since the government was not able to quickly resolve many of the economic problems, which alienated more of the middle class, or to completely do away with

⁵⁵ David Adams and Phil Gunson, "Media Accused in Failed Coup," *St. Petersburg Times*, 18 April 2002.

⁵⁶ Valentina Lares, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁵⁷ Daniela Bergami, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁵⁸ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁵⁹ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Protest letter: Venezuela: New constitution would restrict press freedom," Committee to Protect Journalists, 12 November 1999 [www.cpj.org].

problems of corruption. “Chávez argued that the critiques of the disenchanted were unfounded and he confronted them, increasing even more the social breakdown and the class conflict,” wrote Venezuelan communication scholars Caroline Bosc-Bierne de Oteyza and Leopoldo Tablante.

President Chávez’s aggressiveness and the politicization of society was converted into permanent material of interest in the Venezuelan press. The press began to cover the political climate and the problems (inefficient administration and corruption) of the government. In this sense, the press began acquiring a growing influence in shaping public opinion. This influence is partially explained by the fact that the press had become the only bastion representing a dissatisfied civil society in the face of Chávez’s political style and orphaned from the political parties.⁶⁰

During 2000 and 2001, the relationship between the media and Chávez slowly deteriorated as his rhetoric became more and more harsh and the media continued to criticize him and his government. Elías Santana, a columnist for *El Nacional*, host of a radio program, and coordinator of the group Queremos Elegir, filed a lawsuit requesting a right of reply under Article 58 of the Constitution after Chávez criticized him during *Aló, Presidente*. The Supreme Court denied the petition in a 12 June 2001 ruling and said the “right to reply was intended to benefit only individuals who do not have access to a public forum, not media professionals. The court then vastly exceeded the limits of the case and went on to create a set of criteria defining what constitutes ‘timely, truthful, and impartial information.’”⁶¹ This ruling said that journalists can only express opinions if they do not contain insults that are “out of context, disconnected, or unnecessary for the topic; or offensive, insidious, or degrading.” Also, if an “independent” publication could be in violation of these standards if a majority of the columnists have the same belief or political ideas. In some cases, the government is justified in using prior restraint, the court also said.⁶² The Bloque de Prensa Venezolano, the largest newspaper association, protested the ruling and appealed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Other events inflamed the poor relations between the private media and Chávez. In 2001, journalist Patricia Poleo broke the story that the former Peruvian security chief, Vladimir Montesinos, was hiding in Venezuela, with the knowledge of the government.⁶³ Reacting to media coverage such as this, Chávez and his supporters called the media and journalists “traitors” and “terrorists.” He said journalists “cannot say they are innocent. No, here there are no innocents; everyone must assume their responsibility before history and the people. People are tired of the lies, of the manipulation, of the deception.... 2002 will be the year of the offensive.”⁶⁴ The media reported that attacks against journalists rose after this speech; by early 2002, journalists reported more assaults, death threats, and the destruction of their equipment. On 7 January 2002, after Chávez criticized *El Nacional* during *Aló, Presidente*, a group of his supporters surrounded the paper offices, smashed windows, and prevented about 400 employees from leaving the building. Incidents such as these raised fears that the president’s speeches were

⁶⁰ Caroline Bosc-Bierne de Oteyza and Leopoldo Tablante, “La Línea editorial de los periódicos *El Universal* y *El Nacional* entre el 7 y el 15 de abril,” Anuario ININCO, Universidad Central de Venezuela, *Investigaciones de la Comunicación* 14 (June 2002): 66.

⁶¹ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Attacks on the Press 2001: Venezuela” [www.cpj.org].

⁶² Committee to Protect Journalists, “Attacks on the Press 2001: Venezuela” [www.cpj.org].

⁶³ Patricia Poleo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

⁶⁴ T. Christian Miller, “The World; Media Under Siege in Much of Latin America,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 24 March 2002.

now resulting in actions by his supporters.⁶⁵ “This is an escalating spiral of aggression, and it’s being sponsored by the government,” said Otero.⁶⁶

Chávez response to the counterattacks was to say things such as, “The media are perverse factories of lies. What they sell is poison.”⁶⁷ Government officials supported the president. Willian Lara, then-president of the National Assembly in March 2002 said, “The media have taken a political position, which is legitimate in a democracy. But just as legitimate is Chavez’s right to defend himself. They’ve called him crazy, a fascist, compared him to Hitler. No president has been subjected to this.”⁶⁸ Chávez justified his actions during his radio program near the end of January 2002:

El Nacional and *El Universal* are pathetic, the television stations—with a few exceptions—are pathetic.... They call cowards those who do not bow their head to the fundamentalist and dictatorial ideas and the infamous campaign by the media owners. They are just businessmen who want to earn more money and bribe the government. Some media owners even came to me with their proposals. Some day, I may give names. Some asked for a loan and since I did not yield to their immoral demands, they launched this war against me. But they made a mistake with me because I will not yield and will not be defeated.

Continuing his criticisms, he said, “They (the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) will only come to confirm what everyone already knows. The government does not imprison any journalist, blackmail anyone, kill anyone, sanction anyone, or ban programs. There is full freedom of expression. The media owners are the ones who abuse this freedom.” Finally, he threatened the media, saying, “We have told you—tirelessly—that we have tolerated enough. Do not be surprised if one of these days, we adopt a decision—within the legal framework—to put things in their right place.”⁶⁹ This last threat was a reference to the Content Law for broadcast media that would be proposed later that year.

Teodoro Petkoff, editor of the newspaper *Tal Cual* was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying about Chávez that “his language has been supremely intolerant and aggressive. He personalizes his disputes and debates with the media and does not perceive the gravity. He does not understand that he is not just some political leader, but the president of the republic.”⁷⁰

A second major turning point in the relations between Chávez and the media occurred in April 2002. As mentioned earlier, the massive opposition protests of 11 April 2002 in Caracas—the largest in recent Venezuelan history—were sparked by Chávez’s Sunday Aló presidente broadcast where he fired the directors PDVSA. Confrontations between armed groups, police, and the protesters resulted in shootings that left 15 dead, including Jorge Tortoza, a photographer for the newspaper *Diario 2001*, and about 300 wounded. Video images repeatedly broadcast on television for the next year showed an armed man firing a pistol at the demonstrators; participants in the demonstration talk about sharpshooters placed on the nearby rooftops also

⁶⁵ Mark Fitzgerald, “Under Siege in Caracas,” *Editor & Publisher* 135, no. 5 (April 2002): 28.

⁶⁶ Christina Hoag, “Venezuelan Journalists Under Siege by Chavez/Incendiary Attacks Stir Up Followers,” *Houston Chronicle*, 24 March 2002 [www.houstonchronicle.com].

⁶⁷ Christina Hoag, “Venezuelan Journalists Under Siege by Chavez/Incendiary Attacks Stir Up Followers,” *Houston Chronicle*, 24 March 2002 [www.houstonchronicle.com].

⁶⁸ Christina Hoag, “Venezuelan Journalists Under Siege by Chavez/Incendiary Attacks Stir Up Followers,” *Houston Chronicle*, 24 March 2002 [www.houstonchronicle.com].

⁶⁹ “Venezuela: Chavez Lashes Out Against Media in Radio Programme,” *BBC Monitoring Media*, 29 January 2002.

⁷⁰ Phil Brennan, “Venezuela Threatening Press Freedom,” NewsMax.com, 22 October 2001 [www.nesmax.com/archives/articles/2001/10/21/171451.shtml].

firing into the crowd. What happened in the next two days has been extensively debated. Sectors of the military reacted negatively to the deaths and staged a military coup or a “rebellion of military disobedience.” Chávez resigned and was flown out of the Caracas while Carmona as the leader of Fedecámaras, the country’s largest business organization, was installed as head of an interim government on 12 April. Carmona quickly alienated his supporters as he tried to take on dictatorial powers, dissolving the National Assembly, removing from office all elected officials, and suspending other rights. Chávez’s supporters began to gather in Caracas and protest the coup, calling for his return. Upset with the disastrous actions of Carmona and seeing the support, factions in the military brought back Chávez, who reassumed power early in the morning of 14 April. The protests continued throughout the weekend, leaving more wounded and dead.⁷¹

The media played a crucial role during this week in April. The opposition media extensively covered the protests against Chávez. In an effort to combat this coverage, Chávez began proclaiming cadenas, where all the television and radio stations (not including cable or satellite) must carry the government signal. He repeatedly called cadenas in an effort to prevent the media from showing the opposition marches and demonstrations. Finally, frustrated with the situation, the main television stations spilt the screens, showing the demonstration on one side and Chávez talking on the other. In a last effort to seize control, Chávez forced all the opposition stations off the air; those with satellite (such as RCTV) continued to broadcast and later the others came back on. However, by 13 April, the television stations stopped transmitting information and broadcast cartoons and films; the day Chávez returned to power, opposition newspapers did not circulate. Chávez supporters called this a “media blackout” and a “media coup.”

Journalists and television producers say that it wasn’t a “media coup,” but that armed mobs of Chavistas were threatening the employees and the offices or studios. According to reports from the journalists in the buildings at the time, it was “absolute panic” as the groups outside threatened to kill the journalists. Eduardo Sapene, news director at RCTV said that with all the rumors and the quick-paced events, they reached a point where he made a decision and said, “I will not broadcast any Chavista news until I have some confirmation from a Chavista source.”⁷² *El Universal* started to prepare the paper, but was unable to print it because the printers couldn’t come in to work. However, they were able to put up information on their Web page even though a printed version did not circulate. Afterwards, many of the media owners came on television to apologize for not getting out the information as they should have done. The owners denied that they were directly involved in planning the coup or carrying it out.

⁷¹ There are many accounts of these events and the media coverage (or lack thereof) from a number of political perspectives. See, for example, David Adams and Phil Gunson, “Media Accused in Failed Coup,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 18 April 2002; David Adams, “Embarrassed Pro-Coup Media Silent as Chavez Returns,” *The Times*, 15 April 2002; Jon Beasley-Murray, “Venezuela: The Revolution will not be Televised, Pro-Chavez Multitudes Challenge Media Blackout,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 36 (July/August 2002): 16-20; Caroline Bosc-Bierne de Oteyza and Leopoldo Tablante, “La Línea editorial de los periódicos *El Universal* y *El Nacional* entre el 7 y el 15 de abril,” Anuario ININCO, Universidad Central de Venezuela, *Investigaciones de la Comunicación* 14 (June 2002): 61-108; Campbell Duncan, “Media: It’s a coup: your sets will adjust accordingly,” *The Guardian* (London), 29 April 2002; Juan Forero, “Venezuelan Press Sidestepped Leader’s Return,” *New York Times*, 23 April 2002; International Federation of Journalists, *Missing Link in Venezuela’s Political Crisis: How Media and Government Failed a Test of Journalism and Democracy*, International Federation of Journalists, International Press Centre, 10-12 June 2002; and Maurice Lemoine, “How Hate Media Incited the Coup Against the President: Venezuela’s Press Power,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2002.

⁷² Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

The event served to radicalize and further politicize the media in Venezuela, especially with the death of the photographer Tortoza. Despite Chávez's initial talk of moderation, his verbal attacks on the press soon resumed, as did the physical attacks by his supporters and other armed groups. Windows were smashed, bombs were placed at the media offices, journalists were assaulted, and individuals received death threats. Before the April coup, journalists generally weren't the objects of attacks; they were able to cover the stories without becoming a target. One reporter even said that in previous years, when the media went to cover demonstrations or riots, the police would even give them advance warning before they used tear gas so the journalists could get out of the way.⁷³ Now, the journalists are targets of physical aggression; they almost feel like they are "war correspondents" except that they are the objects of the attacks.⁷⁴

The broadcast media also see the "cadenas" as a way the government can try to censor the media and punish it financially. When the government calls a cadena, which originally was designed for special circumstances or national emergencies, all the television and radio stations must link up to the official signal. The private stations lose money during this time as the regular programming and advertisements are replaced with the government's television signal. In the first two and a half months of 2003 there were 41 cadenas for a total of 41 hours and 43 minutes. They ranged from about five minutes to almost three hours in length and the speakers included various cabinet ministers and, of course, Chávez.⁷⁵

The media are also facing economic and legal difficulties. As businesses, they suffer along with others during the recessions and economic downturns. Declining advertising revenue has also had an impact on the media. Over the past few years, the newspapers have become much thinner and publish fewer pages. During the December 2002 general strike, advertising almost completely dried up as many of the larger companies joined the opposition. Some of the papers even stopped circulation on some days during the strike as a sign of solidarity with the opposition. However, by mid-February 2003, the newspapers reported that their advertising revenues were starting to pick up again.⁷⁶ RCTV said that they were reducing their expenses, but trying to do it in a way that would allow them to keep all their employees. Some of the actors and workers who were on special contracts did not have their contracts renewed this year. Usually the station films five telenovelas during the year, but for 2003 they are planning on only producing two.⁷⁷

The media also face another economic (and legal) challenge with the government's policy of controlling the exchange rate and prices, a policy put into effect in February 2003 to try and deal with the country's economic problems. In the address to the nation in which he read Presidential Decree 2,302, Chávez proclaimed, "Not one dollar for the golpistas! Not one dollar for the destabilizers!"⁷⁸ Included in the category of "golpistas" are the media and they are taking this threat seriously. Newspapers import their paper and ink and pay for it in dollars. Broadcast stations purchase equipment, movies, and other items in dollars. People in the media see this as

⁷³ Patricia Poleo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

⁷⁴ Daniela Bergami, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁷⁵ The broadcast media keep tallies of the cadenas (see www.globovision.com for example) and the actual texts can be found on the presidential web site, www.venezuela.gov.ve.

⁷⁶ Valentina Lares, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁷⁷ Ines Bacalao de Peña, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003; Daniela Bergami, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁷⁸ Hugo Chávez Frías, "Cadena nacional: control cambiario, control de precios," Caracas, Venezuela, 5 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

yet another attempt to silence them or censor them through the control of materials.⁷⁹ Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights or the “Pact of San José, Costa Rica,” states, “The right of expression may not be restricted by indirect methods or means, such as the abuse of government or private controls over newsprint, radio broadcasting frequencies, or equipment used in the dissemination of information, or by any other means tending to impede the communication and circulation of ideas and opinions.”⁸⁰ Venezuela ratified this convention in 1977.

The most severe legal challenge facing broadcasters is the proposed “Content Law” or the “Ley sobre la responsabilidad social en radio y televisión.” This law was introduced in the National Assembly on 23 January 2003 after being under discussion during the previous year. The stated purpose of this law is to guarantee the comprehensive social development of children by regulating sexual, health, and violent content in the broadcast media. The law divides the day into three parts: protected hours (6 a.m. to 8 p.m.), supervised hours (5 a.m. - 6 a.m., and 8 p.m. - 11 p.m.), and adult hours (11 p.m. - 5 a.m.) and specifies the types of materials that cannot be broadcast. For example, during the protected and supervised hours “violencia fuertes,” which is defined as content “that presents physical, psychological, sexual, or verbal violence by an individual or group against one or more people, objects, or animals,” cannot be broadcast.⁸¹ The law was approved on its first discussion in the National Assembly and will be debated article by article (all 150) during the spring of 2003. Supporters of the law see this as a “beautiful” project that doesn’t impose restrictions, but safeguards the television audience, especially the children and youth.⁸² Chávez sees the law as part of his legal, political, and moral “offensive” against the media and the opposition, an offensive he began after the strike ended.⁸³ Lawyers and scholars supporting the opposition and the media criticized the law as being unconstitutional, and detail many concerns with various aspects of it.⁸⁴

However, as Chávez indicates in his speeches, the law appears to have a much broader intent. In one address, Chávez argued that broadcasting scenes of protests against his government violates privacy standards and should thus be banned.⁸⁵ Broadcasters, journalists, academics, and

⁷⁹ Daniela Bergami, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003; Patricia Poleo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003; Luisa Mercedes Chiossone, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 18 February 2003.

⁸⁰ Organization of American States, American Convention on Human Rights, “Pact of San José, Costa Rica” [www.oas.org].

⁸¹ “Proyecto de Ley Sobre la Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión,” Venezuela National Assembly, 23 January 2003.

⁸² Porfirio Torres, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003.

⁸³ Hugo Chávez Frías, “Cadena nacional: Aniversario del Congreso de Angostura,” Caracas, Venezuela, 15 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve]; Hugo Chávez Frías, “Aló Presidente” Number 139, Radio Nacional, Broadcast from Campo Muscar, Venezuela, 16 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve].

⁸⁴ “Especialistas rechazan Ley de Contenidos porque deriva de un precepto inconstitucional,” *Diario 2001*, 7 February 2002 [www.2001.com.ve]; Max Römer Pieretti, conversation with author, Caracas, Venezuela, 18 February 2003.

⁸⁵ Hugo Chávez Frías, “Aló Presidente” Number 139, Radio Nacional, Broadcast from Campo Muscar, Venezuela, 16 February 2003. [www.venezuela.gov.ve]. In this speech, Chávez argues, “Y esto sobre todo para proteger a los niños y a las niñas y a los adolescentes que están siendo atropellados por los canales de televisión privados los están atropellando nos están atropellando, y ellos pretenden que no se les regule nada. ... Respetar los derechos y garantías de todas personas derivado de la Constitución, las leyes, los reglamentos y demás normativa aplicable y en particular el derecho que toda persona tiene a la protección de su honor, de su vida privada, de su intimidad, de su propia imagen, de su confidencialidad y de su reputación. Esto es lo que no quieren respetar los “cuatro jinetes del apocalipsis”, para ellos no hay respeto ninguna confidencialidad, ni de vida privada. Ustedes creen que por ejemplo

press freedom organizations fear that the law will provide a legal way for Chávez's government to legally censor the media. During the first debate over the proposed law, the newspaper *Tal Cual* reported, "When Carlos Tablante stepped up to criticize the law saying that what it really was about was censoring the media, he finished his speech by asking, 'You, who speak so highly of China and Cuba ... they have only one newspaper, only one radio, only one broadcaster, is this what you want?' ... to this all of the [deputies belonging to the] MVR responded, 'Yeeeeeess.' That was a good joke they played on Desirée [Santos Amaral], who had spent so much time trying to convince the night owls [deputies who were debating the law all night long] of the pluralistic and democratic character of the law."⁸⁶

In other legal maneuvering, the government has extensively investigated the media for financial and tax irregularities, threatening to fine them and revoke their broadcasting licenses. For example, Venevisión TV was informed in February 2003 that it would be investigated and possibly fined for its coverage of the national strike.⁸⁷ RCTV reported that they constantly have government officials conducting investigations and reviewing all their accounts.⁸⁸

Overall, the journalists working in the private media have a sense that they have moved beyond their normal role as an opposition voice to the government and are now fighting for their profession, their businesses, and sometimes even their lives. Previous divisions between journalists and the editors or the media owners have softened considerably over the past year as they feel threatened by Chávez and his social revolution. Some academics have even stopped criticizing the profession and joined in defending the media from what they see as an attack on freedom of expression in the country. When asked what his greatest worry as a television news director was, Sapene said, "Survive each 24 hours. This is the great challenge."⁸⁹

Democracy in Venezuela: Conclusions

As mentioned in the beginning, this paper is based on the ideas that freedom of expression is essential for democracy and the media can play a vital role in shaping the discourse in the public sphere. The public sphere, especially the political discourse, in Venezuela is being strongly shaped by Chávez, by the state-owned and alternative media, and by the opposition private media. Chávez has been able to effectively use the media to set the political agenda and many of the terms of the debate. When Venezuelan reporters look at both the pro-government and opposition media, they find several problems that damage or reduce the effectiveness of political discourse in their country.⁹⁰

First, they cite several reporting problems: the reporters and editors may leave out information and only reflect their side of the issue; sources, both government officials and

esa expresión del fascismo de ir a tocarle cacerolas a la casa de una familia y que eso lo transmitan en vivo por los canales de televisión o diferido como sea, eso es violatorio ¿a la qué?, a la vida privada; eso no se puede estar transmitiendo así libre y directamente incitando a que sigan haciéndolo contra funcionarios del estado del gobierno o contra cualquier persona eso no puede ser."

⁸⁶ Maye Primera Garcés, "Crónica de medianoche: Censura anunciada," *Tal Cual*, 7 February 2003 [www.talcualdigital.com].

⁸⁷ Associated Press, "Chávez supporters put heat on media: many news organizations face investigations as strike fades," 7 February 2003.

⁸⁸ Daniela Bergami, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁸⁹ Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

⁹⁰ Rubén Hernández, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003; Valentina Lares, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003; Patricia Poleo, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 20 February 2003; Eduardo Sapene, interview by author, Caracas, Venezuela, 21 February 2003.

opposition leaders, will only speak to the media that support them, which limits the information available to the public; and there is very little investigative reporting, which means reporters tend to repeat the declarations from their sources. As each side reports only its view of the situation, audiences watch or read only those things that reaffirm their beliefs, causing deeper divisions in society and preventing constructive dialog.

Second, language and presentation problems also decrease the effectiveness of debate in the public sphere. Actors on all sides of the issue use inflammatory and derogatory language for their opponents and information and opinion may be mixed together.

Third, the overt attacks, physical aggression, legal sanctions, and economic pressure create a climate where civil, democratic dialog is not valued. The media and Chávez, through their actions and content, reinforce the political divide in the country. Observers fear that as the country continues to be polarized and public debate seems to be ineffective, extreme factions may seek violent “solutions” to the problems facing Venezuela.

Fourth, and possibly most fundamentally, the interpretation and view of press freedom by Chávez and the opposition are fundamentally different. This puts the division between the two views of Venezuelan society in sharp relief and makes effective communication ever so much more difficult.

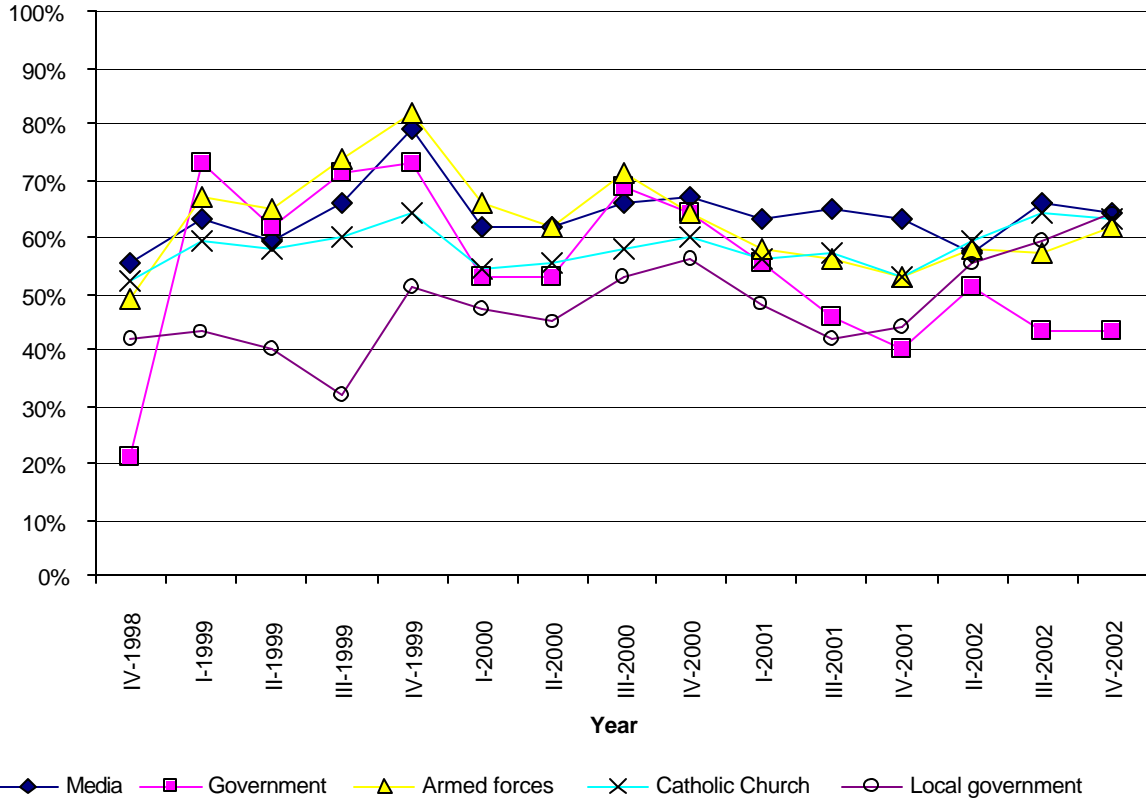
Petkoff, in a front-page editorial in *Tal Cual*, emphasized the importance that all the Venezuelan institutions have in relaying messages that support democratic values, peace, and tolerance if the country is going to overcome the present political divisions and find solutions to the problems facing the people. He singled out Chávez for specific criticism since, as president of the country bears a greater responsibility for setting the political agenda. “His language has been a decisive factor in the triggering of this crisis because since the election campaign the aggressiveness of his discourse and the violent metaphors that he usually employed were characteristic of a rhetorical style that in the following years has not left a wholesome mark [in society]. This damaging, aggravating, offensive, intolerant, threatening, violent, and opposed to coexistence language has had consequences for both his supporters and his adversaries. In both, it stimulates confrontation. ... The search for a negotiated solution demands a distinct verbal climate.”⁹¹

Without a change in the verbal climate, as well as the attendant actions that result from the public discourse, Venezuelans will have a difficult time reaching compromises and solutions to this crisis. The media, as always, will continue to play a central role in the process.

⁹¹ Teodoro Petkoff, “Por la boca muere el pez,” *Tal Cual*, 26 February 2003 [www.talcualdigital.com].

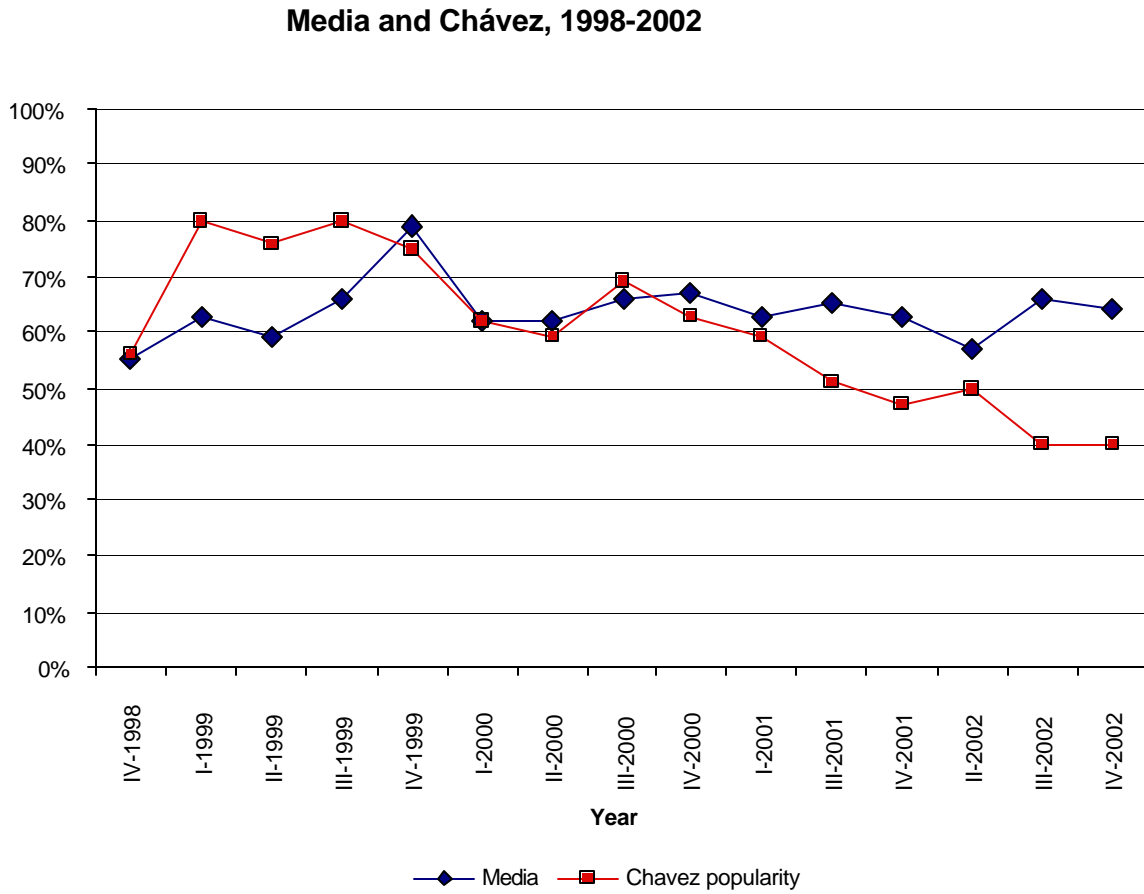
Figure 1.

Venezuelan institutions, 1998-2002



Source: Consultores 21, Caracas, Venezuela, February 2003.

Figure 2.



Source: Consultores 21, Caracas, Venezuela, February 2003.

Appendix A

*Portion of the transcript from Hugo Chávez Frias, "Aló Presidente," Number 138, Radio Nacional. Broadcast from Refinería El Palito, Venezuela, 9 February 2003.
[www.venezuela.gov.ve].*

Presidente Chávez: ... Muy bien, me dicen que tenemos una llamada telefónica, aquí estamos en El Palito, quién nos está llamando, a ver.

Llamada telefónica: Aló.

Presidente Chávez: Aló.

Llamada telefónica: Aló.

Presidente Chávez: Sí, ¿quién nos llama?

Llamada telefónica: Ah, le habla Dora Reyna mi timonel.

Presidente Chávez: Dora.

Dora Reyna: Sí.

Presidente Chávez: ¿Dónde estás tú Dora?

Dora Reyna: En San Diego de los Altos.

Presidente Chávez: San Diego de los Altos, eso es por allá, cerca, por ahí fue que vivió Guaicaipuro.

Dora Reyna: Exactamente.

Presidente Chávez: Y luchó Guaicaipuro. Dora ¿y tú eres de ahí de San Antonio, San Diego?

Dora Reyna: Yo soy de Valencia.

Presidente Chávez: Valencia. Mira y cómo está tu familia Dora Reyna.

Dora Reyna: Muy bien, gracias a Dios.

Presidente Chávez: Reyna es tu apellido.

Dora Reyna: Reyna es mi apellido, el segundo apellido es Vizcarrondo, de Valencia.

Presidente Chávez: Vizcarrondo. Dora Reyna Vizcarrondo, bienvenida a Aló Presidente Dora Reyna, Dora.

Dora Reyna: ¿Cómo está?

Presidente Chávez: Muy feliz chica, mira aquí estamos en la playa.

Dora Reyna: Sí.

Presidente Chávez: Mirando el mar, sintiendo la brisa del mar.

Dora Reyna: Qué rico.

Presidente Chávez: Miles de personas, por allá hay mucha gente aquí en El Palito.

Dora Reyna: Ya lo estoy viendo en la televisión.

Presidente Chávez: Bueno, esto es maravilloso, éste es un sitio donde dimos una gran batalla.

Dora Reyna: Sí señor.

Presidente Chávez: Los trabajadores de El Palito, el pueblo de El Palito, de Puerto Cabello, los Generales y Almirantes.

Dora Reyna: Así es.

Presidente Chávez: Guardias nacionales, marineros, todos unidos aquí celebrando la victoria de El Palito que ya está trabajando en más de 80 por ciento.

Dora Reyna: Sí señor, qué maravilla.

Presidente Chávez: Bueno dínos Dora.

Dora Reyna: Bueno primero que todo le quiero decir pues que lo admiro mucho, que le pido a Dios siempre que lo proteja, que lo ilumine, que le dé sabiduría, que no le salgan más traidores y

le doy gracias a Dios por haberle dado esos padres y esa abuelita que usted siempre nombra, porque ellos tienen que ser ellos los que le inculcaron esos principios tan nobles de amor, de desprendimiento, tiene que ser ejemplo para otros padres que vean que no se necesita mucho dinero para enseñarle a los hijos ética y moral. Es necesario en todos los pensum de todas las carreras, pienso yo, incluir una materia que se llame ética y moral porque es necesario, por ejemplo yo veo que ya hubo la limpieza o está habiendo la limpieza de Pdvsa, ahora tiene que hacer una limpieza en el Ministerio de Educación, no es justo que maestros pongan a sus alumnos que tienen que ser lo más importante para ellos, que los pongan en esa, ni siquiera para reivindicación social, este, salariales, ni siquiera por eso deben poner a los niños en eso, no; yo tengo cinco hijas, mis tres hijas mayores son profesionales, una es administrador comercial y la otra es veterinario y la otra es médico fisiatra, las dos menores son unas gemelas, deficientes visuales, tienen 23 años y ya están haciendo su tesis en Educación Preescolar, ellas, todas tienen ética, eso es lo primero que hay; ellas vieron muchísimas materias en su carrera muy importantes, unas de cultura general, otras específicas de su carrera pero no hay ninguna materia que sea ética y moral, eso se lo he enseñado yo; entonces yo pienso los médicos, los abogados, todos pues, los periodistas, deberían estudiar una materia que se llame ética.

Presidente Chávez: Bueno muchas gracias Dora por esas reflexiones y tienes mucha razón, saludo a tus hijas.

Dora Reyna: Presidente.

Presidente Chávez: Hija, y yo estoy de acuerdo contigo, nosotros ahí en el Ministerio de Educación, eso lo está dirigiendo, lo están dirigiendo Aristóbulo Istúriz y Héctor Navarro, un proceso de investigación para tomar las decisiones que nos correspondan, ya se han tomado algunas pero también hay gobernadores que deben tomar decisiones porque hay estados donde la educación está, ha sido descentralizada; los fiscales, Defensoría del Pueblo, los tribunales, ustedes la sociedad, los afectados; por allí ha surgido una ONG por ejemplo que se llama Víctimas del Paro, eso es perfecto, todo aquel venezolano o venezolana que se sienta víctima de este supuesto paro que no ha sido sino una conspiración contra el país, todo aquel que se sienta perjudicado bueno tiene que denunciarlo ante los cuerpos competentes, Defensoría del Pueblo, los tribunales, un Director de colegio, por ejemplo, que se haya negado a abrir el colegio, que lo haya cerrado; un maestro que haya cerrado su aula de clases, que le hayan impedido a los niños, a los jóvenes en las universidades o colegios recibir clases está violando la Constitución, está violando el Código Penal, está violando la ley, la LOPNA, Ley Orgánica de Protección a los niños y los adolescentes y entonces hay que denunciarlos y los fiscales están obligados a actuar, porque si no actúan están también cayendo en la violación a la ley, a sus responsabilidades, serían cómplices; los jueces están obligados a actuar y las comunidades, el pueblo debe denunciar, si ustedes ven que hay algún Juez que no asume sus funciones, algún Fiscal que no asume o incumple sus funciones debe ser denunciado por la población, porque un Juez o un Fiscal que no asuman su compromiso con la ley y que hagan respetar la ley y que protejan el derecho y generen justicia no merecen ostentar esos cargos de Juez o de Fiscal en cualquier nivel que corresponda.

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