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*Venezuela:
Hegemony destroys pluralism*

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Abstract

Pluralism in terms of mass media is vital to free societies and democratic governance, but it is frequently threatened by public or private monopolies which control the whole spectrum of the media in a particular country. This Media Freedom Report looks at the case of Venezuela, where the government claims to promote freedom of speech and expression, but has in practice set out to control most of the mass media itself.

The right to freedom of thought and expression includes the possibility to seek, receive and broadcast any kind of information and ideas. This right has both an individual dimension, according to which no one should be arbitrarily banned from expressing his or her opinion, as well as a social or collective dimension related to people's right to receive information and to know other people's opinions. This dimension is only possible within an environment of plurality in terms of information sources. People should have access to different ideas and points of view on matters that concern them so that they may have unrestricted freedom of opinion and can freely make their own choices in a democratic society. As expressed by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights: "the free circulation of ideas and news is inconceivable without multiple sources of information and respect for the communication media"¹.

Organisations supporting freedom of thought and expression, like the United Nations (UN), OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and OAS (Organisation of American States) have also affirmed in a joint declaration that "an independent and pluralistic media is essential for a free and open society and an accountable government"². The European Parliament has passed several resolutions highlighting the importance of pluralism. In one of those resolutions it declared that "political pluralism is about the need, in the interest of democracy, for a wide range of political opinions and viewpoints to be expressed in the media (...) Democracy would be threatened if any single voice, with the power to propagate a single viewpoint were to become too dominant"³.

According to the American Convention as well as the European Convention on Human Rights, States are obliged to guarantee pluralism, not only by avoiding the penalisation of the media for taking critical editorial positions, but also through legislation aimed

at guaranteeing this important component of the right to freedom of thought and expression. However, pluralism is dramatically threatened in many countries by the existence of public or private monopolies in terms of ownership and control of mainstream and mass media of all kinds.

In this context, Venezuela presents a clear-cut example of a policy-driven process of creeping state hegemony over the media. Until about ten years ago, mass media there was overwhelmingly in private hands across the whole sector. That situation changed after the government publicly announced its intention to alter the balance in the name of more pluralism. The result, on the contrary, has been that the government has consolidated a communications and information hegemony for itself⁴.

Several detailed studies have chronicled the way in which the Venezuelan government carried out its plans. The number of television channels administered by the government has significantly increased between 2002 and 2009. Traditionally, there was only one television public service channel in Venezuela, *Venezolana de Televisión*, but other six more channels have been added during this period: *TVES*, *Vive*, *ANTV*, *Ávila TV* and *Telesur* (with two outlets, one national and the other international). The government also controls three national radio channels: *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*, *YVKE Mundial* and *Rumbos*, as well as more than 250 community radio stations, most of which behave as mouthpieces of the official line⁵; three newspapers are also financed with public funds: *Veja*, *El Correo del Orinoco* and *Ciudad CCS*.

Two studies by the Instituto de Investigaciones de la Comunicación de la Universidad Central de Venezuela (ININCO-UCV) in 2004⁶ and in 2007⁷ have analysed the contents of these media and concluded that they show a clear and consistent political bias in favour of the government.

In a separate study Reporters Without Borders concluded that the Venezuelan government uses the radio and television spectrum "excessively and discretionally". They found

that between 2 February 1999 and 31 December 2008 President Chávez spoke on national government controlled channels for an astonishing total of 1.179 hours, which is the equivalent of 49 continuous days. During these “nationwide broadcasts”, all the country’s radio and television system -private, state and community- were forced to transmit one exclusive message⁸.

The official policy of moving towards a communication hegemony is described as having two objectives: on the one hand, to establish a powerful communication machinery managed by the state, and on the other to close down or neutralise the independent media using a variety of different methods⁹. One case which caused serious international concern was the withdrawal of the licence granted to the RCTV channel, which was widely interpreted as a punishment for its critical editorial line. The government also revoked 34 private radio station licenses, allegedly because they were in compliance with the Law on Telecommunications, although Amnesty International has sought to demonstrate that those decisions, too, were in reality linked to the editorial line of the media concerned¹⁰. According to recognised international organizations, the Venezuelan government harasses, intimidates and threatens independent journalists and media¹¹, and that pattern of behaviour has resulted in an environment of self-censorship, with catastrophic consequences for media pluralism in the country.

* * *

End notes:

¹Inter-American Court of Human Rights, consultative opinion OC-5/85, par. 30, 32 and 33.

²Joint declaration of 26 November 1999, available in Spanish in <http://www.cidh.oas.org/relatoria>.

³European Parliament resolution on the risks of violation, in the EU and especially in Italy, of freedom of expression and information, Resolution of April 22, 2004.

⁴For example, a high official linked to the Government has pointed out that: “The non-renewal to the concession of RCTV and the purchase of CMT by Telesur (...), the new strategic scene set out, the struggle within the ideological field is related to a battle of ideas for people’s hearts and minds. A new plan must be designed, and the one we propose is aimed at the State’s communication and informative hegemony”. Interview with Andrés Izarra (President of Telesur and former Minister of Communications), Diary El Nacional, Caracas, January 8th, 2007, p. A/4.

⁵Petkoff, T. (2010). “Miedo a los medios”, Tal Cual Newspaper, February 2nd, 2010. page 1-2.

⁶Cañizález, A. (2008). “Venezuela: El lejano servicio público”, In Albórniz, M. B. y Cerbino, M. (Comp.), Comunicación, cultura y política, Quito, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), pages 67-78.

⁷Hernández, G. (2007). “Gubernamental TVES”, Comunicación: Estudios venezolanos de comunicación, N° 139, pages. 26-31

⁸Reporteros sin Fronteras (2009). Referéndum constitucional: un paisaje mediático ensombrecido por la polarización y el exceso de alocuciones presidenciales. February 13th, 2009: <http://www.rsf.org/Referendum-constitucional-un.html>

⁹Amnistía Internacional (2010) El estado de los derechos humanos en el mundo. page 419.

¹⁰Idem.

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