

Anti-media discourse, partisanship, and violence against journalists: Evidence from Chávez's Venezuela

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Abstract

Can political leaders' anti-media rhetoric encourage violence against journalists and undermine media freedom in democracies? While there is evidence that anti-media public discourse can amplify negative attitudes and behaviors towards the media, there is still uncertainty as to whether and how politicians' verbal attacks against the "lying press" and "fake news" may incentivize non-state actors to physically attack journalists. Building on dangerous speech, populist communication, and hostile media perceptions scholarship, I show that although anti-media public discourse may not feature explicit calls for violence, it increases the incidence of physical attacks against journalists. Using qualitative content analysis and survival models, I analyze original data on the content and timing of 696 anti-media messages featuring government officials and the timing and location of physical attacks by non-state actors against journalists during Hugo Chávez's presidency. Estimates of Cox and instrumental variable models show that the frequency of anti-media messages is positively associated with the hazard of violence against journalists and that the relationship between discourse and violence is likely causal. I also find that the effect of discourse on violence is moderated by local patterns of electoral competition: anti-media discourse's effect on violence against journalists is largest in locations where elections are highly contested.