



Analysis

Venezuela -- Chavez Moves to Silence Opposition Media

President Chavez's government is moving forcefully to silence critics by introducing a Media Crimes bill that would give it sweeping authority to jail journalists, media executives, and bloggers who report on anything that the government considers to be harmful to state interests. It is simultaneously moving to shut down more than 200 radio stations, impose broadcasting requirements on RCTV International, and position itself to take over opposition news station Globovision. Tightening control over opposition outlets could make it more difficult for Chavez to blame his favored scapegoat of the media for the country's problems, however.

Introduced at the National Assembly by Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega, the Media Crimes bill significantly expands the government's ability to punish media critics for any action or omission that it finds objectionable.

- The bill makes it illegal to report on anything deemed "harmful to public mental or moral health" or to "the interests of the state," or anything that would "incite violence" or "create panic." It also penalizes outlets for not reporting on events or situations that would violate "the people's right to information." The bill targets journalists, media executives, and even bloggers.
- Unlike the Radio and Television Social Responsibility Law, under which stations can be fined or lose their broadcast license, the new bill sets prison sentences of six months to four years for violations, and also applies to print media. Outlets with convicted workers or owners cannot comment on the conviction in any fashion beyond posting a notice (Noticias24.com, 30 July).¹
- The bill is almost certainly targeted at the government's long-standing media critics. The government has regularly claimed that Globovision is "harming public health," and has accused dailies *El Universal* and *El Nacional* of misrepresenting official actions, which could be considered against state interests (VTV, 12 July, 16, 15 January).^{2 3}
- The government also may go beyond its traditional targets. State-owned news agency ABN has begun to complain about social networking sites, asserting that Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and blogs are new ways to communicate that "create terror" (1 August).⁴

The government is also moving forcefully against radio stations and RCTV International, bringing Venezuela closer to a government monopoly on the media.

- Diosdado Cabello, who heads the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), on 31 July announced the closure of 32 radio stations, the first of 240 the government has vowed to close for allegedly not filing the appropriate Conatel paperwork (VTV, 31 July; 4 July).^{5 6} He added that another 120 stations have problems with their licenses (VTV, 31 July).⁷

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- Chavez said that these frequencies would be "given to the people," presumably referring to new community radio efforts (VTV, 21 July).⁸
- The government also recently imposed national broadcast requirements, including the mandatory live relay of Chavez speeches, on RCTV International, the cable-only successor to formerly top-rated opposition station RCTV that Chavez took off the air in May 2007 (VTV, 9 July).⁹

The government has repeatedly threatened to close Globovision, but appears to be positioning itself to take over rather than shut down the station.

- Cabello suggested that because one of the two owners listed on Globovision's original cable concession is dead, the government has the right to reclaim his share (VTV, 16 June).¹⁰ If the station's other owner is found guilty on charges unrelated to the station - - but widely viewed as another move to pressure the station -- the government could take over his part of the concession as well, turning it into a government-owned entity.
- Chavez said that the government might drop its complaints if the station had "someone in the management who might think rationally" (VTV, 12 June).¹¹
- Globovision has four pending judicial proceedings. One case has already been decided against it; the station could lose its license if found guilty a second time (*El Universal Online*, 17 May).¹²

Outlook

The Media Crimes bill is the most blatant example of the government's steady encroachment on media freedom in an effort to establish a media monopoly and stifle freedom of expression. Silencing his critics would allow Chavez to completely control the media message, but it would also deprive him of his long-standing scapegoat of what he describes as the oligarchic media. He may be willing to give this up in order to clamp down on the negative news reporting and commentary, which have been hammering away at the country's economic problems and Chavez's increasing authoritarianism for the past year. The government action against its media critics would also eliminate the only forums available to Chavez's other domestic critics, including local opposition elected officials, political parties, and university students.

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Chavez Media Message

Chavez already monopolizes large amounts of time by declaring mandatory television and radio simulcasts of his speeches. In addition to his simulcasts, listed below, Chavez speaks on government-owned VTV several times a week, including his two "Hello, President" programs. He also publishes a weekly column in various newspapers throughout the country.

Chavez Simulcasts

Year	Number of simulcasts	Hours broadcast hr/min/sec	Average hours
1999	94	78:07:27	00:49:52
2000	146	106:54:51	00:43:56
2001	118	118:04:09	01:00:02
2002	163	75:14:09	00:27:42
2003	203	168:18:33	00:49:45
2004	375	124:05:09	00:19:51
2005	217	109:05:40	00:30:10
2006	182	91:43:55	00:30:14
2007	164	119:52:01	00:43:51
2008	186	172:55:48	00:55:47
2009	75	88:19:57	01:10:40
Total	1,923	1252:41:39	00:39:05

(TalCualDigital.com, 28 July)¹³

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¹ [Internet Site | | Noticias24.com | Proyecto de Ley de Delitos Mediáticos | 30 July 2009 | | <http://www.noticias24.com/> | | Description of source: Noticias24 in Spanish -- News portal featuring world news with a concentration on Latin America; URL: <http://www.noticias24.com/>]

² [OSC | | LAP20090613001003 | 12 June 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Chavez Terms Obama Cairo Speech 'Extraordinary' | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

³ [TV | | Venezolana de Television | | 15-16 January 2009 | | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

⁴ [Online Publication | | Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias | Campaña mediática de ultra derecha repercute en redes sociales en internet | 1 August 2009 | | <http://www.abn.info.ve/> | | Caracas Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias in Spanish -- Website of the official Venezuelan News Agency also known by acronym ABN; URL: <http://www.abn.info.ve/>]

⁵ [OSC | | LAP20090801001003 | 1 August 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Minister Cabello Shuts Down 32 Radio Stations, 2 TV Stations | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

⁶ [OSC | | LAP20090704011001 | 4 July 2009 | | Program Summary: Caracas Venezolana de TV Spanish 0030 GMT 4 Jul 09 [CAR] | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

⁷ [OSC | | LAP20090801001003 | 1 August 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Minister Cabello Shuts Down 32 Radio Stations, 2 TV Stations | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

⁸ [OSC | | LAP20090721011001 | 21 July 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Chavez Announces 'Thorough' Review of Relations with Colombia | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

⁹ [OSC | | LAP20090715011001 | 9 July 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuelan Minister Apprises Lawmakers of Bid To 'Democratize' Airwaves | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

¹⁰ [OSC | | LAP20090722011002 | 16 July 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Minister Vows To Carry Out Media Reforms Despite Protests | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

¹¹ [OSC | | LAP20090613001003 | 12 June 2009 | | FYI -- Venezuela: Chavez Terms Obama Cairo Speech 'Extraordinary' | | (U) | (U) | Caracas Venezolana de Television in Spanish -- government-owned television station]

¹² [OSC | | LAP20090518071001 | 17 May 2009 | | Venezuela: Globovision Faces Multiple Proceedings, Expects Suspension | | (U) | (U) | Caracas El Universal Online in Spanish -- Website of conservative, pro-opposition morning daily with an average daily run of over 80,000 copies Monday through Saturday and 200,000 on Sundays. Founded in 1909. President Dr. Andres Mata Osorio; URL: <http://www.eluniversal.com>]

¹³ [Online Publication | | Tal Cual Digital | El mensaje unico | 28 July 2009 | | <http://www.talcualdigital.com> | 28 July 2009 | Description of Source: Caracas TalCualDigital.com in Spanish -- Website of tabloid highly critical of

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the Chavez administration; modest circulation but influential; run by former Planning Minister and well-known journalist Teodoro Petkoff; URL: <http://www.talcualdigital.com>]

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