

Pulling the Plug on Anti-Chavez TV

Venezuela's Decision Not to Renew Station's License Draws Accusations of Censorship

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Jan. 17 -- Inside Radio Caracas Television, actors make racy soap operas about love gone bad while an influential television host pillories President Hugo Chavez. Outside the station, none of that sits well with Alberto Carias, a beefy man with a bullhorn whose agitated followers promise that the days of Radio Caracas Television are numbered.

He makes no pretense about who made the decision -- the president, who is poised for sweet revenge against one of his most dogged antagonists, known here by its call letters, RCTV.

"Here they practice yellow journalism, treacherous journalism that goes against the people's rights," Carias told a crowd earlier this week. And then, discussing the entertainment side, he said: "The children are the ones affected for many years by the sex, by the violence of these programs that go against the morality of children, that go against the morality of the Venezuelan people."

As Chavez accelerates his country's shift toward "21st-century socialism," a decision not to renew RCTV's broadcast license is among the government's more dramatic steps, and one that has caused serious concern among free-press advocates. While Venezuelan officials have accused the 54-year-old station of having collaborated with organizers of a 2002 coup against Chavez, the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, the Organization of American States and the Catholic Church have warned that press freedoms in Venezuela are in danger.

The case has attracted widespread attention from officials in Washington and Latin America, for whom the non-renewal of a license has echoes of right-wing dictatorships of the past, when newspapers and broadcasters were closed if they veered from the party line. Though self-censorship and slayings of journalists remain common, particularly in Colombia and [Mexico](#), the closing of a media outlet for political reasons has not occurred in years.

"The RCTV case is clearly a case of censorship and the most grave step back in the region since Fujimori," said Jos? Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for Human Rights Watch, referring to widespread manipulation of the media by Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s. "Chavez is not renewing the concession to punish a medium for its opposition to the government."

RCTV produces Venezuela's sappy soaps, known as telenovelas, which are wildly popular and have been exported to more than 80 countries. It runs an academy that trained 5,600 actors, journalists and technicians last year, and its news operation has 250 staff members and offices in 10 cities across the country.

Much to the bane of the government, it also features Miguel Angel Rodr?guez, whose three-year-old program, "The Interview," makes mincemeat of Chavez's government every weekday morning. Sitting before a giant screen where Chavez's speeches are

replayed, Rodriguez and his guests, usually staunch foes of Chavez, dissect the president's statements and declare his government anti-democratic and incompetent.

"Could we say to Venezuelans that a person of this sort, Hugo Chavez, is rising up against the liberty of Venezuelans?" Rodriguez asked a guest on a recent morning. "Is this constitutional reform, the enabling law and this giant step to consolidate 21st-century socialism a method of finding a legal way to install totalitarianism?"

Government officials openly disparage RCTV's daily programming -- seeing its soaps as akin to pornography. The president has accused RCTV of "poisoning the souls of children with irresponsible sex."

But what really angers the government is what happened before and after April 11, 2002, when an anti-government protest ended in violence and the ouster of Chavez. RCTV, like three other major private television stations, encouraged the protests and, once Chavez was ousted, celebrated his removal. But when the interim government that replaced him began to collapse, RCTV and other stations blacked out the news -- which the government says was done to keep Venezuelans from rising up against the coup organizers.

The director of the station, Marcel Granier, denies taking part in the coup. "That doesn't apply to me," he said. "I was never in any of those meetings." Granier does acknowledge participating in efforts to mount a recall referendum against Chavez in 2004 that failed when the president won 59 percent of the vote. But he contends that RCTV tries to be fair, offering invitations to government officials that are usually ignored.

"What we have tried to do is preserve spaces for pluralism so that different opinions are heard," he said.

Government officials say RCTV has shown nothing but contempt for them. "They were part of the team of conspirators," said Saul Ortega, a congressman. "It's a subversive channel that skirts the law. In no other country would that have been permitted."

Still, the government has not filed charges against any of RCTV's directors. Officials cite the station's anti-government position as a motivation for the non-renewal of its license, set to expire at the end of May.

William Lara, the communications minister, told a delegation from the Committee to Protect Journalists that the station violated a vaguely worded 2004 law by broadcasting sexually suggestive programming during daylight hours. But the government has never provided the station, nor the committee, with an official detailed explanation for the non-renewal.

"The government's decision not to renew the concession is a decision that lacks transparency," said Carlos Lauria, an Argentine journalist who headed the committee's delegation. "We are worried because this can have consequences for the exercise of free expression."

Free expression is exercised in Venezuela. Another influential television station, Globovision, lambastes the government frequently, and Caracas boasts a range of newspapers, many of them with an anti-government bent.

But the government has steadily been pressuring the opposition media -- prompting a once aggressive station, Venevision, to dramatically tone down its news reports. Journalists say access to information is routinely denied, and state advertising is withheld from some opposition media outlets. The government is now planning to close many press relations offices, funneling all information through the communications minister, according to a report in El Universal newspaper.

The state funds hundreds of community radio stations and numerous newspapers. State television channels run Chavez's speeches and forums where moderators extol the virtues of the government. In 2005, the government founded Telesur, a network for Latin America that Chavez says is a leftist alternative to CNN En Espanol.

If the government follows through with its plans on RCTV, it will mark the end of an era for a station that produced the long-running humor program "Radio Rochela" and famous telenovelas such as "Through These Streets," which dealt with social tensions, and "My Fat Beauty," a humorous look at its lovable protagonist.

In RCTV's sprawling facility, which includes a network news center, studios for soaps, editing rooms and warehouses, workers are trying to stay optimistic.

Cameras roll, directors give orders from a control booth and technicians test for sound in a warren of editing rooms.

Sitting in the makeup room this week, with her hair being blow-dried, actress Hilda Abrahamz was wistful when asked about RCTV's future. She is working on the latest soap in her 25-year career at the station.

"Here, I was born as an actress," she said. "I owe my artistic career to Radio Caracas because they gave me the opportunity to start here."