

The Truth Behind Chavez's Media Obsession

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WASHINGTON -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has carried out his threat and refused to renew the broadcast license of dissident Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), silencing it for supporting the short-lived coup against him in 2002. While other privately held stations are still on the air, Chavez is well on his way to extending his hegemony over all of the country's media.

After the coup, Chavez demonized the country's largest private networks, calling Venevision, RCTV, Globovision and Televen the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse." Now with RCTV out of the way, Globovision appears to be Chavez's next target, although it has several years left on its license.

Interestingly, Venevision and Televen now appear to have been spared Chavez's wrath. Media insiders claim that Chavez and the owners of these stations came to an agreement to stay out of each other's business. In fact, Venevision's license was renewed the same day that RCTV's was revoked.

According to Venezuelan media expert Andres Canizalez, Venevision, the country's largest network, "made a 180-degree turn" and now "provides even less information than government-owned channels." It is clear, he added, that "the government punishes the political agenda of RCTV but at the same time rewards the agenda of Venevision."

Venezuela is not the first Latin American country to have its news media silenced. In 1992, Brazil's powerful Globo television network, for instance, was largely AWOL in its coverage of the yearlong corruption scandal that led to the resignation of President Fernando Collor de Mello.

In 1997, Colombian President Ernesto Samper did not extend the license to a daily newscast founded by Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a move largely seen as a punishment for coverage of the scandal linking Samper to drug money.

The Venezuelan media's current suffering stems from a long history of politicization. Back in 1989, during the violent events that became known as the *Caracazo*, government forces killed hundreds who were protesting austerity measures adopted by the government of Carlos Andres Perez. As these events further eroded the public's trust in already weak institutions, the media stepped in and played a defining role in restoring order.

In a survey done soon after, Canizalez recalled, some of the country's top editors expressed their fears for what would happen once the media took on a responsibility that belongs to the political system. One of those editors described feeling pushed by political circumstances "into a boxing ring that wasn't ours."

The media continued its adopted political role during the failed 1992 coup led by Chavez, then an army lieutenant colonel, against Perez's unpopular government. As the rebels struggled to send a message through the government network they controlled, Perez was able to escape and broadcast a message on Venevision claiming the coup had failed.

The coup plotters later recognized that their failure to beat Perez to the airwaves -- due in no small part to the fact their prepared message was recorded on a tape format incompatible with the government's equipment -- was a key to their defeat. After he was democratically elected in 1998, Chavez's hostility toward the media carried official weight.

By early 2002, sparring between Chavez and the media had turned so ugly that the president instituted his notorious *cadena* -- the forced broadcasting of government bulletins through private networks. As anti-government protesters filled Caracas' streets that April, the networks resorted to splitting the screen showing the protests on one side and Chavez's bulletins on the other.

On April 13, the politicization of Venezuela's media reached its climax. Two days earlier, business leader Pedro Carmona deposed Chavez's government, an event widely covered by the media. By the weekend, Chavez was back in power after military forces secured his return. But the media imposed a total news blackout in what became known as a *golpe mediatico*, or media coup. Instead of reporting on Chavez's return, television networks aired old movies and cartoons. The country's two main daily newspapers published no Sunday editions.

Soon after RCTV went off the air last month, a dozen or so Venevision journalists offered their resignations in solidarity while hundreds of students took to the streets to protest the closing. Some protesters marched to Venevision's headquarters in the hope that it would cover their discontent and join them in at least a symbolic defense of a free, pluralistic press against Chavez's authoritarian monopoly. The network did not cover the protest -- apparently it had a movie it couldn't interrupt.