

Building a TV Station and a Platform for Leftists

The New York Times
June 16, 2007

CARACAS, [Venezuela](#)

AT the headquarters here of Telesur, the regional Spanish-language network financed largely by Venezuela's government, an anchor reads a bulletin describing a meeting of landless peasants in Brazil. Producers receive a report from Bolivia on a meeting of Andean leaders. On a talk show, intellectuals discuss trends in Caribbean cinema. An advertisement celebrates the broadcast of a documentary on the life of Che Guevara.

Less than two years old, Telesur is seen as this hemisphere's answer to [Al Jazeera](#), a Latin American network aimed at fostering integration and countering the influence of news organizations like CNN. The man guiding this experiment is Andrés Izarra, a rising star of President [Hugo Chávez](#)'s ambitious project to upend elites in Venezuela and elsewhere in the region.

Mr. Izarra, 38, was a news director at RCTV, the network recently taken off the air in the government's move not to renew its license, until he quit during the 2002 coup against Mr. Chávez, complaining of pro-coup coverage.

Since then, he ascended quickly through the highest ranks of government, becoming Mr. Chávez's communications minister and now president of Telesur, a project at the forefront of Mr. Chávez's efforts to assert greater state control of the news media.

While protests have convulsed Venezuela in recent weeks over Mr. Chávez's move against RCTV, Mr. Izarra has emerged as a passionate defender of the decision.

"RCTV practiced a form of media terrorism," Mr. Izarra said in an interview. "The families that own RCTV hate my guts for saying that, but the oligarchy that once controlled Venezuela is finally coming apart."

While the old oligarchy is undone, a new political elite is emerging in Venezuela, comprised of officials who support Mr. Chávez as a foil to the United States government and, not incidentally, have benefited from the changing order.

His critics call Mr. Izarra an apparatchik, someone who has defended Mr. Chávez's media policies for personal gain, a charge he denies. Mr. Izarra said he admired the president's capacity to stand up to the United States policies of "sabotage and containment."

Hastily eating take-out sushi at his desk here, Mr. Izarra said he and his wife could no longer comfortably dine in restaurants. "I become the subject of verbal abuse when I go into a public place," he said, explaining how walking around Las Mercedes, the chic district where he lives, had become difficult.

DESPITE projecting an intensely partisan personal image, Mr. Izarra says he is tolerant of different opinions in his family or in Telesur's studios. He said 120 of Telesur's 400 employees were opponents of Mr. Chávez, acknowledging that he kept tabs by using lists of voters and their political sympathies, available here on pirated software.

He says he never dreamed of working in a profession that did not revolve around a newsroom. But his departure from RCTV in 2002 led him into other worlds. Cast into the wilderness as far as privately owned media here were concerned, he first returned to CNN as a field producer during a general strike that paralyzed the economy in 2002 and 2003.

"Andrés was far from being a Chavista when I met him," said Lucia Newman, who was Mr. Izarra's boss as a senior Latin America correspondent for CNN.

"But he found himself in a position in which he had to choose sides," said Ms. Newman, who now covers Latin America for Al Jazeera International, describing Mr. Izarra's trajectory after his work for her. "In a general sense, I think he's now a true believer."

Mr. Izarra crossed into politics definitively when he took a job in media relations for the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington after his stint in Caracas for CNN. Then, at the age of 35, he was given charge of Mr. Chávez's personal television show and a growing portfolio of other responsibilities.

“The pace of working alongside Chávez isn't easy for anyone,” said José Roberto Duque, a writer and journalist who was hired by Mr. Izarra to help retool Venezuela's state news agency by drawing inspiration from Cuba's Prensa Libre and Spain's Agencia EFE. “He matured immensely, and intensely, during that time.”

Mr. Izarra started in journalism while living in France after he left university studies here in economics, writing for a magazine published by his uncle, who was jailed in Venezuela in the 1970s for leftist political activities.

His father, William Izarra, a retired air force officer and a political scientist, is one of the chief theorists of Mr. Chávez's political movement.

STILL, Mr. Izarra seems an unlikely Chavista. He had a privileged upbringing, attending Santiago de León, an elite school in Caracas. He speaks flawless English, having also attended public schools in Newton, Mass., while his parents did graduate work at Harvard. He spent nearly five years working in the United States at CNN and NBC before returning to Venezuela.

Now he is in the middle of the debate over the closing of RCTV, even as Telesur plans to expand into Europe, Brazil and perhaps the United States, using Internet-based broadcasting technology. The network, which has more than 10 bureaus overseas, including Cuba, Nicaragua and Haiti, is opening two more in London and Madrid.

Last year Telesur and Al Jazeera announced a content-sharing agreement, which was derided by Connie Mack, [a Republican](#) congressman from Florida, as “creating a global television network for terrorists.”

Such statements, Mr. Izarra said, have only given Telesur greater legitimacy among its viewers. Compared with the Venezuelan government's main television network, which ruthlessly disparages Mr. Chávez's critics, Telesur's tilt left is more moderate. The network's mission, he said, is "to advance integration while portraying Latin Americans as we see ourselves."

Cookie-cutter anchors are not part of this project. Instead, a ponytailed journalist with a 5 o'clock shadow discusses the news each morning. A diversity of accents from correspondents from around the region reflects the countries supporting Telesur, which include Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and Nicaragua.

But this is Venezuela, where politics intrudes even into life's most intimate spaces. During his time as communications minister, Mr. Izarra met Isabel González, a former anchor at Globovisión, Venezuela's only remaining opposition television network.

They married soon after Mr. Izarra was interviewed on her program and have a 1-year-old daughter. Mr. Izarra has a 14-year-old son from a previous marriage.

His wife remains an outspoken critic of the government. So is his mother, Viviana García, a retired university professor. And his wife's stepfather, Antonio Ledezma, heads an opposition political party.

"We do not discuss politics when the family gets together," Ms. García said. "Unfortunately, this is a situation common to many Venezuelan families at this time."