



FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN VENEZUELA

As a vibrant democracy, freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of information in Venezuela are all protected rights in the Constitution of 1999. **The country enjoys a large number of privately owned newspapers, television stations and radio broadcasters**, and over the last decade has undertaken initiatives to democratize access to the media and expand the tools available to citizens for exchanging ideas and accessing information.

THE MEDIA IN VENEZUELA

More than 60 percent of the media on public airwaves is privately owned and operated, and most is controlled by the government's political opposition. Additionally, more than 184 channels broadcast freely through cable networks.

Political discourse through the Venezuelan media remains extremely active and vibrant, with many voices and political opinions using newspapers, radio and TV to reach a bigger audience.

As Bart Jones, a longtime correspondent for the Associated Press wrote in an op-ed published in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 30, 2007, "Radio, TV and newspapers remain uncensored, unfettered and unthreatened by the government. Most Venezuelan media are still controlled by the old oligarchy and are staunchly anti-Chávez."¹

Oscar-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone, who has traveled extensively through Latin America, said the following to CNN's Larry King on June 9, 2010: "It's the most colorful media. You can say anything you want in Venezuela – anything."

DEMOCRATIZING ACCESS TO MEDIA

Like other countries in the region, the ownership of much of Venezuela's media outlets is still concentrated in a small number of economic conglomerates. **Over the last decade, the government has actively taken steps to democratize access to the media** by granting more private and public broadcast licenses for TV and radio, and supporting the development of community-based media outlets.

According to Venezuela's National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL in Spanish), prior to 1998, broadcast licenses were granted to 300 radio stations (291 private, 9 public) and 31 television stations (29 private, 2 public).

Between 1999 and 2008, the number of licenses for radio stations increased to 494 (181 private, 70 public, 243 community-based) and 79 for television stations (38 private, 4 public, 37 community-based).²

There has also been an aggressive push to grant communities the means to report on local issues. In 2002, there were 13 licensed community radio and television stations around Venezuela, while in 2007 that number grew to 193. There are also over 100 community newspapers in the country.³

To ensure that all media outlets are operating legally and abiding by Venezuelan laws and broadcast regulations, on various occasions CONATEL has had to impose sanctions outlined in various regulations. However, contrary to what some opposition groups have tried to argue, these have been legal or administrative sanctions and the media outlets affected have been a minority in the vibrant media landscape of the country.

INTERNET IN VENEZUELA

Beyond expanding community-based media outlets and increasing the number of broadcast licenses granted to TV and radio stations, Venezuela has also dramatically increased access to one of the most important tools of communication and information sharing to emerge in the last century – the Internet.

Since 2000, the number of Venezuelans with access to the Internet has grown from 800,000 to over 7.5 million. In 2000, only three percent of the Venezuelan people were online; in 2009, that number stood at 27 percent.⁴

The Venezuelan government has moved aggressively to make access to the Internet free and universal. In recent years, 668 Infocenters – community-based Internet access points – have been founded, and \$10 million has been set aside to build 200 more in 2010. The Infocenters are a central component of the government's plans to broaden Internet access and offer low-income sectors access to online tools and services.

As a consequence of expanded access to the Internet, Venezuela has become a hotbed for Twitter, with over 300,000 registered users to date. Additionally, over five million Venezuelans use Facebook.



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June 15, 2010

¹ "Hugo Chavez vs. RCTV," Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2007.

<http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2418>

² 2009 CONATEL Power Point presentation.

³ Fernandes, Sujatha. "Who Can Stop The Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chavez's Venezuela," Duke University Press: Durham. 2010.

⁴ "President Chavez: Government Seeks to Increase Access to Internet, Not Restrict It." <http://venezuela-us.org/2010/03/22/president-chavez-government-seeks-to-increase-internet-access-not-restrict-it/#more-9656>