

Venezuela - Media Landscape

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Overview

Prior to any analysis of the media landscape in Venezuela, it must be highlighted how the current situation in the country, with two governments claiming to be the rightful one for more than a year and with a pandemic situation shocking an already economically depressed country, could lead to sudden changes in some of the information provided in this report. Those changes, however, are not expected to affect the media landscape, as this situation can only be modified in the long term with some deep and stable reforms. So, even if the current political crisis should lead to a change in the government and Maduro is to leave power, his successors won't be able to stop repression and introduce freedom immediately, and the polarisation of society and media will not suddenly disappear and neither will the economic crisis. As of May 2020, Juan Guaidó, the self-proclaimed president acknowledged by many countries and international organizations, has not yet the effective power to introduce real change.

Since the arrival of Hugo Chávez to power in 1999, Venezuela has followed a path of state intervention and lack of freedom – including censorship and self-censorship – in the media, a situation which worsened since Chávez's death and the arrival to presidency of Nicolás Maduro in 2013. The country's advances in social equality and respect for minorities are perceived also in the media landscape, but in general terms, this is currently defined, like almost everything else in the Caribbean country, by the government repression, by inflation and by the shortage of goods. The first one has limited the freedom of speech of journalists and communicators that do not belong to pro-government media, with physical aggressions, removal of broadcasting licenses, limitations to the access of public information or intervention in online sites. All these measures, supported by the law and by violent groups linked to the government, have also lead to self-censorship, which has reached levels hard to measure in a report like this, but it has been, at the same time, the only way for many journalists and media to survive and continue informing.

The other two elements, inflation and shortage of goods –worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic–, have been for years affecting communication companies, such as newspapers, that face lack of newsprint to operate. The decadent telecommunications infrastructure, with frequent cuts of the lines, and the poor quality of telecommunication services are also holding back innovation and a proper media scenario, in which the use of Internet, social networks, mobile devices and, in general, ICTs, is not growing at the same pace as in the rest of the world, although its use for political activism has gained relevance to escape the state control of traditional media. In general, Venezuelans have a strong desire for information, since the reality of everyday clashes with what official media show, but their efforts to find information are not always satisfied. Finally, it is hard to find up-to-date official statistics about companies, consumers or their use of media; the ones available come mostly from civil institutions, professional organisations or NGOs, and sometimes they contradict each other or the ones of public institutions. These organisations, mainly based on the Internet, are the main bastion of free press in the country, reporting the attacks and censorship attempts that journalists and media are victims of.

The intervention of the government in the media market has been counterproductive for the development of the sector. The removal of the license of the television broadcaster *RCTV* or the purchase of the newspaper *Últimas Noticias*, some of the most traditional and popular media in the country, are good examples of how state action was negative for those media (Fernández, 2018) and, by extension, for the media market. The obligation to broadcast official announcements, the prohibition to broadcast or publish for a certain amount of time that some media have to face as a “punishment”, the shortages of newsprint, the failures in the TV or Internet services, the impossibility to access certain websites, are all factors affecting mainly critical media, but not only. Additionally, the economic crisis and the uncontrolled inflation –significantly increased during the Covid-19 pandemic– has made the consumption of media drop for many people. The press has been the most affected because of the lack of newsprint, with several media disappearing or surviving only online. This helps explaining how, despite being under the regional Latin-American average, the Internet penetration rate reached 65 percent in 2019 (Tendencias Digitales, 2019), showing the need of citizens of looking for information and solutions in alternative sources. In general, and like most other sectors in Venezuela, the media market is going through turbulent times and the perspectives in the near future are not positive in a completely divided country.

Media are also polarized between government supporters, with outlets owned or controlled to different extents by the state, and media critical with the government, which are not necessarily close to parties of the opposition. The communication and information field has been one of the most affected by authoritarianism and repression, as its control is essential to expand the view and the government’s “revolution”; that is why many media have been bought or fell under pro-government hands, and that also explains why the others have developed a stronger rejection against the government. Critical media are, in general terms, less organised, there are private and international media among this heterogeneous group, with different political ideas; some are closer to some opposition parties or groups, promoting their agendas and their views, while others are more independent. The pro-government group, however, is more homogeneous, and they are either owned by the state or by people somehow connected to it. It is a fact that the government has supported and encouraged the purchase of media by their acolytes (Fernández, 2018). Some other smaller or international media that agree with the views of the *chavist* movement could be included in this group, but the links with the government or political parties are weaker or almost nonexistent and are purely ideological.

All this has led to a lack of trust in media, as they are often more partisans and supporters of each side than independent sources of information. This rising mistrust is not equal in all media, nor in all groups, but the confidence of people in media has decreased dramatically, especially in traditional ones (press, radio and television), as censorship and government’s control is stronger; especially among television media, independent voices are inexistent, and audiences are migrating to other platforms. This mistrust in Venezuelan media system has made international media a much demanded source of

information, both international and national, in order to really know what happens in the country. However, censorship has also reached international groups and information critical with the government or addressing the crisis of Venezuela are temporary blocked or deleted by hackers that are supported by the government. This has affected media mainly in Spanish and in English, as those are the languages most understood in Venezuela and are also the ones spoken where the diaspora of Venezuelan emigrants lives.

This also leads us to the media for the diaspora: with more than 5 million Venezuelans living abroad as migrants or refugees (according to UNHCR, 2020), media focused in the needs of these people or having them as target are increasing. Some of the most relevant ones are *El Venezolano TV* –broadcasting from Miami and Spain–, *Venezuela al Día* –a website also located in Miami–, or *NTN24* –a Latin-American channel with home in Colombia that focuses greatly in Venezuelan information–. These media are focused on Venezuelan content but mainly for people already living in those places; migrants that are currently on the move in very large numbers use mainly social media, especially WhatsApp and, more recently, Telegram, mostly with information meeting their needs about how the situation at the border is or how to find visas. It should be highlighted here that, although the situation in Venezuela has not improved, thousands of Venezuelan emigrants are returning to their country given the hardships they face in their hosting countries given the Covid-19 pandemic.

This whole situation, especially the shutting down of media and the impossibility for many people to carry out their profession in a free environment, has been negative for journalistic professionalism in Venezuela. But at the same time, this has prompted professional organisations and trade unions to join and gain relevance, becoming important actors in the construction of the public discourse and reporting the violations of the rights of journalists. Their presence in the media context has increased as they are one of the last barriers between authoritarianism and freedom of speech and of the press. Despite that, the uncertainty of many professionals, the emigration of others, the threats and attacks that others have had to face and the losing of jobs due to the closure of several media, has weakened the profession as a whole. Journalism has partly lost its value due to the partisanship of many professionals in a strongly polarised scenario. The Code of Ethics and the activities of some NGOs and professional organisations seem to be the only ways to sustain the profession. Also, the proliferation of citizen journalism and alternative ways of getting information, such as social networks or blogs, has made journalists expendable and far less relevant in the construction of the public discourse.

State intervention in the media system is probably one of the main problems in Venezuela. Attacks to the rights of journalists and media professionals, such as expulsion of international journalists, physical violence or seizing of materials are common, and so are the attempts to control the content that is published, either buying independent or critical media or using legislation to silence dissident voices. But journalists are not the only ones whose rights are attacked, also users, mainly on the Internet, have been seen their rights limited and they are forced to use VPNs to access certain sites.

The laws related to communication and information and the action of a non-independent justice, as well as the power of the *Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicación* (National Commission of Telecommunications - Conatel), have become censorship tools that have led to the temporary or permanent closing of media and the imprisonment and different sanctions against professionals, but also against citizens that use social media to inform. At the same time, state-controlled or state-supporting media are often propaganda tools of the government. According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders, Venezuela is in the 147th position out of 180 countries. This has made the population lose confidence in traditional media, especially those under state control or ownership, looking for information in alternative media, mainly social media, making it easier for fake news and polarised contents to spread. According to a survey by Hinterlaces (In Pinillos, 2018), 77 percent of Venezuelans have little or no confidence in media.

Media

Print

The offer of print media in Venezuela is decreasing worryingly, especially since the appointing of Nicolás Maduro as president in 2013. According to the Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), 68 newspapers have closed since that year, and the NGO Espacio Público adds that only in 2018 40 newspapers had to close (in Ocando, 2020). One of the main reasons for this decrease is the lack of newsprint paper, which has forced many newspapers to temporary shutdowns, final shutdowns, decreasing their frequency, sizing down their number of pages or migrations to the digital format.

Since 2013, the supply of newsprint paper depends on the *Complejo Editorial Alfredo Maneiro*, a state-owned monopolistic organism that imports and distributes newsprint and other supplies for the print media in Venezuela, aggravating the crisis of print media. One of the biggest victims was *Tal Cual*, founded in 2000, that had to stop their printed edition on 1 November, 2017, existing now only online. The same also happened in December 2018 to *El Nacional*, one of the biggest and most traditional newspapers. This has also particularly affected regional or local newspapers, as they have less means to survive. Thus ten states –out of 23– do not have local or regional printed media circulating (Espacio Público, 2019) and only national newspapers are available there. Some zones of the country hardly have access to newspapers or the offer is very limited and not plural at all. Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many have stopped circulating and other have reduced their periodicity or their size due to the limitations derived from the state of exception imposed by the Government and the quarantine; for example, one of the main newspapers, *Últimas Noticias*, does not circulate anymore during weekends. Despite all that, press is still a rather close medium to small populations, as regional and local papers are present in most regions, whereas digital media, especially due to the poor quality of the telecommunications network, are not yet developed enough in these areas.

A survey conducted in March 2018 by Instituto Delphos showed how the press is used more often as an information source by urban than by rural populations. It also shows that the press is used by 18.5 percent of Venezuelans as their main information source, while according to Hinterlaces (in Pinillos, 2018), this figure is only 8 percent. Another trend is that older men belonging to the lower socio-economic levels are the ones reading newspapers most often.

Censorship imposed by the government has deeply affected print media, making it very difficult for opposition newspapers to continue informing, forcing them to changes in ownership or to soften their critics to the president (Fernández, 2018). Additionally, there seems to exist a clear antagonism between pro-government (often owned by the state, such as *Correo del Orinoco*, or *El Universal*, a former anti-government medium that was purchased by a pro-government group, changing their line completely) and anti-government (private and under the constant threat of censorship or disappearance; for example, *El Nacional* does not have a printed version anymore and works only online) media. Similarly, emblematic regional media with a long tradition had to close their printed versions in the last years –*Panorama*, in 2019; *El Impulso*, in 2017; and *El Carabobeño*, in 2016–, after they lost access to their main raw material –newsprint paper– and to their main source of income –advertising–.

This is also making newspapers, that were until recently the most influential media in the construction of public opinion (Soler & Rivero, 2017), to lose their privileged position, as they are perceived as politicised and less reliable by the population. Three main groups of newspaper publishers can be found in Venezuela: The state or state-controlled companies under the *Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información* (Bolivarian Communication and Information System), and the private Bloque De Armas and *Últimas Noticias* group. The last two also have an important offer of magazines, whereas the first one

is the main communication group with presence in television, radio and news agencies. However, many national, regional and local newspapers are not included in these groups.

Radio

Radio has a long and acknowledged history in Venezuela, but during the last decade many stations or programs have continuously been censored, shut down or sold to pro-government groups by Conatel, in what many associations have seen as an intromission of the government, proving the vulnerable position of the media. One of the organisations defending radios is the *Cámara Venezolana de la Industria de la Radiodifusión* (Venezuelan Chamber of Radio Broadcasting Industry), founded in 1950, which is the main independent association of radio stations in Venezuela. In 2018, 5.4 percent of Venezuelans used radio as their main source of information according to a survey by Instituto Delphos, but it was 8 percent if we follow the figures of Hinterlaces (2017). In any case, there has been a loss of trust after the government intervention, what has made radio penetration and its relevance decrease.

In spite of the variety of stations, only *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*, the state-owned and biggest radio broadcaster of the country, reaches almost every part of it, being the only one available in some border zones (González, 2015) and in many small regions all the radiophonic options are controlled by the state (IPYS, Armando.info & Poderopedia, 2015). Important stations that belong to the state are *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*, *YVKE Mundial* or *Circuito Radial PDVSA* (this last one via the monopolistic oil company), while some of the private broadcasters, joined under the *Cámara Venezolana de la Industria de la Radiodifusión* (Venezuelan Chamber of the Broadcasting Industry), are *Circuito Unión Radio*, *FM Center*, *Circuito X* and *Circuito Radio Venezuela*. The only two radio stations focused exclusively on news are *Radio Nacional de Venezuela* and *Unión Radio*, both FM- Similarly to the newspapers and the whole media system in Venezuela, state-owned stations are clearly loyal to the government, while private ones are usually very critical, thus creating an obvious division and making it hard to find independent stations. In this context, radio stations –mainly private ones– have suffered censorship and the deficiency of the telecommunications system: IPYS (2019a) counted 65 radio stations that were victims of blackouts, delinquency or censorship, what affected their broadcasting, just during the first semester of 2019.

In April 2019, *Radio Caracas Radio*, one of the oldest and most relevant private radio stations of Venezuela, had its concession removed by Conatel after years of asking for a renovation of it. In the same line, in 2017, 54 stations closed, of which 52 in the inner and rural part of the country (Espacio Público, 2018). According to the survey of Instituto Delphos, radio is most popular among the older, less wealthy and rural population. This is partly explained because radio has a strong capacity to adapt to smaller communities and community radios have had the support of the Government, as it has been able to control them in an easier way. In 2002 the *Reglamento de Radiodifusión Sonora y Televisión Abierta Comunitarias de Servicio Público sin fines de lucro* (Rule of Communitarian Public Service not for profit Radiobroadcasting and Open Television) was approved, promoting these kind of community radios and TV stations, although the second ones are less relevant. Conatel counted more than 300 community radios in June 2018, like for example *Radio Chuspa* in the region of Vargas. Other radio stations aimed to particular groups are the religious *Shalom* or the internationally present *Radio María*, as well as *Fe y Alegría*, an educational radio station belonging to the Catholic Church, originally aimed at uneducated adults left out of the system and at indigenous populations, but widening their goals into different fields of education since their appearing in 1975. Their programming mixes Spanish and indigenous languages such as Wayuu and their informative offer is relevant, although they depend strongly on State's funding. The state-owned *Radio Nacional de Venezuela* (National Radio of Venezuela - RNV) offers an indigenous channel in some regions of the country where these communities are most present. All these small radios have profited from the arrival of Internet and new platforms that allow them to reach new audiences without big investments or to broadcast only via Internet, what has increased the number of small and community radios or stations with a very specific target audience.

Television

TV has traditionally been one of the main telecommunication media, and even though state intervention has made many Venezuelans abandon it, it is still the most used. Until 2004 there existed only one state-owned television channel, while there were already six in 2013. Nowadays TV is the most government-controlled medium. One of the most determinant moments of the television scenario in Venezuela was the removal of the broadcasting permission of *RCTV (Radio Caracas Televisión)*, one of the main private broadcasters, by the Chavez government which gave the license to *Televisora Venezolana Social* (Venezuelan Social TV - TVES), a state-influenced channel. Since then, many private television companies without a pro-government line have been bought by groups with a more favourable view of the government. The huge presence of Hugo Chávez first and Nicolás Maduro later and their messages (known as *cadena*s, meaning 'chains') in the radio and television stations, cutting the original programming without further advise, must be added to understand the influence the government has in the open television media in Venezuela and why people are losing confidence and interest in open broadcasters. These messages are compulsory according to the law and none of the open stations can reject broadcasting them.

The cutting of signals, the censorship of programmes or conductors (Rodríguez, 2018) and the blockade of TV stations, including international ones, such as the Colombian *Caracol TV* and *RCN* or *CNN in Spanish* (Buitrago & Pons, 2017), have been common measures taken by Conatel under the *Ley de Responsabilidad Social de Radio y Televisión* (RESORTE, as will be explained in Media legislation). Many opposition parties and supporters have abandoned television media, which offer a very weak representation of everything outside of the government's view. Traditional television is still most popular among government supporters. Although some private stations show the opposite perspective, they often offer, even when not censored, biased or politicised information. In fact, more than half of the TV stations in Venezuela are state-owned or pro-governmental, and the remaining ones have a self-censorship editorial line.

Television in its different forms is used by 51 percent (according to Hinterlaces; in Pinillos, 2018) or 43.9 percent of Venezuelans (according to Delphos) as their main source of information. It is the most commonly used medium for both genders, for urban and rural people and for every age and socio-economic group. People from the lowest income level, who cannot access cable or subscription television –although the illegal redistribution of the service in some poor neighborhoods is relevant–, as well as youths and urban people with a stronger use of digital and social media, are the least interested in television. The lack of independent and reliable information and the already mentioned *cadena*s have made many viewers mistrust open television, increasing the demand of cable television, that reached 68 percent of homes in 2016 (Castro, 2016), and the use of subscription and digital television, although the precarious condition of infrastructures and the increase of the prices of cable and subscription television (Santistevan, 2020) have made it difficult for these options to spread. A survey conducted by DatinCorp in 2016 showed how open television was the preferred platform to find political information for 26 percent of people, showing a clear decrease, and closely followed by cable and satellite TV (23 percent), which include international channels, such as *CNN en Español* or the Spanish *TVE* and *Antena 3*. According to Conatel (2019), more than 45 percent of the subscribers of pay TV are clients of the US company DirecTV, followed by the telecommunication companies Intercable (13.79%) and the state-controlled CanTV (12.05%). These figures, however, will change after the closing of DirecTV in May 2020, due to the prohibition of the US Government for some companies to conduct business in Venezuela.

In general, television stations in Venezuela can be open or under subscription; the first ones can be public (*VTV*, *ViVe* or *TVes*, joined under the already mentioned *Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información*) and private stations (*Venevisión*, *Televen* or *Globovisión*), as well as national or regional ones. Biggest players in the market of paid television are the main telecommunications providers (see chapter 5.2) as well as Internet television, either Venezuelan channels like *VIVOplay*

, *VPI TV* or *Capitolio TV* or international competitors such as Netflix. Internet television (or IPTV) demands a smart TV, which is why it is still limited to big cities and usually only to wealthier groups of people. Its extension and development are also slowed down due to the poor quality of telecommunications, but the number of users has still increased in the last years as it is one of the main spaces for voices critical with the government of Maduro. It is also one of the most popular ways to access international channels, both for more independent information or for entertainment contents.

One last interesting case that should be highlighted is *TeleSur*, present in different Latin-American countries, with headquarters in Caracas, whose goal is the “integration of Latin-American people and to counter the biased information coming from the North [meaning the USA]” as its creators define it (Arcila, 2005). It is another example of politicisation of television in Venezuela.

Despite the lack of trust and the strong politicisation of its contents, television is still very popular as an entertainment media. It is broadly extended, reaching practically the whole country, although some small or isolated zones need cable television as the open signal hardly reaches them (*El Nacional*, 2020). The variety of programs and channels makes it possible to find a very customised offer for different groups of people. There are no channels especially focused on indigenous people or minorities, but some programs are increasing their use of sign language for deaf people and in general the contents related with indigenous groups have an adequate presence in Venezuelan television, mainly in public channels. There exists a law, the *Ley de Idiomas Indígenas*, that forces all kinds of media to create adequate spaces for the promotion of these languages. There are also some channels controlled by religious groups, such as the Christian *TV Familia*.

Digital Media

Although the government's intervention and limitation of freedom of speech online is also problematic, as 112 blockades and attacks took place in 2019 –more than doubling the 48 violations of 2018– against digital media (Espacio Público, 2020c), the Internet has gained relevance after the decrease of trust in traditional media, subject to government control. The lack of newsprint paper, making many traditional newspapers exist only in their digital versions, has also helped this transition. Nonetheless, the control of the government over online communication, especially thanks to the Law against Hate passed in 2017, has increased, closing websites and blocking international media. According to Freedom House, the Freedom on the Net 2019 in Venezuela was 30/100, 100 being the best result and a punctuation below 39, which describes this country as not free.

The penetration rate of Internet in Venezuela reaches 65 percent (*Tendencias Digitales*, 2019), although it is one of the lowest rates in the Latin American region. This can be partially explained due to the fails in the connectivity infrastructure and the low speed of the connections. Together with the digital sites of traditional media, including newspapers that could not keep their printed version, like *Tal Cual* or *El Nacional*, some of the most popular and influential information pages in Venezuela are *La Patilla*, *Efecto Cocuyo*, *Caraota Digital*, *El Pitazo* or *Runrunes*. The presence of state-owned news portals is not big and it is easier than in traditional media to find independent or alternative voices. There exist local and regional media, as well as international, but media with national information are the most relevant and influential.

Delphos shows Internet as the main source of information for 8.8 percent of Venezuelans, while for Hinterlaces (in Pinillos, 2018) is an 11 percent. According to the *Penetración y usos de Internet en Venezuela 2018* study by Tendencias Digitales, there is a balance in the adoption rate of Internet by men and women. The biggest digital divide can be found between young people (100 percent adoption rate) and people over 60 (26 percent). Income level plays also a significant role, as adoption is more extended among high income levels (100 percent) than in the lowest (54 percent). Most people (75 percent) use their desktop computer, followed by their mobile phones (56 percent) and their laptops (14 percent). In 2019, the study *El consumidor digital en Venezuela*, also by Tendencias Digitales, showed that mailing, banking-related tasks, getting

information or checking social networks are the most common activities online.

Citizen journalism is quite spread, as it has been one of the only alternatives to escape from the control of the government (Ramírez, 2016), but allowing the spread of fake news or low quality contents, as we will develop in chapter Social Network. It has also increased the polarisation of the parts in conflict, as most sites can be clearly identified as supporters of one or the other side. Internet has also allowed international media to gain presence as alternative sources of information.

Social Networks

In the repressive and authoritarian context of Venezuela, social networks have become a key element in the organisation of demonstrations or social movements, as well as a source of not state-controlled information. Even though they are still very polarised and the control of the government is not completely avoided, social networks have increased the variety of opinions and widened the public discourse. Social media, as well as digital news media, have allowed a certain customisation of messages and the production of contents aimed at smaller audiences. This has fostered the appearance of media focused on specific topics such as sports, environment, religion or local matters; in this sense, the access to international networks has also increased the volume of available information and content.

Another alternative use for social networks has been to access goods in the middle of a strong shortage of almost everything. Good exchange rates or, mostly, medicines, have been very demanded, and the use of the hashtag #serviciopublico has been reported to have had a huge impact in Twitter as lots of people used it to find medicines that were not available in close drugstores.

According to the survey of Delphos, 16.1 percent of Venezuelans considered social networks their main source of political information. The survey of Hinterlaces put this figure at 18 percent, showing also how Venezuelans trust social networks (23 percent in 2018, 32 percent in 2017) more than media in general (22 percent in 2018 and 25 percent in 2017). Social media are clearly preferred by younger and wealthier groups of people.

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are becoming important communication alternatives, mainly among detractors of the government. This makes non-supporters of the government overrepresented in social networks, what might help spreading their message in the international sphere, while their voices are underrepresented in traditional media. This reason might help explaining why the use of social networks in Venezuela is over the Latin-American average. According to the Informe Latinobarómetro 2018, Facebook was used by around 70 percent of Venezuelan population, while YouTube was used by 36 percent and Twitter by 24 percent, making Venezuela a regional leader in the use of this platform. Twitter was stronger among adult users between 30 and 60 years old, while Instagram (29 percent of users) and Snapchat (5 percent), were preferred among younger people (Latinobarómetro, 2018). However, the data of the *Digital 2020* study of We Are Social and Hootsuite show that 51% of Venezuelan population over 13 can be found in Facebook, 19% in Instagram and only 5.9% in Twitter. Where both studies agree is in the existence of a remarkable male-female balance; 56 percent of Facebook users are female, what makes Venezuela one of the countries with a stronger percentage of female presence. The disparity in the figures can be explained by the different methodology of both studies, but it also shows the fluctuations of the country, with constant increases or decreases from year to year. This last aspect is partly explained because of the clash between the interest of Venezuelan population to find alternative and independent information and the difficulties (technical, censorship or economic) that they face to do so.

The biggest collateral damage of the rising of social media and so-called citizen journalism as information sources, is the rising of fake news, which have found in these platforms their biggest trampoline. In the Venezuelan context of confrontation, both sides have accused each other of using fake news and misinformation campaigns. Pro-government actors have

accused the US or other international parties of spreading fake news about Venezuela in order to force a regime change (McIlroy, 2017). At the same time, it has been common to find accusations of the use of fake news from the government, for example in official figures, in order to hide the dramatic situation of economy or society. In fact, one of the main challenges when trying to understand what happens in Venezuela is finding reliable information and differentiating it from fake, manipulated or strongly politicised one. These fake contents have not only taken place in social networks, as manipulation in the media is a common problem in all and each of them, but it has usually been social networks what has allowed them to grow and spread. Also viral contents, not necessarily fake, have been frequent, especially during moments of high tension, such as protests or demonstrations.

Opinion Makers

In a country with strongly politicised and mistrusted media and with a very negative situation for professional journalists, alternative voices have gained space in the public discourse. One of the most relevant cases are the websites or social media accounts showing the exchange rate between different currencies, mainly the US Dollar, something that the government, who fixes artificial exchange rates between the Venezuelan Bolívar and other currencies, considered illegal for 16 years, until May 2019, when the exchange of currency was liberalized, what led to a stronger presence of this type of information in many media. Some examples are the Twitter account Monitor Dolar Vzla (@monitodolarvla), Dolarizante.com, the more international site AirTM, or Dolar Today, which also includes sensationalists news, mostly against the government, quite often published by citizens instead of journalists, and with little verification or quality, sometimes being just fake news. Other sites that offer this Due to the hyperinflation and the need of international currency, this page is very popular and influential in the exchange rate that people use in their daily life, as well in opposition circles, especially for economic, financial and political information. The headquarters of this medium and the people or organizations behind it are not known.

Another page that should be mentioned here is that of the *Asamblea Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (American Popular Revolutionary Assembly), *Aporrea.org*, founded as a citizen movement to defend the achievement of socialism after the attempted coup d'état against Chávez in 2002. This political support group has evolved into a very influential digital site that clearly defends the views of the government.

Finally, although relevant in every country, in one such as Venezuela, with a strong autocratic tendency, the political leaders, especially the president, are particularly important opinion makers. According to legislation, broadcasters are forced to offer all the messages the government considers of public service. Henceforth, the use of Twitter and radio and television broadcasters by Chávez and Maduro has been highly influential in public discourse. The weekly television program *Aló Presidente*, conducted by Hugo Chávez between 1999 and 2012, is a good example. Diosdado Cabello, president of the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* (Constituent National Assembly), also conducts a TV program in the public channel VTV, called *Con el Mazo Dando*. Other voices, such as those of the opposition members Henrique Capriles or Leopoldo López, and in 2019 the one of the "interim President", Juan Guaidó, are also significant and particularly strong in social networks, with millions of followers and interactions.

It must be mentioned, before finishing this paragraph, that it is not possible to clearly separate the influence of opinion makers and the relevance of social networks that were highlighted in 1.5 due to their strong interconnection. Both social networks and opinion makers, although sometimes represent the only way to find independent information, usually show the lack of professional and reliable structures and increase the risk of a spread of fake news and disinformation.

Sources

Newspapers

- [2001](#) (national)
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- [El Aragüenho](#) (regional)
- [El Correo del Orinoco](#) (national)
- [El Mundo](#) (national, business)
- [El Universal](#) (national)
- [Líder](#) (national, sports)
- [Meridiano](#) (national, sports)
- [Panorama](#) (regional)
- [Últimas Noticias](#) (national)

Radio

- [Circuito Radial PDVSA](#)
- [Circuito Radio Venezuela](#)
- [Circuito Unión Radio](#)
- [Circuito X](#)
- [FM Center](#)
- [HOT 94](#) (from FM Center)
- [La Mega](#) (from Circuito Unión Radio)
- [Radio Caracas Radio](#)
- [Radio Nacional de Venezuela](#)
- [YVKE Mundial](#)

Television

- [Conciencia TV](#) (public, cultural)
- [Globovisión](#) (private, news)
- [Meridiano](#) (public, sports)
- [TeleSUR](#) (public, Latin-American)

- [Televen](#) (private, general)
- [TV Familia](#) (private, religious)
- [TV FNAB](#) (public, military)
- [TVes](#) (public, general)
- [Vale TV](#) (private, education, cultural and religious)
- [Venevisión](#) (private, general)
- [Venezolana de Televisión](#) (public, general)
- [ViVe](#) (public, cultural)

Digital Media

- [Caraota Digital](#)
- [Efecto Cocuyo](#)
- [El Estímulo](#)
- [El Pitazo](#)
- [La Patilla](#)
- [Prodavinci](#)
- [Runrunes](#)
- [Tal Cual](#)
- [El Nacional](#)
- [El Diario](#)
- [Crónica Uno](#)

Opinion Makers

- [Aporrea.org](#)
- [Con el mazo dando](#)
- [Dolar Today](#)
- [Dolarizante.com](#)
- [Henrique Capriles](#)
- [Leopoldo López](#)

- [Juan Guaidó](#) (Interim President)
- [Nicolás Maduro](#) (Head of the Government)

Organisations

Trade Unions

IPYS (2020) counted 518 cases in 2017, 266 in 2018 and a record of 534 cases in 2019, especially during the first three months, as the self-proclamation and international acknowledgement of Juan Guaidó as Interim President led to confrontation. Similar figures were accounted by Espacio Público (2020b), with 708 cases in 2017, 387 in 2018 and 468 in 2019, to which must be added the 161 reported in the first four months of 2020 (Espacio Público, 2020a). This shows how frequent the attacks against mass media and their professionals are, what explains why the activity and relevance of trade unions have increased. The most relevant trade union in the media sector is the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa* (National Union of Press Workers - SNTP), member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). It focuses not only on journalists, but in all workers of the media sector. Their recent activity has focused on reporting the lack of freedom, the violation of journalists' rights, the aggressions they are victims of and the shutting down of media. Their action has been connected with the one of other organisations, collaborating with other journalist and media workers' associations and also with other trade unions in the defence of workers of different fields, not only of the media. Although usually associated to left-wing movements, like the one of Chávez and Maduro in Venezuela, the SNTP has taken a very critical position as control of media became a main goal of the government, increasing repression and harassment against media and its professionals.

Journalist Associations

Similarly to trade unions, these associations have gained presence in the last years as a response to the attacks that journalists and their rights have received. Some of these organisations have become strong elements in the fight for freedom of speech and they produce some of the few statistics and information about the situation of media context.

Some of these organisations have a long history: The *Colegio Nacional de Periodistas* (National School of Journalists - CNP) was founded in 1976 as a substitution of the *Asociación Venezolana de Periodistas* (Venezuelan Association of Journalists - AVP), that had been created in 1941. This is the main professional association and is the one ensuring the free and responsible praxis of journalism in the country, ruled by the *Ley de Ejercicio del Periodismo* (Law on Journalistic Exercise) and the one in charge of its Code of Ethics (see 3.3).

The *Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa* (Inter American Press Society - SIP), acting in the whole American continent, was also created in 1926. They all have the goal of defending freedom of speech and protecting journalists in their work. With the same objective, the *Asociación de Periodistas Venezolanos en el Extranjero* (Association of Venezuelan Journalists Abroad - APEVEX) appeared in 2012 during the government of Hugo Chávez. It has played a great role in the last years after the exodus of many Venezuelans during the crisis and after many journalists of the country have left it because of its lack of freedom. All these groups are supposed to be independent from political authorities, but they can be considered critical with the authoritative and repressive behaviour of the government. In this field the role of IPYS is of great relevance.

Less relevant, but important in the chavist circles, is the *Fundación Movimiento Periodismo Necesario* (Necessary Journalism Movement Foundation - FMPN), which theoretically has the same goals as the previous ones, but it develops a much weaker and less combative agenda.

News Agencies

The main news agency in Venezuela is the *Agencia Venezolana de Noticias* (Venezuelan News Agency - AVN), created in 2005 and controlled by the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información* (Ministry of People's Power for Communication and Information) as a substitution of the previous state news agency, *Venpres*. The propagandistic style of this agency has a similar effect as in the radio, television and print media, with lots of Venezuelans losing trust in it, but still being the most relevant one due to government support.

The turbulent context in Venezuela has made the Caribbean country gain relevance in the international information scenario. The main providers of information are the international agencies present in Venezuela: Reuters, Associated Press, Associated France Press, BBC or the Spanish EFE. This relevance in the international information scenario has also brought relevance to the *Agencia Carabobeña de Noticias* (News Agency of Carabobo - ACN), born in 2009 in the Carabobo region as one of the firsts efforts in Venezuela towards digital media. Finally, private agencies such as Notimill, News Flash or Intopress closed during the last years. Especially Intopress had great relevance as a provider of independent information, mainly for regional print media.

Audience measurement organisations

The measurement of audiences is not particularly developed in Venezuela, especially after the disappearance of many of the companies in the business in the last years given the increasing weakness of the advertising and the information sector. The lack of public statistics and transparency culture have not helped this activity. There are no official or open statistics for the public, beside some academic or international studies that do not usually measure the audience of the different media. The reports of NGOs tend to focus more on the lack of freedom or in the closing of media rather than on the volume of audiences. This lack of information is currently one of the main problems of the sector in Venezuela.

There are, however, private companies that offer results under payment. The main worldwide group in this topic, Nielsen, is present in Venezuela. It is the biggest company carrying out these activities in the country, together with the equally worldwide present Comscore, more focused on digital media. We must also mention Statmark, a Venezuelan market research and audience measurement company that ceased its activities at the end of 2017. Additionally to these ones, the *Asociación Nacional de Anunciantes* (National Advertisers Association - ANDA), together with the *Federación Venezolana de Agencias de Publicidad* (Venezuelan Federation of Advertising Agencies - FEVAP), constituted a committee to check the audience and circulation figures of Venezuelan media.

Although not purely an audience measurement organisation, Hinterlaces, the first intelligence agency in Venezuela that has been accused of supporting the government, does relevant work as it studies public opinion and elaborates market researches, including analysis about media. Other important market research companies in Venezuela are Datanálisis and Consultores 21, with similar activities but a smaller interest in media than Hinterlaces, and Tendencias Digitales, with a stronger focus in market research and analysis in digital media.

Sources

Trade Unions

- [National Union of Press Workers](#) (SNTP)

Journalist Associations

- [Association of Venezuelan Journalists Abroad](#) (APEVEX)
- [Espacio Público](#)
- [Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad](#) (IPYS)
- [Inter American Press Society](#) (SIP)
- [National School of Journalists](#) (CNP)

News Agencies

- [Agencia Carabobeña de Noticias](#)
- [Agencia Venezolana de Noticias](#)
- [Associated Press](#) (AP)
- [Reuters](#)

Audience measurement organisations

- [Comscore](#)
- [Datanálisis](#)
- [Hinterlaces](#)
- [National Advertisers Association](#) (ANDA)
- [Nielsen](#)
- [Statmark](#)
- [Tendencias digitales](#)
- [Venezuelan Federation of Advertising Agencies](#) (FEVAP)

Policies

Media legislation

The authoritarian course that started during the government of Hugo Chávez has been strengthened during Nicolás Maduro's one. Three laws must be mentioned when analysing the media legislation in Venezuela: All of them have been considered censorship tools used by the government to silence dissident voices.

In 2000 the *Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones* (Organic Law of Telecommunications - LOTEL) was passed. It was modified in 2011, making it more restrictive and turning it into the excuse for the shutting down of media. It is the broader and main media legislation rule under the Constitution and it was the rule that gave the Conatel the power to control the sector of telecommunications and to ensure the compliance of this and all the laws applying to said sector (Díaz, 2018).

The *Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión* (Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television - RESORTE)

was approved by Venezuelan Parliament in 2004 under Hugo Chávez's presidency. The goal of the law was to promote the social responsibility of all the individuals of the media system and it could be applied to all content broadcasted in radio and television. One of the most polemic rules of this law is the obligation that all radio and television stations have of broadcasting the messages that the government sees necessary. The opposition, together with international organisations such as Human Rights Watch, have considered this law a 'Gag Law'. In 2010 it was modified in order to include Internet and social networks, expanding the control over digital media (Urribarrí & Díaz, 2018).

The *Ley contra el Odio, por la Convivencia Pacífica y la Tolerancia* (Law against Hate, for Pacific Coexistence and Tolerance), or simply Law against Hate, was passed in 2017 in order to control hate crimes and intolerance, with punishments of up to 20 years of prison and the closing of broadcasters. This regulation focuses particularly on online communication and social media content, as it is in the less controlled Internet where the most critics against the government or the president take place. The Parliament of Venezuela, controlled by the parties of the opposition, and now practically dissolved by the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* (National Constituent Assembly) declared the law void because of its violation of the Constitution, as well as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, but it is still being applied. The main critic against this law is the lack of definition of what hate speech is, offering the chance for possible arbitrary applications of sentences to almost 20 years of jail for hate crimes (Espacio Público, 2018a).

The Constitution nominally proclaims freedom of speech and freedom of the press and at the same time it forbids censorship. This has not prevented the promulgation of the previous laws, but it could be the basis for future less restrictive laws once/if the current authoritarianism is over. Finally, although enshrined in the Constitution and in the Law of the Superior Court, the only legislation regulating data protection in Venezuela, the *Providencia Administrativa N 171*, allows the state to access the private data of telecommunications users, including information such as photos or fingerprints of users.

These three laws, including the RESORTE, which is the one paying most attention to digital media, do not include any specificities about the issue of data protection (Privacy International, IHRC & Acceso Libre, 2016). The violation of data privacy has been a political tool, with the publication of the *Lista Tascón* (a list with the data of people who supported the destitution of President Chávez between 2003 and 2004) as an example (Patiño, 2018).

The *Ley de la Comunicación Popular* of 2015 was passed with the contribution of Venezuelan Communal Councils, which are councils of neighbours, common in rural areas, responsible for the local policies and projects. There is a Ministry among whose functions appears the coordination of these *comunas*, that promote participation of small communities in the distribution of public financing. The law regulating these Communal Councils was passed in 2009. These project has helped the development and the participation of indigenous population and women. In this context the 2015 law has promoted communitarian and alternative media that transcend the private and the state-owned media, to focus on the needs and development of smaller societies (Villalobos, 2016).

Accountability systems

Although established in the Constitution, there is no strong accountability culture in Venezuela (Narváez, 2018). Starting with the Conatel, who has not fulfilled its duty of publishing a yearly report of the financing of broadcasters since 2015, there are no national initiatives in order to ensure an accountability system for media and telecommunication companies. Some of the most active organisations in this matter are NGOs like the aforementioned *Espacio Público* and, especially, *Medianálsis*. They have been forced to partially abandon their control of how media find their sources or the quality of journalism and communication in order to focus on the defence of the rights of professionals, consumers and companies of this field, but they continue publishing reports on the Social Responsibility or the quality of journalistic activities of the media. Something similar, but to a smaller extent, happens with the professional organisations, such as CNP or IPYS. CNP, in charge of

assuring the compliance with the Code of Ethics and the Law of journalism praxis (see next chapter), plays one of the main roles in controlling the adequacy of journalism to standards of quality and responsibility.

There are also some individual proposals, like the ombudsman of the newspaper *El Nacional*, created in 1998, which is one of the oldest and most recognised experiences of this kind in Latin America (Sánchez, 2001). Nonetheless, the precarious situation of media and their lack of resources, together with the strong control from the government and the lack of tradition of accountability systems in the whole Latin American region, has made it difficult for stable accountability systems to develop in Venezuelan media.

Regulatory authorities

A distinction between official or government institutions and private and professional organisations should be made. Among the first ones we find the aforementioned Conatel, the National Telecommunications Commission, dependent on the Ministry for Communication and Information. Founded by the government in 1991, in 2000 it was appointed by the *Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones* (Organic Law on Telecommunications) as the organism that controls the application of the laws that apply to communications (mentioned in Media Legislation). It regulates the concession of broadcasting permissions too, and also produces its own norms, such as the *Norma técnica sobre los servicios de producción nacional audiovisual y otros servicios de producción audiovisual* (Technical norm about national audiovisual production services and other audiovisual production services), with a more technical and specific goal than government regulations. One of the main objectives of Conatel is the development of telecommunications services, with a particular interest in new technologies. This has been the institution responsible for the closing of media and the sanctions against journalists that have violated the norms of the *Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones* or the other laws.

Outside of the state-controlled institutions, the CNP is the responsible of the *Código de Ética del Periodista Venezolano* (Code of Ethics of Venezuelan Journalist), first published in 1973, but modified in 1988, 1997 and 2013. They also ensure the compliance with the rules of the *Ley de Ejercicio del Periodismo* (Law of Journalism Praxis), the oldest law of the profession in Venezuela and that was also promoted by this institution. One of the organisations under the umbrella of the CNP is the *Instituto de Previsión Social del Periodista* (Journalist's Social Prevision Institute - IPSP), supporting journalists in fields such as healthcare or retirement pensions.

Another code of ethics with the same title as the previously mentioned was approved in 2006 by the Ministry of Communication and Information. Both codes have a similar content, not very different from the one of international codes of ethics in the field. These two texts, together with the *Ley de Ejercicio del Periodismo*, although relevant for journalists, have lost strength as the telecommunications laws of the government were being approved. The two norms supported by the CNP are used by professionals as an argument against the arbitrary and authoritarian decisions of the government, based on its appliance of telecommunications laws.

Sources

- [Ethics Code](#)
- [Law Against Hate](#)
- [Law of Journalism Praxis](#)
- [Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television](#) (RESORTE)
- [Medianálisis](#)
- [National Commission of Telecommunications](#) (Conatel)
- [Organic Law of Telecommunications](#) (Lotel)

Education

Universities and schools

Since the foundation in 1946 of the first *Escuela Nacional de Periodismo* (National School of Journalism) in Caracas with a president's order by Rómulo Betancourt, the Journalism Degree has become essential for the praxis of journalism (Arcila et al, 2016). There are currently 13 universities offering journalism bachelor degrees in Venezuela, five of them public and the other nine, private; from all these the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) and the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (UCAB) are the most relevant ones. These degrees are estimated to last five years, except in the *Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Bolivarian University of Venezuela), created in 2003 by President Chávez to form professionals that can help achieving the goals of the “state communicator”, where it is a 4-year degree. A study conducted in 2016 in some of these universities shows that students tend to rate the quality of these degrees positively (Arcila et al, 2016).

There are master programs in journalism or different fields of communication with more specific goals. According to their economic possibilities, most universities and journalists' associations, such as the CNP, IPYS or the IPSP, usually in collaboration with some media, offer different workshops, seminars or courses, often about digital and online journalism. These courses are aimed at students but sometimes also at professors, and the most demanded ones have a focus in community managing techniques or digital writing, as they are considered most useful for the professional future. They are mostly in person, as Internet and telecommunications are not reliable to carry out courses. That explanation is also valid for online degrees: There are some possibilities to study journalism online, but the face-to-face option is preferred by a vast majority.

Minorities, mainly constituted by indigenous groups, do not receive any particular attention in journalism studies, but it must be highlighted that, even if it does not offer any courses related with journalism, there is a university especially designed for indigenous people in Venezuela, the *Universidad Indígena de Venezuela* (Indigenous University of Venezuela). In any case, indigenous groups, although less present in universities, usually located in big cities, do not have extra barriers to access university or later to develop a career in the media. The provenance, gender or income level of students and professors do not play a relevant role either, as they are usually quite proportionally distributed. However, there exists a slight majority of female and middle class students (Arcila et al, 2016).

Professional development

It is essential to have a degree in the field in order to work as a journalist, what makes all students that want a future job in a journalism-related position to enroll in a bachelor degree. However, the complex situation of journalism and, in general,

economy in the country has made it hard for many graduated journalists to find a job as journalists, which has compelled many journalism graduates to emigrate; the professional perspectives abroad are better than those inside the country but the possible professional paths are similar and, although journalism is still the main professional alternative after a journalistic degree, there are different fields that are followed by these graduates. Audiovisual artistic professions related with cinema, documentaries or the big telenovelas market are also common.

Journalistic degrees are called *comunicación social* (social communication), giving an idea of the broader perspective of these careers. This makes graduated students also ready for a profession in the communication teams of companies: corporate or internal communication, marketing or public relations and external communication. This connects with one of the main alternatives, as many people lead their careers towards advertising, as there are almost no official university studies about this topic. Recently, and due to the strong component of digital and online communication, as well as social networks in those studies, a new path for students of this degrees are computer- and Internet-related jobs such as webmaster, community manager, consultant, etc. Finally, there has been an increase in the number of journalistic graduates becoming teachers or professors not only in their own communication and information fields, but also in topics such as linguistics or drafting, as they are important elements of the job or the studies of a journalist. Most of these jobs, just like those in the field of journalism, are usually badly or underpaid. This applies to most sectors, but is particularly true in this one.

Being this the professional development, some of the most important subjects are related with audiovisual content or with marketing and corporate communication. However, students of journalism degrees prefer a career in traditional media rather than in online journalism or other communication-related positions (Arcila et al, 2016).

Media Development Organisations

Organisations like the aforementioned IPYS, CNP and SIP, along with NGOs *Espacio Público* and *Medianálisis* constitute some of the most respected voices in the analysis of the media scenario in Venezuela and their record of violations of freedom of speech are used by other media, both in Venezuela and abroad to prove the attacks that press receives in this country. All these groups fight for a free press that, currently, does not exist in Venezuela. The adverse conditions and the need to form a joint front has made them (at least partially) lose their particularities and carry out similar activities. They can all be considered critical with the government and have a strong relevance in the journalistic panorama, reporting attacks against journalists and defending their rights. They also organise conferences, debates or courses, but their main activity is the production of reports and researches.

The *Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos* (National Association of Communitarian, Free and Alternative Media - ANMCLA), appeared in 2002 to help community media, making Venezuela a leader in the matter. Radio stations have been the most popular among community media. These media have not escaped from censorship and government influence, but they have not been harassed or made illegal like other media (Romero-Rodríguez, Torres-Toukourmidis and Aguaded, 2017). These media have been particularly relevant in small and in indigenous communities; an example could be *Catía TVe*, the first of these experiences, a TV station born in 2001 in a neighbourhood in Caracas. These communitarian media, when belonging to an indigenous community, are required to use of the native language according to the *Ley de Idiomas Indígenas* (Law of Indigenous Languages).

Additionally, there are some foundations, some of them international, such as the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, or human rights organisations, like Provea, with a strong focus in the area of communication, that also support and defend free and independent media in Venezuela. They have also collaborated with the aforementioned organisations.

Sources

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- [Universidad Bicentenario de Aragua](#)
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- [Universidad Dr. Rafael Belloso Chacín](#)
- [Universidad Fermín Toro](#)
- [Universidad Monteávila](#)
- [Universidad Nacional Experimental de Los Llanos Centrales Rómulo Gallegos](#)
- [Universidad Santa María](#)

Telecommunications

Mobile network ecosystem

Due to the decrease in GDP, the extended poverty in Venezuela and the millions of people leaving the country, the number of mobile lines fell by 11.2 percent in 2017, continuing the decreasing tendency started in 2014, whereas fixed-line subscribers dropped by 22 percent (BuddeComm, 2018). These figures have continued dropping, and by 2019 only 60.57% of population used mobile lines and there existed only 17.07 lines of fixed telephone for every 100 inhabitants (Conatel, 2019).

Long Term Evolution (LTE) was developed in Venezuela only in 2017 after long delays due the impossibility to purchase equipment from foreign suppliers and the poor condition of infrastructures. The state-owned company CANTV and its filial Movilnet, have spread this technology and fibre cabling, increasing the number of people for whom these services are available (BuddeComm, 2017). However, the lack of resources both of companies and users has made these efforts insufficient, and most Venezuelans report problems in their connectivity, while others cannot afford spending money in telecommunications or mobile devices. According to the figures of Conatel, in the second quarter of 2019 this service was available for 18.47 percent of mobile phone users, but IPYS stated that only 8 of the 23 states (34.7 percent) in Venezuela can access 4G services. As an average, the speed of Internet connection in the country is 1.8 Mbps (IPYS, 2019), the second slowest of the Latin-American and Caribbean region after Paraguay. This helps explaining why cybercafés, even though they do not hold a dominant position as they did in the past, are still used by 14 percent of Venezuelans to access Internet (Tendencias Digitales, 2018).

This is partly explained because the infrastructure is old and underdeveloped. One reason for that is the lack of investments of the companies, with much more urgent debts and in a very weak position after years of decreasing their revenue. Another reason is the impossibility to access international supplies, services and currencies, what makes international investments

and contracts harder. The lack of international currency affects also international phone calls and the access to international TV channels (Lucas, 2016).

Despite the rising interest in these services, Urribarrí and Díaz (2018) expect penetration rate of mobile connectivity to be around 51 percent in 2020. The prices of telecommunication services, that Conatel had forbidden to rise until November 2016, have been going up since, including the ones of the state-owned CANTV, who rose almost a 400 percent their prices in November 2017 (*El Nacional*, 2017) and over 15,000 percent in August 2018, according to *Últimas Noticias*: this has made it difficult for many people to pay for these services, but it has not helped telecom companies, mainly private ones, to cope with revenue shrinkages. Something similar happens with mobile devices, whose price are hard to estimate in the Venezuelan scenario of hyperinflation, but they are, like many other technological devices, very hard to afford for most of the population. The main problem with these prices is the comparison with the wages in Venezuela; for example, a standard connection in a house could be around one third of the minimum wage and many people cannot afford it. However, these prices are extremely low in comparison with other countries, and according to the real exchange that price translated into US dollars would be minimum.

The investment of the state in this field, via its own companies, has helped spreading Internet and mobile communication through the country, making it available for most people. All this makes telecommunications more or less equally distributed along Venezuelan geography. There are, however, differences, as some rural areas still show the slowest Internet speeds of the country and mountains zones have very limited access to telecommunications. LTE services are available almost exclusively in cities.

Company profiles

The main companies providing telecommunication services are CANTV, Movistar, Digitel, Inter, NetUno and Supercable, most of them present in the Internet, mobile and TV branches. The biggest of them is CANTV, the state-owned company, with a market share over 66 percent –reaching more than 91 percent of the fixed telephone lines– (Conatel, 2019); the quality of their services, with frequent cuts of the service and complaints from users, has arose criticism. It has also been accused of blocking certain pages or contents, in what has been considered another form of censorship. Most companies are based in Caracas and, although they are present in the whole country, in some small rural areas the only telecom provider is CANTV (Díaz; in Avendaño, 2018). A few smaller groups, like CIX, in the Monagas state, operate beside these national ones. We can define the system as an oligopoly, something that is even clearer in the mobile network market, controlled by only three companies: Movilnet, Movistar and Digitel. CANTV is also present in this market with its subsidiary Movilnet, with almost 40 percent market share, although it has been replaced as the leader of this market by Telefónica (43.5% of the market at the end of the second quarter of 2019 according to Conatel). This three companies are also the only ones present in the market of mobile internet connection.

Hyperinflation and the decrease of lines due to the poverty of Venezuelans have made telecommunication companies, especially private ones, drop their revenues and this has stopped their investments in order to improve or expand their services. The nationalisation of CANTV, the strongest and most supported by the state, as well as price limitations, make the other companies compete in a position of disadvantage.

Finally, a bill passed in 2017 by Conatel (the *Providencia Administrativa N 171* mentioned in Media legislation), substituting one of 2005, forces providers of mobile services to store personal data, such as photos or fingerprints of users, and share them with the State (Urribarrí & Díaz, 2018). This is another measure that ensures state control over the population.

Main trends

Two main trends should be highlighted in the field of telecommunications in Venezuela: First, the booming use of social networks and messaging apps, especially Twitter and WhatsApp, as information sources, fields in which Venezuela is leader among Latin-American countries (Rodríguez & Fernández, 2017); and second, the use of Internet for banking activities, placing the online sites of banks in Venezuela among the most visited pages (Espinoza, 2018) and with 89% of the users of internet conducting banking activities online. They are both explained by the social, political and economic crisis of the country. The lack of confidence in traditional media has made Venezuelans look for information in channels that are harder to control, such as the two mentioned. At the same time, the lack of cash and hyperinflation has forced population to use Internet even for the smallest transactions and purchases. These trends are less common in rural areas and among older or underprivileged population.

The deficiencies in the telecommunications infrastructure and connectivity are avoiding a further development of these services. And it also explains the deceleration, or even decrease, of Internet and mobile phone penetration rates, unlike most countries in the world.

A last trend, or rather a particularity of the Venezuelan context, is the different approaches shown by the two groups in which the population can be split, those for and those against the government; as it is, government supporters tend to adopt a more optimistic perspective, also in what affects telecommunications, acknowledging the developments in the introduction of new technologies and services, while government critics offer a more negative view of the situation, complaining about the lack of investments and development in this field. This is a raw simplification that aims to show how the polarisation and politicisation of the country also affects the behaviours and views about the telecommunication system.

Mobile coverage

The rural and mountain areas of the inner part of the country are still those with a weaker mobile network coverage, and in some of these zones only one provider, usually the state-owned one, is available. In these places it is more common to have cuts in the line, due to natural phenomena or vandalism, and they usually take longer to be repaired. Nonetheless, big cities, including the capital Caracas, are not excluded from these fails in the lines, as the whole infrastructure is generally deficient. Electricity blackouts are also very common in the whole country but more in rural areas, making regular connectivity impossible.

In general, the digital divide between rural and urban areas is very strong. Some small villages have neither fixed nor mobile phone connectivity and this digital divide has been increasing in the last years, according to Freedom House. Some states and regions with a stronger portion of rural population, such as the Amazonas, show lower mobile penetration rates. This has also affected some groups, like indigenous people, as they usually live in more or less isolated parts of the country which are often not connected.

Mobile ownership

The official figures from Conatel show that in the second quarter of 2019 there existed less than 61 active mobile lines for every 100 inhabitants, after years of constant decrease in the number of mobile lines in the country, which had reached a penetration rate over 100 percent. According to the same figures, 12,747,926 people own a smartphone. Pew Research Center (in Mediatelecom Policy & Law, 2018) placed the penetration rate of smartphones at 38 percent, placing Venezuela among the least advanced countries in this aspect, even though when this technology was appearing Venezuela was

expected to be one of the Latin American leaders.

According to information from *Tendencias Digitales (2018)*, 56 percent of Internet users in Venezuela connect using their mobile phones in 2018, while We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020) consider this figure to be 24.7% at the end of 2019. Despite the difference, both agree that this figure has been increasing in the last years, especially thanks to the use of social networks and, mainly, the mobile banking and payment systems, that have substituted cash in a hyperinflationary context. That is, smartphones have had a significant effect in society, greater than that of normal mobile phones. Disaggregated data about the use of mobile phones are not easy to access and, when they exist, they are usually available under purchase from private companies.

Income level defines the strongest digital divide. There have been efforts from the government to reduce this divide and to make mobile and Internet network available for everybody. Some measures where the nationalisation of companies, the legal limitations of prices - which at the same time made it very complicated for companies to survive - and the distribution of mobile phones with strong price reductions among underprivileged people by Movilnet. Nevertheless the connection problems were not solved, the quality is still low and the prices, due to hyperinflation, have continued going up, so many people may access the network but cannot afford it. These measures are over now, but they have proved negative for private companies, that must struggle to compete in unequal conditions. They have also led to slower Internet and mobile connections due to the lack of investment and renovation of the infrastructure, which is not made for such a big network.

Sources

- [CANTV](#)
- [Digitel](#)
- [Inter](#)
- [Movilnet](#)
- [Movistar](#)
- [NetUno](#)
- [Supercable](#)

Innovation

Landscape analysis

Innovation in Venezuela is regulated by the *Ley Orgánica de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación* (Organic Law of Science, Technology and Innovation - LOCTI), passed in 2005. In that year the *Plan Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación* (National Plan of Science, Technology and Innovation - PNCTI) was also approved, promoting the development and investment in this field between 2005 and 2030. There was a clear willing to make advances and some positive ideas on how to do it, like the chance of companies of reducing their taxes if they invested in innovation, but so far these measures did not work out. The public institution in charge of ensuring this plan and the one regulating the science, technology and innovation system is the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación Universitaria, Ciencia y Tecnología* (Ministry of University Education, Science and Technology - FONACIT). The *Fondo Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación* (National Fond of Science, Technology and Innovation) is the funding institution according to said law (Artigas, Useche & Queipo, 2016). Despite the important tradition and impulse given to innovation in the past, the current social, political and economic crisis in

Venezuela have made innovative processes almost disappear. Some authors add also a lack of innovative culture in Venezuela as an explanation for not having greater technological innovation (Arenas, Colina & de Adrianza, 2015).

There are many more urgent necessities that prevent large investments, both from the government and from private companies, in innovation and technology. As detailed in the chapter Telecommunications (Company profiles), there are many companies unable to invest in developing technology as it is already hard for them to survive. The important role of China as the main investor in the country must be mentioned, as it has allowed some of the few developments in the fields of technology and energy (Di Stasio, 2018; Grabendorff, 2018).

Despite being still underdeveloped in comparison to other countries, some of the areas in which innovation is stronger in Venezuela are online banking and telecommunications. Also the oil industry, essential in Venezuela, is object of important investments, even if its production in comparison with other countries is much smaller. An important technology is cryptocurrency, with the Petro which is the Venezuelan cryptocurrency associated to the price of oil, actually one of the main strategies of the government to get international currency and escape the international blockade. Blockchain technologies are, therefore, important in the innovation scenario in Venezuela and have an appreciable effect on the economy and society of the country (Bermúdez, 2018), and so have the online banking technologies. But none of them are in the top of their class and their use is still politicised and should be improved and extended.

This politicisation of innovation is what raises the level of skepticism, as anti-government groups distrust phenomena like the introduction of the cryptocurrency Petro, while supporters of the government tend not to rely on the scientific advances coming from critical groups in universities and research centres or from international organisations. Beside this always present political division, access to technology is generally equally distributed in the country.

Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons

Innovation, research and technological development are at minimum levels in Venezuela already for several years (Martínez, 2018). Explanation might be found in the lack of resources of universities, the main founder and location of the innovation system, together with the emigration of thousands of researchers; these two arguments are simply the materialisation of the economic, social and political crisis of Venezuela. The application of regulations, usually with political goals, has also harmed innovation (Gutiérrez, 2016). At the same time, the socialist approach of Venezuela has led innovation, technology and science towards projects of social development and inclusion (Casas, Corona & Rivera, 2013).

The most common innovation efforts are made by universities and their technological parks. We can then affirm that innovation is not restricted to certain groups, but the strong polarisation and politicisation of these institutions, both by the government and opposition supporters does offer an ideological barrier for certain groups, forms or lines of innovation and investigation.

The oldest and most relevant technological innovation centres in Venezuela are the *Parque Tecnológico Sartenejas*, connected to the Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, the *Parque Tecnológico Universitario del Zulia*, belonging to the Zulian University in Maracaibo, the *Parque Tecnológico de Mérida*, created by the University of Los Andes in Mérida or the *Parque Tecnológico de Barquisimeto*, associated to the Universidad Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado in Barquisimeto. Together with these ones should be mentioned the *Centro Nacional de Tecnologías de Información* (National Centre of Technologies of Information - CNTI), belonging to the Ministry of University Education, Science and Technology, which is in charge mainly of the technological update of state institutions.

There are some collaboration experiences between these institutions and between different universities. The *Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Ciencia y la Tecnología* (Foundation for the Development of Science and Technology - FUNDACITE)

offers experiences of scientific and technological knowledge exchange in each of the different regions of the country, but there is not a national specific plan to coordinate their activities or to facilitate info sharing in general. There exist also awards, conferences and grants, but they are often used with political goals, what brakes technology and innovation, as they require a free environment to advance and develop.

Sources

- [Foundation for the Development of Science and Technology](#) (FUNDACITE)
- [Ministry of University Education, Science and Technology](#)
- [National Centre of Technologies of Information](#) (CNTI)
- [National Science, Innovation and Technology Awards](#)
- [Parque Tecnológico de Barquisimeto](#)
- [Parque Tecnológico de Mérida](#)
- [Parque Tecnológico Sartenejas](#)
- [Parque Tecnológico Universitario del Zulia](#)

Traditional forms of communication

Summary

The control of media by the government or the lack of access to reliable informative sources for some people have made journalists find alternative ways to communicate, returning to analogical options. One of the ideas came from *El Pitazo*, a very popular news portal. The impossibility to use Internet in some rural or remote zones made journalists of the portal go to these places with a vehicle-mounted loudspeaker and share information; they use WhatsApp or SMS too as alternative channels of communication. Another alternative, nominated for the Gabriel García Márquez Journalism Award in the Innovation category, was *El Bus TV*, a group of journalists going into buses and reading news out loud behind a carton frame simulating a TV.

The reunions around sports, such as football (soccer) or baseball, are relevant as they have the capacity to congregate large amounts of people. The government also often uses sport figures, especially the national teams, for its political goals. Also the Catholic Church can be considered a political actor, as long as many of its leaders have rejected the ideas of the government, openly criticising the government and the lack of freedom of the country (Ramos, 2018). In a still very religious country (98 percent of Venezuelans self-define as Catholics), these voices are particularly strong, although inside of the religious community there are also bishops and priests that support the government (Calisa, 2018). The sermons during religious events have been sometimes used like political speeches for both sides.

The communication established in demonstrations, assemblies, political rallies or strikes is of great relevance. Many Venezuelans consider it a source of information (Rodríguez & Fernández, 2017) and in a country in which media are not trusted and telecommunications are deficient, personal communication gains relevance. Additionally, the strong polarisation of society makes it easier and more common to establish contact with people with similar ideas that attend the same political or protest events.

Finally, the *Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela* (National System of Youths' and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela), also known as *El Sistema* is a project founded in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu so that music and

musical education would become a tool for development of young people and for serving as a way to escape poverty and criminality. Their concerts in the best halls of the world, their international awards and the orchestras and choir developed from it, have made *El Sistema* one of the most successful development tools in Venezuela and one of its most recognised experiences worldwide. The successful Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel started his musical career in El Sistema, but he has criticised the political use the government has made of it, leading to the cancellation of his tour with this orchestra by President Maduro (Santander & Moreno, 2017). Even though there is a certain use of this system as a propaganda tool, the intervention of the government has been smaller than in most spheres of society and communication, making this musical project one of the few reasons for pride and connection in Venezuela.

Sources

- [Catia TVe](#)
- [El Bus TV](#)
- [El Pitazo](#)
- [El Sistema](#)

Conclusions

Conclusion

A survey conducted by DatinCorp in December 2017 showed that 64 percent of Venezuelans expected the situation of the country to get worse in the following months. The events of 2018 and, mostly, the political instability that increased in 2019 have proved them right, and the first months of 2020 have not offered the conditions for any improvement, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Trust in media, especially traditional ones, continues its decrease; only Twitter and WhatsApp have won relevance compared to other platforms as they are harder to control from the government or from other groups. It is precisely control from the government or its supporters that creates one of the main challenges for media landscape in Venezuela, as the buying off of critical and independent media, adverse legislation, censorship and violation of journalists' rights keep taking place and silencing dissident voices, leading others to self-censorship. The worst part of this is the closing of media, mainly small groups and print media that are also affected by the shortage of newsprint, but also radio and television stations and more recently digital media as well; these closings, that are explained by political and economic reasons, have clearly diminished plurality and quality of information access. For these reasons, the action of professional associations and trade unions will continue being essential in their fight for a free press.

Media and the two main political groups will stay strongly interconnected in a very polarised and politicised context in which independent voices are hard to hear. All this, together with the rise of alternative channels that try to escape from this division, could help the already strong presence of fake news, disinformation strategies and echo chambers. And again, this would keep trust in the media going down, making it very difficult to leave this spiral. These problematics affect the population of Venezuela more or less equally; in general, rural, old and less wealthy people have it harder to get plural and reliable information and communication services, but the distribution of poverty and lack of goods does not show big differences, reaching almost everybody.

As long as the political and economic crisis and the lack of freedom for journalists persist, the media scenario will hardly improve. The same applies for technological innovation and for the development of mobile and digital infrastructure and of services and education in the field of communication.

The changes in the political arena, with Maduro's government in his weakest position and strongly confronted with neighbor countries such as Colombia or the USA, the constant risk of a civil war and the still unknown consequences of the coronavirus situation, can affect all the previously analysed scenario; however, not many big changes are expected soon in the deteriorated media landscape of Venezuela.

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