

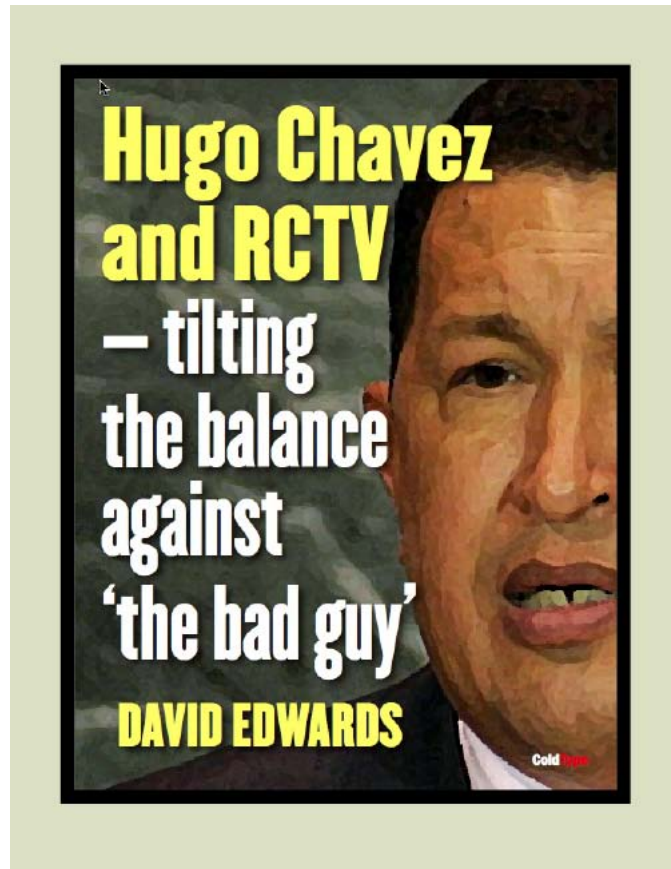


Hugo Chavez and RCTV

– tilting
the balance
against
‘the bad guy’

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Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez

has long been demonised by the Western media as a “leftist firebrand” (The Independent), “Venezuela’s demagogue” (Washington Post), and as a “militaristic strongman” (Financial Times).

No surprise, then, that Chavez’s decision not to renew the licence of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) has elicited outrage across Britain and America. In an article titled, “He is losing the country’s respect”, Catherine Philp wrote in the Times:

“The move has fuelled accusations that Mr Chavez is moving towards an increasingly authoritarian rule and is quashing dissent against his ‘socialist revolution’.” (Philp, “He is losing the country’s respect”, The Times, May 29, 2007)

The Washington Post described the action as an attempt to silence opponents, supplying further “proof” that Chávez is a “dictator”. (FAIR, Media Advisory, ‘Coup Co-Conspirators as Free-Speech Martyrs - Distorting the Venezuelan media story,’ May 25, 2007; <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=3107>)

One might think from these comments that Chavez is indeed behaving like a stereotypical “strongman”. So why is he refusing to renew the licence?

According to CNN reporter TJ Holmes the motive lies in the fact that RCTV “has been critical of his government” (Ibid). The Associated Press also stressed that RCTV “has been critical of Chávez”. (Ibid) A Guardian headline carried the same emphasis: “Chavez silences critical TV station – and robs the people of their soaps.” (Rory Carroll, The Guardian, May 23, 2007) A Financial Times news report was titled: “Chavez pulls plug on dissenting TV station.” (Benedict Mander, Financial Times, May 9, 2007)

These and similar claims have given the impression that Chavez is simply crushing

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dissent. An Independent leader came closer to the truth:

“President Chavez has long detested RCTV, accusing it of helping to incite a coup against him in 2002.” (Leader, ‘A show of intolerance,’ The Independent, May 30, 2007)

As this suggests, the problem with RCTV does not revolve around political differences with Chavez; it revolves around RCTV’s attempts to overthrow the democratically elected government of Venezuela.

A consistent theme of media reporting has been to ascribe this “accusation” to Chavez personally. Thus the Independent wrote of the “station, which Mr Chavez believes was plotting against him”. (‘Anti-Chavez protesters clash with police,’ The Independent, May 29, 2007)

The Times reported: “President Chavez withdrew its licence, accusing the network of ‘coup plotting’”. (Philp, op. cit)

Likewise the Financial Times: “Chavez has repeatedly alleged that it supported the [2002] coup...” (Richard Lapper, ‘TV channel axed in latest Chavez drama,’ Financial Times, May 26, 2007)

And the BBC: “He [Chavez] says they were involved in a coup that nearly toppled him five years ago.” (James Ingham, ‘Venezuelans protest over TV issue,’ BBC Online, May 27, 2007; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/americas/6695769.stm>)

These media reports thus all distort the truth by attributing a mere “claim” to Chavez, someone they have all previously demonised as an authoritarian “strong-man”. This earlier demonisation acts to undermine the credibility of the charge against RCTV in readers’ minds, so reinforcing the bias of ostensibly balanced reporting against the Venezuelan government. Robert McChesney and Mark Weisbrot explain:

“This is a common means of distorting the news: a fact is reported as accusation, and then attributed to a source that the press has done everything to discredit.” (McChesney and Weisbrot, ‘Venezuela and the Media: Fact and Fiction,’ Common Dreams, June 1, 2007; <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/06/01/1607/>)

Consider, for example, that the BBC’s Ben Brown said of Saddam Hussein:

“He claims UN sanctions have reduced many of his citizens to near starvation – pictures like these [of a malnourished baby and despairing mother] have been a powerful propaganda weapon for Saddam, which he’ll now have to give up.” (Brown, BBC News, June 20, 1996)

And ITN’s John Draper:

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“The idea now is targeted or ‘smart’ sanctions to help ordinary people while at the same time preventing the Iraqi leader from blaming the West for the hardships they’re suffering.” (Draper, ITN, 22:30 News, February 20, 2001)

And the Observer:

“The Iraqi dictator says his country’s children are dying in their thousands because of the West’s embargoes.” (John Sweeney, ‘How Saddam “staged” fake baby funerals,’ The Observer, June 23, 2002)

Viewed from the perspective of honest reporting, the opinion of Saddam Hussein – a thoroughly demonised and non-credible source – was irrelevant to an analysis of the effects of sanctions. A range of very credible reports from the United Nations, aid agencies and human rights groups all blamed mass death in Iraq on sanctions. These were the views that mattered for anyone who cared about the truth.

Likewise, it is a simple fact, not a claim, that RCTV was deeply complicit in the 2002 military coup – and the views of the West’s Venezuelan bete noire should be placed front and centre only if we are content for media demonisation to undermine this truth.

A climate of transition – overthrowing Chavez

In a rare example of media honesty, the Los Angeles Times reported at the end of May that RCTV had initially been focused on providing entertainment:

“But after Chavez was elected president in 1998, RCTV shifted to another endeavour: ousting a democratically elected leader from office.” (Bart Jones, ‘Hugo Chavez versus RCTV – Venezuela’s oldest private TV network played a major role in a failed 2002 coup,’ Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2007; <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-jones30may30,1,5553603.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>)

Controlled by members of the country’s ruling elite, including station chief Marcel Granier, the channel saw Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” in defence of Venezuela’s poor as a threat to established privilege and wealth.

Thus, for two days before the April 11, 2002 coup, RCTV cancelled regular programming and instead ran constant coverage of a general strike aimed at ousting Chavez. A stream of commentators delivered fierce criticism of the president with no response allowed from the government. RCTV also ran non-stop adverts encouraging people to attend an April 11 march aimed at toppling the government and broadcast blanket coverage of the event. When the march ended in violence, RCTV ran manipulated video footage falsely blaming Chavez supporters for the many deaths and injuries.

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On the same day, RCTV allowed leading coup plotter Carlos Ortega to call for demonstrators to march on the presidential palace. After the overthrow appeared to have succeeded, another coup leader, Vice-Admiral Victor Ramírez Pérez, told a journalist: "We had a deadly weapon: the media. And now that I have the opportunity, let me congratulate you." Another grateful leader remarked: "I must thank Venevisión and RCTV." (Fair, op. cit)

RCTV news director Andres Izarra later testified at National Assembly hearings on the coup attempt that he had received clear orders from superiors at the station:

"Zero pro-Chavez, nothing related to Chavez or his supporters... The idea was to create a climate of transition and to start to promote the dawn of a new country." (Bart Jones, op. cit)

While the streets of Caracas erupted with public outrage against the coup, RCTV turned a blind eye and showed soap operas, cartoons and old movies instead.

On April 13, 2002, RCTV's Marcel Granier and other media moguls met in the Miraflores palace to offer their support to the country's new dictator, Pedro Carmona who, at a stroke, demolished Venezuela's democratic institutions - eliminating the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and the Constitution.

Finally, when Chávez returned to power (April 13, 2002), the commercial stations again refused to cover the news.

In a leader titled, 'Chavez clampdown: Closing TV station is part of pattern of authoritarianism,' the Financial Times observed in May:

"The closure limits freedom of expression and reflects the arbitrary and authoritarian approach that has come to characterise Mr Chavez's government. In a region where the media have been becoming more open in recent years after the dark period of military rule in the 1970s and 1980s, this is a backward and worrying step." (Leader, Financial Times, May 29, 2007)

The irony is bitter indeed. It was a "backward and worrying step" of exactly this kind that RCTV attempted to impose on Venezuela by means of a military coup. As the coup appeared to have succeeded in April 2002, the Financial Times helped create "a climate of transition" for British readers:

"But while the Chavez administration was hobbled by inefficiency, a lack of support across class lines and an inability to tackle the country's economic problems and rising crime rate, it was Mr Chavez's overbearing and authoritarian style that analysts said transformed the public's resigned acceptance of an ineffectual government into an active desire among a majority to see it removed." (Richard Lapper and Andy Webb-Vidal, 'Militaristic president falls victim to military

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revolt,' Financial Times, April 13, 2002)

As for the Venezuelan media's involvement in this "backward and worrying step", the Financial Times had no complaints, other than to comment:

"An example of Mr Chavez's militaristic style has been his confrontational relationship with the local media, particularly television. On Tuesday, when the business sector and union confederation began what was then a 24-hour strike, the state began interrupting broadcasts that showed the success of the work stoppage with turgid interviews with ministers and old video footage of oil wells operating normally." (Andy Webb-Vidal, 'Chavez tests limits of nation's patience,' Financial Times, April 12, 2002)

The liberal media - often considered great bastions of democracy and honest reporting - queued up to present the overthrow of Chavez as an inevitable response to his alienating authoritarianism and multiple failures. With Chavez apparently gone for good, Alex Bellos wrote in the Guardian of "the leftwing firebrand":

"Mr Chavez was elected in 1998 on a wave of popular support and quickly established a reputation as Latin America's most charismatic leader. But his popularity plummeted as he antagonised almost every sector of society and failed to improve the lot of the poor."

Bellos concluded:

"Mr Chavez polarised the country by his attacks on the media and Roman Catholic church leaders, his refusal to consult with business chiefs and his failed attempt to assert control on the unions. The US accused his government of provoking the crisis by ordering its supporters to fire on peaceful demonstrators." (Alex Bellos, 'Ousted Chavez detained by army,' The Guardian, April 13, 2002)

In fact it turned out that the US had conspired with the coup plotters to overthrow the government. Likewise, Chavez supporters had been *defending* themselves against sniper attack. The Venezuelan media had misrepresented film footage to present the required version of events.

In similar vein, the Independent wrote of Chavez:

"His authoritarian style, his friendship with Fidel Castro and his inability to reverse Venezuela's 20-year slide into poverty and corruption, took their toll on his popularity ratings... Convinced he was embarked on a 'Bolivarian revolution', inspired by the ideals of his hero, independence leader Simon Bolivar, Mr Chavez was messianic in his fervour. He alienated every organised group from the former leftist guerrillas of Bandera Roja to the employers' federation, Fedecamaras." (Phil Gunson, 'Deposed Chavez to be exiled as anti-coup rebels

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speak out,' The Independent on Sunday, April 14, 2002)

And the Observer weighed in:

"In almost four years in office Chavez alienated most sections of Venezuelan society and was fast becoming as much of an irritant to the US as Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader."

The conclusion:

"His popularity waned in recent months as he became more autocratic, pushing through constitutional changes and alienating former supporters. He exasperated many Venezuelans by implementing economic policies by decree, and accused the news media and Roman Catholic leaders of conspiring to overthrow him." (Faisal Islam, 'Venezuelan civil war fears as ousted president leaves,' The Observer, April 14, 2002)

Even after days of non-stop media broadcasts had succeeded in working for the overthrow of Chavez, for this Observer journalist talk of a media conspiracy remained merely Chavez's accusation.

The opinions of these ostensibly well-informed, highly-trained professional journalists were instantly rubbished by the vast popular uprising that restored Chavez to power, and in the longer term by Chavez's eleven election wins in nine years. In truth the coup was a class-based revolt by and for privileged elites, led by Pedro Carmona who, as the BBC reported, was "head of Venezuela's biggest business organisation, Fedecamaras". Carmona, it was, who "marshalled business and trade union opposition to Mr. Chavez's economic policies". ('Profile: Pedro Carmona,' BBC Online, May 27, 2002; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1927678.stm>)

Genuine attacks on free speech that go unnoticed

A May 30 Independent leader declared:

"RCTV was the sole opposition-aligned station with a national reach. Now it has gone. All governments need media opposition to keep them honest. But it appears that President Chavez does not have much time for this concept." (Leader, 'A show of intolerance,' The Independent, May 30, 2007)

Refusing to renew the licence of a TV channel complicit in the demolition of democracy described above is somehow "a show of intolerance" for the Independent. In fact RCTV has not "gone" - it is being allowed to continue operating by satellite and cable.

The Venezuela Information Centre (VIC) notes:

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“In Britain, TV and radio must adhere to the Broadcasting Code which embodies objectives that Parliament set down in the Communications Act of 2003. This states that ‘Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder must not be included in television or radio services’ and that ‘Broadcasters must use their best endeavours so as not to broadcast material that could endanger lives.’ RCTV’s role in the coup would have clearly violated these laws.” (‘The truth about RCTV – a VIC briefing,’ http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=186&Itemid=29)

FAIR also makes the obvious point: “Were a similar event to happen in the U.S., and TV journalists and executives were caught conspiring with coup plotters, it’s doubtful they would stay out of jail, let alone be allowed to continue to run television stations, as they have in Venezuela.” (FAIR, op. cit)

The BBC reported: “The decision to close RCTV has received international condemnation, including from the EU, press freedom groups, Chile and the US, which urged Mr Chavez to reverse the closure.” (‘Venezuela head in new TV warning,’ BBC Online, May 29, 2007; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/americas/6702965.stm>)

Almost unmentioned anywhere in the media are the statements of support made by a number of countries and leaders, such as Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil. The BBC report cited RCTV’s general manager Marcel Granier who described the “closure” as “abusive” and “arbitrary” – not a word was written of Granier’s role in the 2002 coup.

In a letter published in the Guardian (May 26, 2007), Gordon Hutchinson of VIC noted that despite claims made by opponents of Chavez, there is no censorship in Venezuela, where 95% of the media is fiercely opposed to the government. This includes five privately owned TV channels controlling 90% of the market. All of the country’s 118 newspaper companies, both regional and national, are held in private hands, as are 706 out of 709 radio stations.

While the British and American press focus intensely on the alleged crushing of free speech in Venezuela, little is written about comparable actions elsewhere. A report on 21 countries, including the US and in Europe, by J. David Carracedo published in the magazine Diagonal, found that there have been at least 236 closures, revocations, and non-renewals of radio and TV licences. (See: VIC, ‘The truth about RCTV,’ op. cit)

There is also little media interest in genuine attacks on media freedom elsewhere in Latin America.

In Honduras, beginning May 28, 2007, President Manuel Zelaya ordered all TV and radio stations to broadcast daily one-hour prime-time programmes for ten days to counteract what he called “misinformation” on his administration provided by the

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press. (Ibid)

The BBC reported Zelaya's actions on May 25 (Will Grant, 'Honduras TV gets government order'; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6690217.stm>) A June 11 media database search found that in the previous two weeks the US press had mentioned Zelaya's actions in four articles - the highest-profile outlet being the Miami Herald. Over the same period, the US press had mentioned the words "Chavez" and "RCTV" in 207 articles. The British press had not mentioned Zelaya's actions at all - Chavez and RCTV had been mentioned in 23 articles.

In Colombia, President Álvaro Uribe was asked if he would have refused to renew RCTV's licence. Uribe replied: "I would not do that to anybody."

The Inter Press Service News Agency commented wryly:

"But the rightwing Uribe cannot shut down opposition TV stations for the simple reason that there aren't any." (Diana Cariboni, 'Easy to See the Speck in the Other's Eye,' May 30, 2007; <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=37957>)

In October 2004, Uribe closed the public Instituto de Radio y Televisión (Inravisión). The Colombian government argued that Inravisión was "inefficient." But the underlying problem "was the strength of the union" of Inravisión employees, according to Milciades Vizcaíno, a sociologist who worked for nearly 27 years in educational programming for the channel. (Ibid)

In Nicaragua in 2002, La Poderosa radio station lost its licence and had its equipment seized without any legal proceedings by the Enrique Bolaños administration. La Poderosa was an outspoken critic of the government.

These and many other attacks on free speech across the region do not make the front pages of the British and American press. As usual, alleged concerns for democracy and human rights mask deeper priorities: protecting governments that toe the line dictated by Western power, and undermining those that do not.

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