

Censorship and the Health Crisis in Venezuela

Summary of Marielba Núñez Presentation
The Venezuelan Tragedy – A Panel Discussion
October 3, 2020

Censorship and the health crisis in Venezuela are two closely related issues. As a journalist mainly working with scientific information during the past twenty years, I can attest to it. For both specialists and the whole population, it is crucial to have information and data access in a country currently fighting against reemerging epidemics that were under control in the past, e.g. malaria, measles, and diphtheria, as well as new problems such as Zika, Chikungunya, and more recently, Covid-19. However, health information is managed with total opacity in Venezuela.

The Ministry of Health used to publish two documents that were relevant to the health situation in Venezuela. The first was the *Epidemiological Bulletin*, Boletín Epidemiológico, containing information about 72 diseases of mandatory notification in the country, which was obtained through of a network of physicians in public and private medical centers. The other was the *Mortality Yearbook*, Anuario de Mortalidad, where it was possible to consult the mortality statistical trends due to death causes according to the international classification of diseases and health-related problems.

These two publications were born with the modernization of the Venezuelan health sector during the 20th century and were uninterruptedly published for decades. The *Epidemiological Bulletin* appeared in 1938 and was published weekly until 2007, when the Venezuelan government, then under Hugo Chavez's presidency, decided to stop publication. The country was suffering a reemerging epidemic of dengue with more than 89,000 cases. Moreover, 2007 was not a typical year because of an outbreak of orally transmitted Chagas, the largest recorded outbreak in Venezuela at the time.

Since 2007, the *Epidemiological Bulletin* was published irregularly until 2016 when it was finally stopped. However, that last bulletin was very eloquent about the deprivation of health in Venezuela, as it showed a 30% increase in child mortality compared to 2015 and 66% in maternal mortality.

During the last few years, due to the absence of the *Bulletin*, more than 17 epidemic events in Venezuela were disguised or reported late. One of these episodes was the Chikungunya fever epidemic in 2014. Even though the disease was detected in the country in June of that year, four months went by before the Ministry of Health gave the order to notify it.

Something similar happened with the outbreak of diphtheria, a disease that reappeared in the country after 24 years without cases. The illness reappeared in April 2016, but it was officially acknowledged months later when the epidemiological bulletin was published for the last time in early 2017. Only then, public opinion got to know with certainty that 324 cases of diphtheria had occurred during that year. Similar situations have occurred with events such as the epidemics of measles, malaria, mumps, and Zika, among others.

The Venezuelan *Mortality Yearbook*, which has not been published since 2014, followed a similar destiny. Other health documents that used to be published regularly are also now impossible to consult. The *Comprehensive Environmental Health Bulletin* (Boletín Integral de Salud Ambiental) published by the Institute for Advanced Public Health Studies “Arnoldo Gabaldón”, also disappeared. It contained data on rural endemics including Chagas, dengue, malaria, and parasitosis. The same situation happened with the *Food Balance Sheets* of the National Institute of Nutrition (Hojas de Balance Alimentario), a technical document that recounts the available food in the territory. The last available document of that type was published in 2014.

Opacity is government public policy, but in the case of health it is particularly extreme. Health was presented as a success story by Chavismo, which organized a parallel health system called *Barrio Adentro*, with the promise of reaching the most impoverished sectors of the country. The reality today is very different. The hospital infrastructure has been dismantled, and there is an acute lack of medical and health personnel all over the country.

Most of the information pertaining the Venezuelan health system is now found in alternative channels such as non-governmental organizations or medical associations. For example, the National Survey of Hospitals, organized by the NGO *Médicos por la Salud*, found that 70% of hospitals have water service failures, more than 60% have electricity failures, and almost 80% report absence of medical and surgical materials.

This is the current situation of Venezuela in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Health is, without any doubt, one of the sectors where it is possible to see very clearly the extent of censorship in the country. Since the access of trustworthy official information is impossible, we have a situation where it is very risky for doctors, scientists, and journalists to inform about the virus epidemic in the country.

An episode that clearly showed the danger of censorship to those informing on the health situation took place last April, when the National Academy of Sciences presented a report warning about the under registration of Covid-19 cases in Venezuela. They estimated a more realistic number of cases in the month of August. As a result, vice-president Diosdado Cabello threatened to send the security forces for releasing this information, which later proved to be correct.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the journalist Darvinson Rojas was detained for 12 days because he reported that regional information about the number of cases of Covid-19 was different from the national figures given by Maduro's regime. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 12 doctors and health employees have also been detained for denouncing the lack of suitable conditions in hospitals to fight against the virus.

Chavismo was always outspoken about its plan to reach what is referred to as "communicational hegemony", which allows government to control all the media and information. Consequently, independent radios, TV stations, and newspapers – including the one where I used to work – have had to close or continue to work in very precarious conditions. A recent study by the Press and Society Institute in Venezuela found that currently more than 5 million Venezuelans do not have access to information. They live in news deserts. It is very clear that the lack of access to the press also threatens the right to health, especially at a time when information can really save lives.

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