

Digital Gag Marielba Núñez

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In the first few days of October 2018, two Venezuelan dailies stopped printing, bringing to 58 the list of news journals that have stopped circulating in the country in the last five years. They were *Tribuna Popular*, a 70-year-old iconic newspaper of the Venezuelan Communist Party, and *El Luchador* from Bolívar State with a history that goes back a century.

The government economic clamp down has been one of the main causes of the newspapers' agony, as documented by the special task force of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in their country report. It recalled that "the shortage of paper supply and control by government continues to affect the free operation of the press," underlining the responsibility of the State Corporation Alfredo Maneiro for the inexistence of this item. The consequent forced move to the digital world neither ensures that voice plurality will find a refuge as the government's siege on digital communications has been intensified in the last years.

The Venezuelan researcher Raisa Urribarri, author during the last eight years of the section on Venezuela in Freedom House's report, *Libertad en la Red*, considers the present moment as the worst for digital media in Venezuela. To complete this report 100 indicators were measured and grouped in three basic categories: access impediments; content censorship; and violation of users' rights. As a result, they have perceived in the Venezuelan case a "constant and progressive decline."

Regarding the first point, Urribarri emphasizes that the implementation of government policies such as currency exchange control and the tariff freezing of telecommunication services, as well as disinvestment in this sector, have hampered "the expansion and maintenance of the telecommunication infrastructure and, thus, of open network access." The extremely low bandwidth is the daily expression of state negligence. A joint study by IPYS and the MLAB Internet data laboratory determined that Venezuelans "cruise at an average of 1.61 Mbps on the fixed broadband, the lowest in Latin America."

From Glory to Decline

The freedom of digital speech in Venezuela did not always have such a hopeless outlook. In a second revision, Urribarri, a former researcher at The Andes University, and Marianne Díaz of Digital Rights divided the evolution of communication in this century into three instances. A first stage between 2000 and 2006 characterized by measures favoring Internet expansion due to the opening of the sector to free competition and by the opening of 234 info-centers. A second stage between 2007 and 2014 denoted by the onset of coercive actions such as the reform of the *Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television* to include electronic media, making evident the service decay. Finally, as from 2016 in a last stage referred to as "the decline," there is a drop in the number of Internet connections indicating that service coverage for 2020 will be under 51%.

A further action strengthening the digital gag has been the hardening of legal restrictions, among them the *Law Against Hate* approved in November 2017 by the National Constituent Assembly specifying a 20-year sentence to those “that incite hate, discrimination, and violence.” It allows the persecution not only of those posting the messages but the service providers as well, who can be fined and sentenced to jail term if they do not remove the offending contents within six hours. In addition to the *Law of Telecommunications* and the declarations of state of emergency, we must include in this coercive legal framework the selective blockage of Venezuelan and international news websites. Regarding the violation of users’ rights, Urribarri exemplifies the persecution with the harassment and detention of editors and journalists of online media and the absurd detention and jailing of social network users.

Toxic noise

Other mechanisms for silencing the digital spaces have also been applied. The presidential election of May 20th, 2018 became a useful laboratory for documenting the manipulation strategies to annul social networks such as Twitter as alternative information sources. The Venezuelan communications expert, Iria Puyosa, described three types of actions in her study of the *Strategies of the Chavismo Informational War on Twitter*, published in the webpage of the Latin American Observatory of Disinformation and Propaganda: opening and automation of official accounts to reach the *trending topics* daily; promoting distraction hashtags with bot accounts and cyborgs; and sequestering the opposition’s hashtags to smear and interfere their messages and dialogs on the network.

During the last presidential elections, the government managed to promote 33 campaign hashtags through 4,957 official accounts that, against legal regulations, were amplified by more than 500,000 bots. Not all the soldiers in that digital manipulation army spread the official line; some impersonate radical opponents trying, for instance, to divert public attention to the opposition’s weaknesses or to send trivial messages out of political context.

A second investigation by Puyosa shows how the hashtags #CastigoParaLosTerroristas and #LoDijoRequesens, implicating the congressmen Julio Borges and Juan Requesens in an attempt on Maduro’s life, became trending topics by government boosting. This type of interference has an impact on the news programming and causes fatigue in the population that becomes disheartened in the growing distortion of the digital interchange. “The resulting effect is very toxic, and I would say that it is currently being effective because those accounts impose a dominating discourse on the networks.” One of the consequences is the loss of usefulness of that social network as an information source and its credibility as an asset.