



## Will Venezuela's revolution be televised?

*Critics say the government is limiting media freedom while supporters claim they're wrestling airwaves from the elite.*

By: Chris Arsenault – April 9, 2013

---

Venezuela's upcoming vote is set to be the final hurrah for Globovision - a pugilistic television station known for taking sides in partisan debates to consistently support the country's opposition and attack the government.

The station, the sole remaining private TV outlet backing the opposition, reflects a media divide where state broadcasters consistently back the socialist government led by interim President Nicolas Maduro while private outlets, including established newspapers, generally support the opposition and its candidate, Henrique Capriles.

In 2011, broadcast regulators fined Globovision \$2.1m for its coverage of prison riots. In 2009, regulators opened a case against the station after one of its commentators apparently called for a coup against the elected government and the assassination of now deceased president Hugo Chavez.

"Venezuela has suffered from the fact that - as in most countries - the press is identified with the elite," Jim Naureckas, a media analyst with Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a New York-based watchdog, told Al Jazeera.

"The most important thing to recognise is that Venezuela has [since the socialist party was first elected 14 years ago] really made a shift in addressing inequality and the people who were at the top - including media owners - are relatively much worse off than they were before."

End of an era

In the weeks prior to official campaigning, which began on April 2, Globovision announced it will be sold after the April 14 vote.

When the announcement was made in March, a line of riot police stood guard outside the network's offices after pro-government demonstrators tried to attack the building.

"We are politically unfeasible, because we are in a totally polarised country and against a powerful government that wants to see us fail," Guillermo Zuloaga, Globovision's majority owner, said in a statement released in mid-March.

"We are economically inviable, because our revenues no longer cover our cash needs."

Juan Domingo Cordero, an insurance executive considered an ally of Venezuela's socialist government, is said to be spearheading the acquisition, which will be finalised after the election.

Many journalists expect to lose their jobs as a result of the sale, and the station's editorial line is expected to change.

The political opposition in Venezuela and their supporters outside the country believe they are losing access to key communications channels. The CATO Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington, claimed Globovision was "the latest casualty of Venezuela's assault on freedom of the press".

Government supporters say the private media, especially Globovision, back the country's oligarchy, spreading false rumours about the elected government in order to defend the interests of their corporate owners.

"When Globovision first started its activities in 1995, they were struggling to find their way into the market," said Dr Asalia R Venegas former director of the journalism school at the Central University of Venezuela, and now a government media spokesperson. "When Chavez was elected in 1998 they became an organising tool for groups opposed to the Bolivarian process. They acted as a spokesman for the opposition.

"The history of the Bolivarian process and Globovision are intertwined."

The government played no role in pressuring the station's owners to sell the channel, she said. Private companies control 70 percent of Venezuela's TV and radio stations, according to 2012 statistics from CONATEL, the country's communications regulator and more than 40 percent of households subscribe to pay TV channels.

### Coup attempt

As political polarisation and elite anger intensified, so did Globovision's ratings, Venegas said, which is often thought of as the country's equivalent to the US' Fox News.

In 2001, unions opposed to the government began a crippling oil strike - or sabotage regime according to the government - blocking the lifeblood of Venezuela's economy, and many observers believe Globovision's extensive coverage attempted to illicit sympathy for the strikers.

The following year, private TV stations, including Globovision, played a key role in organising a short-lived coup in 2002 that deposed Hugo Chavez for about 48 hours. News coverage promoted demonstrations organised by the opposition, and went straight to air when disgruntled army officers read a communiqué announcing that Chavez had "resigned".

The channels, however, did not report on the pro-government demonstrations, instead showing wildlife shows and American movies. Loyal army officers eventually re-instated Chavez as thousands rallied in support of the government outside Miraflores palace.

Alberto Ravell, Globovisión's boss at the time, apologised for not reporting events around the coup as they unfolded and asked for forgiveness from "any viewer who feels we failed them on that day".

The coup hardened both sides of Venezuela's political divide and led the government - understandably, according to some - to clamp down on the outlets that were supporting undemocratic activity.

RCTV, arguably the most vocal of the private stations, was unable to renew its broadcast license in 2007 while Venevisión, another private channel, softened its anti-government coverage significantly, apparently after the company's CEO had a chat with Chavez.

'Intolerant of criticism'

Many journalists, along with government opponents, believe the state is trying to silence its detractors.

"The government has been intolerant of criticism, and Globovisión has been stronger in their criticism compared with other media companies," Maria Torres, spokesperson for the National Association of Journalists in Venezuela, told Al Jazeera. "Today, the government sees journalists as enemies of the country," she said, adding officials often refuse to speak to outlets that are believed to support the opposition, making it difficult for reporters to write balanced stories.

Opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles has refused to appear on state television, saying its coverage is biased.

"The state media have become a propaganda wing of a political party," Capriles said recently, referring to the ruling socialists.

It's a claim supported by most journalists, even if they aren't always comfortable with behaviour of the private networks.

"I don't agree sometimes with the things announced on Globovisión, but I think it [the sale] will be a tough hit to freedom of expression," Marisela Paz, a journalism professor at Arturo Michelena University, told Al Jazeera.

International watchdogs, including the Committee to Protect Journalists and Human Rights Watch, have been critical of the government's commitment to a free press. Reporters Without Borders ranked Venezuela 117 out of 179 countries on its 2011-2012 media freedom index.

While some journalists have faced intimidation at the hands of pro-government thugs, established newspapers, including *El Nacional* and *El Universal*, produce strong, well-edited content and most opinion columnists are government critics.

Some analysts say the state allows newspapers, which cater to the upper classes, to print without censorship, while making daily broadcasting more difficult for TV and radio stations, which have greater capacity to influence the masses.

Even before the beginning of "21st century socialism" with the election of Chavez in 1998, Venezuela's media outlets were "partial to one party or the other", Paz said. "Now it's the government versus the opposition."

### Community media

Both sides of Venezuela's contentious political and press debate agree the media is polarised. To try and wrestle control of information from the elite, the government has created a series of "community media outlets" where residents - particularly in poor communities - can produce their own news.

"In the past, many radio stations received access to airwave frequencies - a public domain - through corruption," Venegas said. "In 2011, 42 radio stations were suspended because their licenses expired. Those slots were given to organised communities. You will see these stations in different low-income neighbourhoods."

As leftists win elections across Latin America, the new governments have been attacked by the elite media who are keen on defending vested interests and the established order, she said.

Despite setbacks and complaints of a heavy-handed approach to critical reporters, free speech goes beyond the right of individuals to stand on a street corner yelling slogans, Venegas said, and marginalised groups need access to the airwaves. Community media accounts for more than 25 percent of the country's TV and radio stations, according to government statistics.

"Increasing community media," she said, "is one of the best achievements of the Bolivarian revolution."