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Silencing the media anywhere should matter everywhere

[Robert Rivard](#) - Robert Rivard

Few American television viewers outside Miami are familiar with Globovisión, Venezuela's 24-hour television news network that serves as that country's CNN. Its expansive Web site features content American readers would expect to find in the best U.S. newspapers.

Spanish-speakers with DirecTV can tune in Channel 110, or access its programming at www.globovision.com.

Anyone who cares about freedom of expression should care about the looming fate of Globovisión. As the network goes, so go the free and independent media in all of Venezuela. And what happens there likely will play out soon in Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

Two decades after ruthless military regimes gave way to elected civilian democracies in the Americas, a clique of *caudillos* are consolidating power and moving the region backward.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a once-jailed army colonel who led a failed coup against an elected civilian government there, was himself elected president in the late 1990s. Since then, he has used constitutional reforms, legislative maneuvers and violent street mobs to consolidate power, seize private businesses, intimidate opposition parties and threaten the operations of independent media.

He's also used his country's petrodollars to buy influence throughout the region from like-minded, cash-starved leftist governments.

Chávez and his allies came to power by the ballot box but since have moved to rewrite their countries' constitutions to extend their presidential rule and make it absolute. They are unabashed admirers of Cuba's longtime dictator Fidel Castro.

The lead news story in Venezuela today is the Saturday morning blitzkrieg by the Chávez regime to remove 34 private radio stations from the airways. The move was announced by a Cabinet official as just another step in the government's program to regulate freedom of expression by nonstate media.

Globovisión, among others, was not allowed to cover the official's press conference.

I've watched this drama unfold at close range, having traveled the region with some regularity over the last two years as chairman of the Committee on Freedom of the Press for the Miami-based InterAmerican Press Association.

Last week I was invited to speak on a panel at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., along with Guillermo Zuloaga, Globovisión's president and one of its founders in 1994. No one knew at that time that Chávez was preparing to seize the radio stations, but his intensifying threats to shut down Globovisión for practicing

“media terrorism,” which translates to honest, critical reporting of the regime, made it an opportune moment to draw attention to the situation in the nation's capital.


Chávez disagreed, and his administration blocked Zuloaga from leaving Venezuela for a flight to Washington, citing a trumped-up investigation of his business interests to prohibit his departure. Carlos, his son and Globovisión's vice president, came in his place and told an overflow audience that it was “when,” not “if” Chávez makes his move to silence Venezuela's last independent network news station.

It's a sad and familiar story with universal importance, best understood by rereading George Orwell's 1945 novel “Animal Farm.”

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