



OPINION AND ANALYSIS: VENEZUELAN MEDIA

## Internet Revolution in Venezuela

By EVA GOLINGER - CORREO DEL ORINOCO INTERNATIONAL, March 26th 2010



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Venezuela.

Despite critics' exaggerated outcries and accusations in the international media alleging Internet censorship, President Chavez announced a new government-sponsored program to promote Internet usage and cyber communication throughout

Venezuela. Venezuela has made headlines recently in international media for alleged threats to freedom of expression, this time directed at the Internet. But as in the past, many of these accusations against the Chavez administration that spread contagiously throughout mass media outlets and are tweeted and blogged in cyberspace at the speed of light, are just not true.

Press agencies and major world newspapers, such as the New York Times, El País and The Guardian, were quick to react to statements made by President Hugo Chavez two weeks ago regarding a website that had maliciously reported the murders of two prominent government figures. "Venezuela's Chavez calls for internet controls", headlined a Reuters release, which went on to claim that "Chavez is angry with Venezuelan political opinion and gossip website NoticieroDigital, which he said had falsely written that Diosdado Cabello, a senior minister and close aide, had been assassinated".

By referring to Chavez's reaction to the website's dangerous and false reporting as a personal issue, i.e. "Chavez is angry", Reuters downplayed and ridiculed very serious crimes: inciting violence and knowingly and maliciously reporting false information to further criminal acts. Additionally, contrary to Reuters' brushing aside the content of the posts as something that President Chavez "said", and therefore questioning the veracity of the charge, the Venezuelan website NoticieroDigital actually had posted false reports on Diosdado Cabello's assassination by armed attackers, alongside another post claiming that pro-Chavez television host Mario Silva had been "gunned down" the following day. Both stories remained on the website for at least two days, and were only taken down after government supporters publicly denounced the website for the malicious posts.

### The Internet Is Not A Free-for-All

President Chavez did state that "the Internet cannot be something open where anything is said and done", a notion shared by governments and societies around the world. In the United States, controls on Internet content are frequent. Content such as pornography is strictly regulated, and criminal acts or incitement to commit such acts is outright prohibited, even on blogs, chats and informal, anonymous forums. In early 2009, Steven Joseph Cristopher, a 42 year-old resident of Wisconsin, was arrested by the US Secret Service for threatening to assassinate President Obama in a chat forum on a website about UFOs and aliens. Christopher was charged with violating a US law that prohibits threatening to kill a president or president-elect of the United States, carrying a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 USD fine.

In late December 2009, President Obama named Howard Schmidt, a former White House security advisor to George W. Bush, as Cybersecurity Chief, to oversee Washington's Internet policies and regulations, as well as aid in the protection of US cyber assets. The US Congress has also debated a law that would give the US President

emergency control over the Internet and permit a seizure of “private-sector networks” during a so-called cybersecurity emergency.

That type of regulation goes well beyond what is presently being discussed in Venezuela. At most, the Venezuelan government – legislative and executive branches alike – are debating extending current penal codes to cyberspace. Rumors spread internationally, probably via twitter, which is used by more than 160,000 Venezuelan residents, that Venezuela’s National Assembly was debating a law to regulate Internet content. But members of the Venezuelan legislature were quick to deny those rumors and clarify that current laws should merely be applied to crimes committed over the Internet, as is common in most countries.

Germany has also been considering creating a government agency to specifically regulate and create policy regarding cyberspace, one of the most rapidly growing industries and business fields around the world.

### **Free, Universal Access to Internet**

Dispelling critics and so-called international defenders of freedom of expression who claimed President Chavez was shutting down Venezuelans’ access to Internet, the Venezuelan head of state declared on television on Sunday, “A false rumor is spreading, and it’s wrong, saying that we are going to limit Internet access, that we are going to control it. It’s false. We have a central strategy and it’s none other than transferring power to the people, and the first and most important power is knowledge”.

In that context, President Chavez inaugurated twenty-four new infocenters last Sunday during his program, *Aló Presidente*, bringing the total to 668 nationwide. He also approved more than \$10 million USD for the creation of 200 more of these community-based free cybercenters to be built during 2010. Infocenters are a project of the Ministry of Science and Technology, and are government-sponsored and funded computer centers built in communities throughout the nation that provide free Internet and technological access and services to all Venezuelans. Twenty-seven mobile Infocenters were also launched this week, which will travel across the nation to remote areas in the Amazon, Andean and rural regions, guaranteeing free Internet services and computer training to citizens with little or no access to technology.

At present, the infocenters have the capacity to provide Internet and computer services to more than 2.5 million permanent users and up to 10 million visitors annually. The government’s goal is to transfer the operations and administration of the infocenters to organized community groups, such as Community Councils, that can collectively determine the use and technological needs of their residents, neighborhoods and regions. “The transfer of the management and administration of the infocenters and technological spaces built by the Revolution will permit organized communities to collectively make decisions regarding the use of these spaces. Our strategic objective is to advance the technological growth and communications access to aid in the creation of the communal state”, explained President Chavez.

“Technology will be assumed as a form of communication of the People’s Power, to capacitate and articulate communities”, added Chavez. “The people should have the responsibility to maintain and operate the infocenters and to conserve their equipment, as well as guarantee the functioning of each center” said the Venezuelan President, emphasizing that the Internet is a “tool of the Revolution” and should aid in the creation and expansion of Venezuela’s alternative press.

“Each community can create a network and we can communicate with one another to inform each other of developments”, exclaimed Chavez, also announcing the creation of his own blog. “I am starting my own battleground in the Internet with a blog. It’s going to be full of different information, and we will be ready for the bombardment of responses we will surely receive. Even from the enemy, they will attack me with fire and I will respond. Battle is battle, assault is assault”, he warned.

### **Technology for the People**

President Chavez also announced that in Venezuela, only 273,537 Internet subscribers existed in the year 2000. But by the first trimester of 2009, more than 1,585,497 Internet subscribers were registered, an increase of 600%. “And the number of Internet users in 2000 was only 820,000 in Venezuela. Nine years later, that number has risen

to 7,552,570 users, an increase of more than 900%", indicated President Chavez.

In the year 2000, only 3.4% of the Venezuelan population had access to Internet, while statistics show that by the end of 2009, 30% of Venezuelans had Internet access, a huge increase in large part made possible by government programs. The Infocenter project not only provides computers and Internet access to communities nationwide, but also trains users in computer literacy. Brigades of computer and Internet educators, sponsored by the Science and Technology Ministry, have trained thousands of Venezuelans in the basics of computer usage, ranging from simply how to use a computer to advanced Internet searches and blogging.

### **Media Battleground – Internet as A Weapon**

While the Venezuelan state has been empowering its own citizens to enter the world of cyberspace in a conscientious and responsible way, another government has been training and funding a select group of Venezuelans to destabilize their nation and promote regime change using the Internet as a weapon.

During the last few years, more than \$7 million USD have been channeled from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to anti-Chavez youth and student groups in Venezuela to "strengthen new media tools that can improve access to information and allow open and productive debate on the Internet". Since 2002, USAID has funded hundreds of opposition organizations and political parties in Venezuela with over \$50 million USD in an ongoing effort to promote the overthrow of the Chavez administration.

### **Twitter Revolution**

The millions invested in Internet "strengthening" for opposition youth groups have accounted for the proliferation of anti-Chavez websites, blogs and propaganda online, aiding in the mass media offensive against the Venezuelan government. New media tools such as Twitter and Facebook are also overridden with anti-Chavez users. And it's no surprise. In October 2009, the US State Department sponsored the 2nd Annual Summit of the Alliance of Youth Movements (AYM) in Mexico City, bringing together the founders and representatives of new media companies, such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Myspace, Google, Meetup and others, along with a selection of handpicked student and youth leaders from around the world. Representatives from US government agencies, including the State Department, USAID, Freedom House, International Republican Institute (IRI), National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Cato Institute, Cuba Development Initiative, and others, were also present at the event, which included a welcome speech from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Forty-three young political activists funded by the State Department were brought to the AYM Summit from nations such as Sri Lanka, Colombia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Turkey, Moldova, Malaysia, Mexico, Ecuador and Venezuela. The Venezuelan attendees were Yon Goicochea, current leader of the ultra-conservative Primero Justicia party, and winner of Cato Institute's Milton Friedman Award for promoting neoliberal politics; Geraldine Alvarez, member of Goicochea's foundation Futuro Presente, created with funding from US agencies; and Rafael Delgado, another former student leader associated with the opposition.

The goal of the State Department event was to capacitate selected youth with the knowledge, technology and funding to promote "Twitter Revolutions" in their countries, citing the examples of Iran, Moldova and the anti-FARC and anti-Chavez marches promoted in Colombia via Facebook and Twitter.

### **Balancing the Battleground**

Nevertheless, pro-Chavez groups and activists in Venezuela are now flooding those same new media technologies used by Washington to promote the imperial agenda. Facebook and Twitter accounts have recently been opened by prominent figures connected to the Bolivarian Revolution, and new blogs, websites and email lists are growing fast, in an attempt to gain ground in the information battlefield in cyberspace.

While the Internet is still dominated by those forces working to destabilize and discredit the Chavez administration and the Bolivarian Revolution, chavistas are catching up fast. The hundreds of new infocenters throughout the nation, guaranteeing free access to all

Venezuelans, will enable millions to share their stories and voices – previously ignored and invisible – with the international community. A blog written by President Hugo Chavez himself will surely serve as major ammunition for the Bolivarian Revolution and counteract many of the lies and myths spread about him and his government around the world.

**Source:** [Chavez Code](#)



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### See also:

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- > 16/05/2008: [Grow Them Young, Pay Them Well - Venezuela's Anti-Chavistas, That Is](#)