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Americas - Venezuela

Censored coverage

Government restricts coverage of protests

18 February 2014

Discontent with the country's economic problems and the high rate of violent crime are fueling the protests that erupted earlier this month. Protesters and human rights groups grievances include government control of the media.

The political tension has also had an impact on journalists' safety. Shots were deliberately fired at **Karen Mendez**, the correspondent of the Peruvian online newspaper *El Comercio*, while she was covering the protests and demonstrators threw stones at *María Iginia Silva* while she was editing a report on the protests for *Globovisión*.

Journalists working for state media have not been spared. **Jilfredo Alejandro Barradas**, a photographer with the State Communication and Information Office, sustained a gunshot injury while covering the demonstrations on motorcycle.

A group of protesters assaulted the VTV headquarters with Molotov cocktails and other explosives.

Rafael Hernández of the magazine *Exceso* and the blogger **Ángel Matute** were arrested while covering the unrest on 12 February and remained in police custody for three days. When a judge released them on 15 February, he ordered them not to cover the demonstrations.

The head of the National Telecommunication Commission (CONATEL) reacted to the scale of the protests by announcing on 11 February that "coverage of the violent events" was punishable under the Radio, TV and Electronic Media Social Responsibility Law ([RESORTMEC](#)), which bans content condoning violence or hatred.

The authorities began carrying out this threat the next day when the protests turned violent, with three reported deaths and many gunshot injuries, both civilian and police. Venezuelan viewers suddenly found themselves deprived of access to *NTN24*, a Colombian TV news station that had been reporting the opposition's demands.

Even social networks, normally resistant to all forms of censorship, have been affected. Many people who use the national Internet Service Provider CANTV have reported that their access to photos has been blocked on Twitter, as confirmed by Twitter's official spokesperson, Nu Wexler. He immediately suggested an [alternative by SMS](#): "Users blocked in #Venezuela: Follow + receive notifications via SMS of any Twitter account. Send SEGUIR [usuario] to 89338."

"We condemn these arbitrary acts of censorship, which are being implemented outside of any established administrative or judicial procedures and which are all the more disturbing for coming against a backdrop of government harassment of local and international news providers," said Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire.

"We join local free speech organizations in pointing out that control of news coverage will just exacerbate the current situation and fuel the extreme media polarization currently prevailing in Venezuela."

"We are also concerned by the threat economic asphyxiation of newspapers causes for [pluralism](#)."

Accused by the government of waging "war [propaganda](#)," the Venezuelan media are also

threatened by structural problems – the shortage of raw material, including newsprint.

Many newspapers have been forced to print smaller or fewer issues or suspend printing altogether. The list of those affected gets longer by the day. Around 20 newspapers are currently in danger. Ironically, the authorities systematically [harass media that mention the shortages](#).

Under the protection policies adopted when Hugo Chávez was president, newspapers have to obtain dollars to import newsprint as Venezuela does not produce any of its own.

The procedures for getting the foreign currency and the newsprint they need to operate have become increasingly complex. The requirement to apply to the government for dollars has given the authorities a say in the number of copies the newspapers print and distribute.

The government has responded with conspiracy theory to accusations that it is deliberately starving the newspapers of newsprint. Ruling party legislator Julio Chávez has gone so far as to accuse the media of deliberately hoarding newsprint in order to put pressure on the government.

According to the authorities, newsprint imports rose by more than 30 per cent in 2013 although Venezuelan newspapers kept on reducing the number of copies they print.

Various factors make Venezuela one of the western hemisphere's most worrying countries as regards freedom of information.

They include the requirement for broadcast media to carry government speeches, called cadenas, the creation of a new [intelligence agency with powers that threaten access to information](#), a restrictive legal framework, and the government's systematic [harassment of news media](#) and journalists.

As a result, Venezuela is ranked 116th out of 180 countries in the 2014 Reporters Without Borders [Press Freedom Index](#).

Photos: [Mariana Vincenti](#)

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