



Censorship and disinformation countered by increasingly active audiences

This meta-analysis shows how Venezuelans assess the credibility of mainstream, digital, and social media, how they use and engage in them to get news, even with their biases, *vis à vis* the regime's communicational hegemony.

By Ana Julia Niño Gamboa

June 2021

Executive Summary

Audiences' feelings and actions are crucial – and not always visible – phenomena. It is an aspect of communication that has a major influence on the media and journalists, as well as on the culture of a society and the healthy exercise of democracy. As stated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (1985) " a society that is not well informed is not a society that is truly free".

In this research, we approach this topic from the perspective of audience reaction to the erosive climate taking shape as the establishment of *Chavismo's* communicational hegemony. 2007 marks a fundamental milestone: The closing of the oldest private broadcaster of the country, Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) and the confiscation of its equipment showed an audience that was reluctant to embrace TVes as the successor imposed by the government. The ratings spoke to the regime. That meant migration to pay TV. Censorship has spanned over radio and print media. However, citizens have strived to find choices to get news and entertainment as well.

The journey has not been entirely smooth, not only because of censorship itself and regulatory penalties, but also because the infrastructure of utilities that could allow digital migration is very poor. Many areas of the country spend more hours without electricity than with it, thereby obstructing Internet access. In addition, the “red machine” (government media ecosystem) has wiped out longstanding broadcast media in the province. Currently there are at least 90 municipalities being insufficiently served by radio, TV stations, newspapers, and websites. This is what the Institute of Press and Society in Venezuela (Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad Venezuela, IPYS-Venezuela, 2020) names information deserts, leaving over 5 million Venezuelans without access to local news.

An attempt has been made to explain audience reaction from the perspective of the selective exposure theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948), according to which people act on their biases and, when their communications channel is disturbed, they look for alternative sources that are more in line with their preference. This view is complemented by Schwarz's (2000) proposal that relates emotion with decision making: If fear prevails among Venezuelans, a pessimistic vision of the future takes shape and with it comes social paralysis. However, it seems that anger becomes the fuel of a society reluctant to give in to the authoritarian agenda of censorship and disinformation. The government fails in demobilizing the people and achieving more adherents to its ideas of revolution.

This does not mean that the government abandons its attempts. Many of its disinformation-oriented actions are not aimed at convincing, but at running interference on communication channels to encourage distrust, thereby feeding citizen frustration. Surely the reach of alternative media is still small. However, if after almost two decades of communicational hegemony there is no monolithic thinking, it means that audiences are defiant and have become committed citizen reporters and news "prosumers" (producers and consumers).

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the behavior displayed by audiences in Venezuela in the face of the overwhelming operations of communicational hegemony by the government. This has led to a reduced availability of traditional media and the migration to websites and digital platforms, in which the controlling hand of the government is also present, encouraging censorship, self-censorship, and disinformation.

In Venezuela, several civil society organizations keep records of government actions against the media, journalists, and even citizen reporters. The effect of these actions seems to be orchestrated, not so much to impose a revolutionary narrative, but to run interference on communication channels, boost disinformation, and encourage mistrust, thereby feeding citizen frustration. We believe, however, that more systematic research efforts would be required to document the public's perception. The public has been considered a passive receiver for long; but today it has gained certain relevance in view of the opportunities that information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer to all those who have a telephone and Internet access, identified as citizen reporters or prosumers.

Most of the records we accessed abound in details about the impairment of media and journalists and its effect on freedom of communication. This reveals an authoritarian – or mixed-authoritarian, as it has been called by Cañizález and Matos (2015) – model of government. Under this model, some media are still privately owned; but this does not guarantee that their activity is unencumbered, as there is direct or indirect pressure on their editorial policy and content.

Faced with this outlook, we inquire how average Venezuelans experience, perceive, and overcome disinformation. Is it true that the emergence of new media in the digital ecosystem compensates for the decreasing offer of besieged mainstream media? We pose this question bearing in mind that the disruptions of electric power service are in a range between serious in the center of the country and very serious in areas farther away from Caracas. In addition, the IT infrastructure for phones and internet has been sustaining an unceasing deterioration due to the iron-fist control of the Executive, inflation, and lack of investment.

Methodology

The diagnosis that we intend to establish is framed in a documentary proposal based on research on secondary sources and specialized reports regarding this subject of our interest. This *corpus* of our investigation yields findings reflecting the opinions, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of media audiences, evident in these secondary sources.

We accessed these sources online. To this end, we have used Google's advanced search tools, especially Google Scholar. Our information gathering and data construction model is based on content analysis. It is precisely the critical analysis of the data that will serve as the basis for achieving our objective.

Background

The government's strategy of communicational hegemony gains strength as enabled by deinstitutionalization. By means of this strategy, any hint of action by any independent public body has been neutralized, and an administrative, legal and judicial framework has been developed to wrap in legality what is not validated by an unlawful exercise of government. In this effort worthy of better causes, those media independent from the official narrative have been wiped out.

During the government of the late Hugo Chávez, the hegemony took the lead in revoking broadcast licenses (RCTV Case 2007) or through legal technicalities involving irregularities encouraged by the regime itself. Since the government of Nicolás Maduro, capitals of obscure origin bought out media outlets and turned them into neutral broadcasters that do not bother the government. Apart from criminalizing the practice of journalism and threatening the personal safety of journalists, the state-owned media have been reduced to bullhorns for official propaganda, and community media controlled by partisan government spokesmen have been added. Public discussion spaces are co-opted, the digital ecosystem is contaminated with disinformation and its troll farms, citizen scrutiny is censored, and an endless stream unpalatable harassment is perpetrated, one that cannot be put in perspective without factoring in the complex humanitarian crisis, worsened by the arrival of COVID-19.

Added to all the above is the healthcare emergency of these critical times being experienced by the country. This demands a comprehensive public policy that goes beyond confinement measures. Although we cannot say that there is a more important right than that of life, we must admit that it is much more threatened if the information required to make personal choices in this regard is banned, and if access to vital data is denied, some as essential as information on a nationwide COVID-19 vaccination plan.

That is the scenario in which we must conduct this research. Even so, we will focus on looking into the ways citizens experience the censorship and informational disruption encouraged by the government as part of its public policies.

According to data from several civil organizations, between 2013 and 2018, the government closed 115 media outlets. Paradoxically, against the government's wishes, this caused some media to ultimately migrate to the web and others to be born online, thereby forming a new digital media ecosystem. This change among the media also brought about new audience profiles, new experiences, and another way of relating to social media and getting news.

This journey has not been entirely fortunate, because the digital domain certainly facilitates access to diverse content with which other consumers also engage, adding data to an original news. However, at the same time, it is an undeniable fact that, in digital platforms, disinformation has increased significantly because of the activity of bots and trolls.

Findings

After reviewing the sources selected, we can gather several facts, among which the complexity of the relationship between the media and audiences stands out. In it, there is evidence of a decline in the covenant of trust because one of the parties feels neglected by the mainstream media. In this regard, there is enough material that could explain such neglect, which is not a willful act of the media or its journalists. Instead, it is explained by the iron-fist action of the hegemonic government machinery in pursuit of quelling dissent, criticism, and public scrutiny over the administration's activities.

We highlight several facts reported in the documents reviewed: The search for other sources of information by the audiences is characterized by seeking bias confirmation. Therefore, they try not to expose themselves to messages dissonant with their ideology or preferences in any respects. This explanation is consistent with the selective exposure theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948), now readapted to the dynamics of distance relationships enabled by the Internet. This is, in a broad sense, the approach of Fernández (2018), supplemented by Iyengar and Kahn's studies (2009). The author notes the 2018 trend: "[T]he communicational hegemony has not been able to impose itself over the citizen voice. The media can be very powerful in setting the agenda of the topics that are discussed in the country; but they are much less effective in being able to change the opinions of voters and their political behavior".

When it comes to the effect of feelings among audiences, it is necessary to distinguish which feeling prevails, because from Schwarz's study (2000) on the relationship between emotion, cognition, and decision-making, Carrasco (2015) points out that negative emotions drive analytical-deductive thinking in search of solutions to problems. In this case, the absence of information in regular channels motivates the search for other options catering to these citizen concerns.

In these cases, it is necessary to ascertain which feeling prevails. If fear prevails in the subjects' judgment, they will tend to pessimism about the future and consequently to inaction. Conversely, anger can become a trigger for mobilization, in search for mechanisms to tackle censorship and disinformation, as well as to face the possible shortcomings of a downcast journalism that should address current challenges.

From what has been explained, the author confirms that "when discontent prevails, audiences tend to mobilize and stereotypical explanations of an authoritarian communicational model fail to achieve the demobilization or adhesion sought".

An interesting aspect on this topic relates to audiences' perception of themselves and their activity amidst the climate of censorship and disinformation in Venezuela. Cañizález (2018) refers that this topic is contingent to political alignment. It is an opinion conditioned by perception and political preference. The author refers to the electoral climate prior to the presidential contest of May 20, 2018. A survey conducted by Delphos (as quoted by Cañizález) showed that 65.3% of citizens are not vigilant of the right to information in Venezuela, which coincides with the percentage of those believing that there is no freedom of expression in Venezuela and the government obstructs the work of the media.

Cañizález adds that "the highest score in this questioning view of their own citizen role are in the A-B social segment [upper and upper middle classes] and among those who are sure they will not vote on May 20". These variables match other findings of the above study. For instance, regarding the perception of journalists' work, respondents in the capital city of Venezuela who oppose the government had the most critical position; the most favorable opinion prevailed among those who lived outside Caracas and the main cities of the country and holders of the Fatherland Card ([Carnet de la Patria] a program of benefits to supporters of the regime) who were certain they would vote. Regarding the usefulness of the information produced by the media, 49.7% classified it as useful and very useful; but surprisingly, 42.4% indicated it as not very useful or outright useless. When the data is disaggregated, the A-B strata rate it positively and the E strata (lower class) negatively.

Regarding the media used by Venezuelans to get news, the transition identified by Cañizález is partly evident: "Television continues to be the most important reference retaining a preference of 43.9% among those surveyed, despite being a far cry from the 90% preference that boasted in the nineties. Meanwhile, the web has 8.8% of users who turn to it for news, the flip side is that nationwide 7.3% do not use any platform, and of that group a third is from the capital city. It is interesting that news searches are done on social media going later to websites when seeking further information, others choose to settle for the version offered by their preferred social media platform".

Following the trend of migration to the web, pollster Datincorp (2020) presents us with the outlook based on the electoral landscape. In this case, the most used source to get news is social media with an overwhelming 47%. Disaggregating the data, WhatsApp has 29% of preference against only 6% for news websites. As for the behavior of preferences for traditional media, the press is barely mentioned by 2% of those surveyed, radio by 13.7%, and television is split between 15.04% for broadcast media and 13.37% for pay TV. An important fact for future audience studies is users' political leanings. In this Datincorp study, 30% of those self-defined as *Chavistas* get news from broadcast media against 6.6% identified with the opposition and a not insignificant 30% of those not politically aligned. For pay TV, there is a tie in preferences with 14%. If we add the different TV modalities, it reaches 28.41%, a decrease against the data reported by Cañizález in 2015, with a preference of 43.9%.

We can view a different picture in results released by Medianálisis, an NGO devoted to research on freedom of expression, based on focus groups (2020), one regarding media categories and their perceived accuracy among residents of the East and West of Barquisimeto, Lara State, Venezuela, and another regarding media categories and their perceived accuracy among residents of villages around the town of Guarico, Lara State, Venezuela. The importance of both studies lies in their use of the focus group technique, as mentioned above, which is very revealing of the firsthand sentiment of the audiences studied.

In both studies, differences in search for and access to information emerge, not only stemming from political bias but also from social strata, age group, and even geographical distance from the center of the country, which exposes people to adverse conditions of access to vital utilities such as water or electricity. The economic crisis is not a minor issue, because it can mean the difference between having a smart phone and access to the Internet or depending on the signal of public channels co-opted by the government.

For those interviewed in both studies, TV has little credibility, being almost alien to younger people, and there is little coverage by local media. Radio is a fixture, although it is perceived as self-censored. Direct searches on news websites are scarce. In the best-case scenario, they are accessed indirectly from links received on WhatsApp. They enjoy some credibility, but are accessed only if there is electrical power and internet. Among the most used social media are Facebook and WhatsApp.

These general features show that the approach to audiences, their perceptions, their tools to circumvent censorship are a very rich field of study, at least in our country. The reasons for this are the current fragile status of the right to be informed and the patent economic crisis that prevents, for example, replacing communication devices, both telephones and other electronic equipment. A survey by *The Media Office* in 2019 estimates that, by the end of 2018, there were less than 10 million smartphone users, against 12 million devices available in 2017, a small number if we take into account that, between 2000 and 2010, Venezuela achieved the highest cell phone penetration per capita in Latin America. In 2008, 15 million cell phones were sold and the country reached 31 million active lines in a nation of 30 million inhabitants (Tal Cual, 2019).

Another issue worth addressing eventually is that of the audiences leaning to the ideology of *Chavismo*. They are neglected because, evidently, for them to support the government's ideas, canvassing is not enough; information is vital. Even lying to them on state-owned network Venezolana de Televisión (VTV) while they are waiting in line for gasoline, food, or clamoring for a vaccine to be protected from the threat of the coronavirus is an abuse without a citizen outlet to vent through, or media serving them. Another rather neglected audience is that of those not identified with any of the political poles. In this case, Datincorp's figures (2020) show a different information consumption than that of those aligned with the extremes.

In our data search for this article, we assessed the intersection between the preferred platform and its architecture for news traffic. WhatsApp is the most used platform to deliver and get news and is recognized at the same time as "the realm of disinformation in Venezuela" (Medianálisis, 2020).

Conclusions

i) Undoubtedly, we are living interesting times. A complex transition can be noticed, from changes in news consumption habits to the emergence of new apps, media,

and devices. As far as Venezuela is concerned, it is imperative to assess the issue from a political and economic standpoint, as this adds elements and challenges that are intensified under the scenario of a complex humanitarian crisis.

ii) Communicating on digital and social media is almost a daily practice among a significant section of the urban population. Their questioning of the media is a pending issue to be assessed. Under this same scenario, the experience of the so-called citizen reporters is viewed as an expression of a virtual political identity, one allowing direct engagement. Through it, citizens expand their reach (Urribarrí, 2011 citing Puyosa, 2008).

iii) The impoverishment of Venezuela's media, and consequently the work of journalists, has put the reporting profession up against the wall. Their credibility levels are low. However, among some media and news professionals who have migrated to digital platforms, there is an effort to honor their commitment to audiences. It is a challenge that involves citizens. We believe that, from this perspective, some media have understood the need to educate their audiences, to make collaborative work among citizens, journalists, and media.

In this sense, there are some initiatives in place: BusTV, a service of news read by journalists in public transportation and communities; the website *El Pitazo* (The Whistle Blow) experiments with training the audience on content generation and directly engages with readers through its local correspondents; the website *Efecto Cocuyo* (The Dragonfly Effect) included the voice of migrants in its editorial plan; the website *Reporte Ya* (Report Now), one of the first citizen journalism projects, gives workshops on digital literacy. Medianálisis has also engaged audiences through workshops on news media literacy, training on hoax detection, tools for fact-checking suspicious content, etc.

iv) The digital platforms and technology that have emerged are engaged and transformed by the citizens who use them. This establishes their real usefulness. In Venezuela, audiences have clearly found a space on these platforms. The media and the powers-that-be have had to migrate there. The image of a Nicolás Maduro making a big hype about his arrival into WhatsApp and Telegram is still fresh in our memory, a suspicion-arousing gesture given the communicational hegemony exercised by the regime. One wonders if the impact of the pro-government media is weak and he has also had to make this move to reach out to his elusive audience.

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