

Reporters Without Borders and RCTV: Disinformation and Lies

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The rejection to renew the 20-year-old concession license of the private Venezuelan television channel RCTV that expired May 27, 2007, set off extraordinary media hysteria worldwide. For several weeks, press from all over the globe focused on a banal event that goes totally unnoticed when it occurs in any other country. The media converted the completely normal and legitimate administrative decision into an attack on press freedoms. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), naturally, participated in the international disinformation campaign publishing an extremely bias report about RCTV on June 5, 2007. (1)

Closure of RCTV and media hegemony?

RSF titled their report “Closure of Radio Caracas Television Consolidates Media Hegemony.” The organization’s tone instantly conveys two lies in only one phase. First, RCTV has not been closed and can continue broadcasting via cable or satellite. As the radio spectrum, by definition, is limited, the Venezuelan government decided not to renew the contract of this channel and instead assign the freed space to another channel in an attempt to democratize the media. Therefore, contrary to RSF claims, RCTV has not “stopped broadcasting.” (2)

The second fallacy is found in the expression “media hegemony.” With this title, RSF expects the reader to believe that the Venezuelan authorities control the media and hold a virtual monopoly over this sector. In order to win over public opinion, Robert Ménard, general secretary of the organization, incessantly repeats the same maxim to the press: “Chávez has hegemonic control over the media.”(3) However, the truth is quite different. In Venezuela, 80% of current TV channels and radio stations are privately owned. In terms of cable and satellite TV, private companies control nearly all channels. Moreover, the 118 national and regional periodicals distributed in the country are controlled by the private sector. “Media hegemony” exists, all right. But private financial groups and corporations are the ones in control. (4)

Arbitrary decision by President Hugo Chávez?

RSF asserts that the decision was made “by order of president Hugo Chávez” and claims that this is illegal since, according to RSF, there is a lack of a “judicial order [...] in order to deny the channel the right to broadcast for the next twenty years.” Here again RSF uses the double lie, given that the decision is perfectly legal in terms of existing international law. As in most countries around the world, the airwaves belong to the state and are to be used in the public’s interest; Article 156 of the Venezuelan constitution as well as the Organic Law of Telecommunications grants the government the power to regulate access. It is absolutely

not a matter of “judicial order” as RSF claims. Besides, as already explained, RCTV continues to have the “right to broadcast” via cable or satellite. (5)

Likewise, it wasn't Hugo Chávez who decided not to renew the concession, but the National Telecommunications Commission of Venezuela. The concession of RCTV was not renewed for several specific reasons. First, the government wanted to establish a balance between public and private channels. Next, RCTV did not respect their obligations or Schedule of Conditions of License. For example: between June and December 2006, authorities cited RCTV with at least 652 infractions. The channel also systematically denigrated the policies of the government and on various occasions incited the public to violence and rebellion against constitutional order. The proven participation of RCTV in the coup d'état of April 11, 2002 and its seditious participation in the oil sabotage of December 2002, which cost the national economy around 20,000 million dollars, were significant factors in the decision. (6)

However RSF alleges that RCTV is only “accused” of participating in the coup, while evidence and testimonies abound. *Le Figaro*, a very conservative French newspaper recalled that “for years the channel conspired openly against the president broadcasting calls to over through the regime.” *Le Figaro* emphasized that during the coup, the channel “announced that Hugo Chávez had resigned,” in keeping with the coup plotters' plan, and even recognized Pedro Carmona as interim president. (7)

After the return of President Chávez, RCVT prohibited its journalists from reporting any related information and restricted broadcasting to cartoons. Andrés Izarra, the production manager at the time and who was opposed to the coup, resigned immediately to avoid becoming an accomplice. During his testimony before the National Assembly, Izarra stated that on the day of the coup and those following he received the formal order from Marcel Granier (the head of the conglomerate that owns RCTV) to “not transmit any information about Chávez, his followers, ministers or any other individual that could be connected to him.” (8)

The conservative *Los Angeles Times* also published RCTV's intention to “oust[ing] a democratically elected leader from office” ever since Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998. According to the daily, after the coup RCTV “edged fully into sedition [and] ran manipulated video blaming Chavez supporters for scores of deaths and injuries.” Its article recalled that Granier went to the Presidential Palace to swear his loyalty to “dictator Pedro Carmona who had eliminated the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and the Constitution.” The *LA Times* concluded: “Granier and others should not be seen as free-speech martyrs,” but instead as coup plotters. (9) In another instance, Granier made an eloquent declaration to RSF regarding the coup “I confess that I was not unhappy to see Hugo Chávez go.” (10) How could he be “unhappy” if he actively participated in his overthrow?

It is evident, by RCTV's open support and participation in the rupture of constitutional order in April 2002 that it is not concerned with public interest. Moreover it goes without saying that if a French TV channel, or that of any other country in the world, dared to behave similarly it would not even last 24 hours and its directors would immediately be thrown in prison. The *Houston Chronicle* doubted that RCTV's “actions would last more than a few minutes” in the United States. (11)

Why does RSF want to convince public opinion that RCTV's culpability is still a matter of

debate? Simply because Robert Ménard and his organization also supported the 2002 coup. Perhaps it would be helpful to recall the declaration published by RSF on April 12, 2002:

“Chávez, held in the presidential palace, reportedly signed his resignation under army pressure and was taken to Fort Tiuna, the capital’s main military base. Immediately afterwards, Fedecámaras president Pedro Carmona announced he would head an interim government, saying he had been chosen by “agreement” among civil society groups and the armed forces leadership.”

Unpopular decision?

The Paris entity also asserts that the “(numerous) opposition and the (fewer) Chavistas” simultaneously marched in Caracas to support or condemn the government’s decision. Here, RSF does not hesitate to bold face lie. The opposition demonstrations only consisted of thousands of individuals. In contrast, the demonstrations in support in the capital, such as that of May 27 or of June 2, 2007 were impressive. Hundreds of thousands of citizens hit the streets of Caracas to demonstrate their support for Hugo Chávez. (13) What is RSF’s objective in manipulating the truth?

To demonstrate the unpopularity of the decision, RSF cited polls conducted by RCTV and the opposition as if they were reliable, thus adopting an openly bias position. The Minister of Interior and Justice, Pedro Carreño, scathingly responded to these polls: “freedom of expression is not defined by the empire or Reporters Without Borders or the Inter-American Press Association or the oligarchy, but instead by the people who today came out into the streets.” (14)

By alleging that the closure was “widely condemned by the Venezuelan public and the international community” and “by the governments and parliaments of many Latin American countries including Brazil, Mexico and Chile, and even by his Bolivian counterpart and ally Evo Morales,” and by loosely citing a resolution adopted by the European Parliament May 24, 2007, RSF attempts to give the impression of global unanimity against Hugo Chávez. But reality is totally different. Of the more than 35 countries that make up the American continent only the legislature of three countries (Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica) condemned the non-renewal of the concession and Costa Rican President Óscar Arias was the only head of state to issue an unfavorable comment. The rest of the continent, beginning with Evo Morales, voiced their agreement with the Chávez government (Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua) indicating that this was an administrative measure that only concerned Venezuela and that they had no desire to meddle in the internal affairs of the nation. Evidently, RSF specializes in disinformation. (15)

Regarding the European Parliament resolution, it was adopted May 24, 2007, but only by 43 of the 784 (4.5%) Members of European Parliament (MEP). This resolution was rejected by 741 MEP’s due to its politically charged nature and above all because it constituted an unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. Most MEP’s refused to participate in the vote and left the chamber. As for the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, neither has issued any condemnation, in contrast to what RSF maintains, but simply general recommendations regarding press freedoms. (16)

Other RSF manipulations

RSF also assured that “requests for meetings with government officials and representatives

of public and pro-government media went unanswered. Their silence was as eloquent as the comments of the people it did meet, and tends to confirm that RCTV's closure was not just an administrative measure." However, the government has reiterated several times that it has received no such requests for meeting from RCTV. By promoting Marcel Granier's point of view RSF again demonstrated their partisan stance and stigmatized the democratic government of Hugo Chávez calling it a "political system known as "Chavism." Here, we are far from the topic of "press freedoms." Ménard aligns himself in political and ideological opposition by deliberately caricaturizing the Venezuelan government. In effect the opposition uses the term "Chavism" in a derogatory manner. (17)

RSF concludes their report with a lie manifest as a warning against the "media hegemony" of the president. It's important to be precise about this topic. The VHF band range in 2000 hosted 19 private channels and 1 public. In 2006 the number surpassed 20 private channels versus the solo public channel. Since May 28, 2007 there have been 19 private channels and two public: Venezolana de Televisión and Tves, which replaced RCTV. On the UHF band range there were 28 private channels and two public stations in 2000. In 2006, there were 44 private channels and six public stations. In terms of radio broadcasting, on AM between 2000 and 2006, there were 36 public and 143 private stations. On FM, there were 3 public and 365 private radio stations in 2000. In 2006 that figure surpassed 440 private stations opposed to 10 public broadcasters. RSF lies again. (18)

"RCTV may have broadcast pornography," states RSF, using the conditional to suggest that some doubt exists about the charge. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court censured the channel many times in 1981 and 2006 for airing pornographic scenes at prohibited hours. Now RSF calls in to question the decisions of the nation's highest judicial authority. (19) Moreover, it's important to emphasize RCTV has been sanctioned more than any other channel in Venezuelan history (six times) for violations of the law, and only one of these incidents has been during the Chávez presidency. (20)

RSF even accuses the Supreme Court, which ordered the equipment of RCTV be put at the disposition of the new channel TVes, of "jeopardiz[ing] the presence of the 'channel of the lion' on cable." Here Ménard's clumsiness even reveals to public opinion that in reality RCTV has not disappeared. The truth is that the Supreme Court simply ordered a temporary transfer of the equipment in order to assure the continuation of the public service. In addition this decision does not compromise in any way the channel's possibility of transmitting via cable despite what principal media outlets have claimed. (21)

RSF accuses two of the leading private channels Televen and Venevisión of being in the hands of President Chávez. The two channels, while still strongly allied to the opposition- as easily confirmed by their programming- have adopted a more rational position toward the government and since 2004 have stopped calling for insurrection and the overthrow of the government. Same for the private national daily Últimas Noticias. To qualify as being opposition press in the eyes of RSF it seems a media outlet would have to continue denigrating the government, manipulating information, destabilizing the nation and calling for the assassination of Chávez as RCTV and Globovisión did in May 2007. RSF's fanatical point of view is evident: media outlets are either against Chávez, or they are his lackeys. (22)

RSF claims that "President Chávez does not care about international law." This accusation is completely gratuitous. RSF is incapable of citing even one violation of international law committed by the Bolivarian government. The organization also claims that numerous

appeals [from RCTV were] favorably received by the [...] Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In reality said Court accepted to consider only one appeal on May 25, 2007 and has not yet announced its opinion. (23)

“Chávez wants the constitution amended in 2008 so that he can be re-elected indefinitely,” includes the report, presenting this intention as a great threat to democracy. Perhaps RSF has forgotten that in the majority of western countries, France included, unlimited re-election is a constitutional reality? Why is RSF commenting on aspects of domestic policy when it professes to be “apolitical” and solely interested in “freedom of the press?” (24)

“Complete control of the state, government and armed forces. No opponents in the assembly, as the opposition boycotted the 2005 legislative elections. A ruling party that is virtually the only party. Twenty-two out of twenty-four state governors who are entirely loyal. And soon, a largely neutralised civil society.” More RSF’s alarmism. “A ruling party that is virtually the only party,” complains RSF, while more than a dozen political parties exist in Venezuela. Could it be that in France the state, the government and the armed forces are under the control of the opposition? In regards to the assembly and the governorships, perhaps RSF questions the democratic decision of Venezuelan voters. Perhaps civil society, or maybe the entire population, is gradually relegating the opposition to the periphery. Reiterating the rhetoric of the opposition, which has suffered more than 10 consecutive electoral defeats since 1998, RSF falsely claims that Chávez controls all the institutions in the country and plans to transform the most democratic government in Latin America into an authoritarian regime. Once again, these matters have nothing directly to do with “freedom of the press.” (25)

The Paris organization also attacks lawyer Eva Golinger. Her crime? Revealing to the world a list of all the Venezuelan journalists financed by the U.S. through USAID that “ included the Reporters Without Borders correspondent,” as acknowledged in Ménard’s report. (26)

RSF also claims that many world personalities advise President Chávez regarding constitutional reform such as Argentine Norberto Ceresole among others. The only problem is that Ceresole died in 2003 of a heart attack. These blatant errors demonstrate the lack of credibility of the organization’s report. (27)

RSF forged their opinion on the situation of the Venezuelan press after only five days in the country, “from May 24- 28, 2007,” and after meeting with only opposition journalists and media owners. Their objective from the start was crystal clear: transform an administrative decision, common worldwide, into and act of censorship and attack on press freedoms. How can the Parisian organization expect to come off as impartial and serious with such methods? (28)

Why didn’t RSF get upset about the lost concessions of Spanish channels TV Laciara in 2004, TV Católica in 2005 and Tele-Asturias in 2006? Why didn’t they mobilize when concessions were not renewed for British channels One TV, Actionworld and StarDate TV 24 in 2006, or Look for Love 2 in 2007? Why hasn’t Robert Ménard traveled to Peru to investigate the closure of two TV channels in 2007, or to El Salvador when the government revoked the concession of Salvador Network in 2003? Why did RSF remained unmoved when Canada didn’t renew the concession of Country Music Televisión (CMT) in 1999? Why did RSF remain silent about the revocation of the concession to U.S. channel Daily Digest in 1998 or when the FCC yanked Trinity Broadcasting License in 1999? (29)

This adaptable indignation clearly demonstrates that the ordinary case of RCTV is nothing more than a pretext for RSF to stigmatize Hugo Chávez and continue the disinformation war against a democratic and popular government. As for freedom of expression, anyone who has spent 24 hours in Venezuela can only be astonished by the opposition channels' spiteful and fanatical tone against the government. To assert otherwise is an extraordinary act of bad faith.

The real role of RSF is not to defend press freedoms as they profess; instead it is to promote the political and economic interests of the entities that fund them such as the U.S. government, which generously contributes to the Parisian organization through the National Endowment for Democracy, an entity that the world's most important newspaper, The New York Times, calls a CIA front. (30)

[Article in french](#), June 25, 2007.

Notes

(1) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «[Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique](#)», 5 de junio de 2007. (sitio consultado el 6 de junio de 2007).

(2) Ibid ; Libro Blanco de RCTV, «Mitos y hechos sobre Radio Caracas Televisión», Cubadebate, 30 de mayo de 2007.

(3) L'Express, «Chávez bâillonne la dernière chaîne d'opposition», 29 de mayo de 2007.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Ibid. For the 652 infractions see Jean-Luc Mélanchon, «Où va la bonne conscience anti-chaviste», May 26, 2007, www.jean-luc-melanchon.fr (site consulted on May 30, 2007.) For the oil sabotage see Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, «No aceptaremos comportamientos antidemocráticos de la oposición», November 3, 2006.

(7) Lamia Oulalou, «Chávez bâillonne la télé d'opposition», Le Figaro, May 26, 2007.

(8) Eva Golinger, El código Chávez (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2005), p. 125.

(9) Bart Jones, «Hugo Chávez Versus RCTV», Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2007.

(10) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(11) Bart Jones, «Chávez As Castro? It's Not That Simple In Venezuela», Houston Chronicle, 7 de febrero de 2007.

(12) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Un journaliste a été tué, trois autres ont été blessés et cinq chaînes de télévision brièvement suspendues», April 12, 2002. www.rsf.org/article.php?id_article=1109 (site consulted November 13, 2006.)

(13) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit ; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, «Hoy el pueblo demostró que está movilizado en apoyo a la revolución», June 2, 2007.

(14) Ibid.

(15) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(16) El Nuevo Herald, «Legisladores de EEUU y Europa condenan cierre de RCTV», May 25, 2007.

(17) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(18) Ibid.; Telesur, «Informe RSF 'Cierre de Radio Caracas Television. La consolidación de una mentira mediática a través de 39 embustes», June 7, 2007.

(19) Telesur, «Informe RSF 'Cierre de Radio Caracas Television. La consolidación de una mentira mediática a través de 39 embustes», op. cit.

(20) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, «RCTV ha sido el canal más sancionado en Venezuela», March 29, 2007.

(21) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(22) Ibid.

(23) Ibid ; Néstor Ikeda, «CIDH pide a Chávez proteger libertad de expresión», Associated Press, May 25, 2007.

(24) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(25) Ibid.

(26) Ibid.

(27) Ibid ; Telesur, «Informe RSF 'Cierre de Radio Caracas Television. La consolidación de una mentira mediática a través de 39 embustes», op. cit.

(28) Reporteros Sin Fronteras, «Fermeture de Radio Caracas Television: la consolidation d'une hégémonie médiatique», op. cit.

(29) Jean-Luc Mélanchon, «Où va la bonne conscience anti-chaviste», op. cit.

(30) Robert Ménard, «Forum de discussion avec Robert Ménard», Le Nouvel Observateur, 18 de abril de 2005. www.nouvelobs.com/forum/archives/forum_284.html (sitio consultado el 22 de abril de 2005); John M. Broder, «Political Meddling by Outsiders: Not New for U.S.», The New York Times, March 31, 1997, p. 1.

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Cuba et les Etats-Unis (Pantin: Le Temps des Cerises, 2006).

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