Freedom
House

# Venezuela

| | 2013 | 2014 |
|---|---|---|
| **Internet Freedom Status** | Partly Free | Partly Free |
| Obstacles to Access (0-25) | 16 | 17 |
| Limits on Content (0-35) | 16 | 18 |
| Violations of User Rights (0-40) | 21 | 21 |
| **TOTAL\* (0-100)** | **53** | **56** |

\* 0=most free, 100=least free

| | |
|---|---|
| Population: | 29.7 million |
| Internet Penetration 2013: | 55 percent |
| Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked: | Yes |
| Political/Social Content Blocked: | Yes |
| Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested: | Yes |
| Press Freedom 2014 Status: | Not Free |

## Key Developments: May 2013 – May 2014

- Amid a government crackdown on protests in February 2014, internet service was down for approximately 36 hours in San Cristobal. Additional service disruptions were reported throughout the country (see **Obstacles to Access**).

- In late 2013 and early 2014, the Venezuelan government blocked nearly 400 websites providing information on politics and economic issues, such as currency exchange rates and political demonstrations (see **Limits on Content**).

- In February 2014, CONATEL blocked the website of NTN24, a Colombian news group, after it aired video of a protester being killed; the regulator also blocked images of the protests on Twitter and blocked apps facilitating organization, such as Zello and Tunnel Bear (see **Limits on Content**).

- In June 2013, a Venezuelan court made its first official ruling specifically forbidding an individual from using social media (see **Violations of User Rights**).

# Introduction

In a country where all government branches act in compliance with the interests of the ruling party, ensuring a hegemonic media landscape, the Venezuelan people widely use the internet to participate in forums that allow independent expression, particularly social networks.[1] As a result of the government's ongoing siege against private media[2]—which includes the takeover of newspapers by progovernment owners—traditional media outlets have ventured into the digital arena. Due to the comparatively low barriers to entry, new businesses have appeared in this environment as well.[3] It is in this atmosphere that Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and similar platforms have become the final refuge for independent voices and freedom of expression.[4]

Since Nicolás Maduro was elected president following the death of Hugo Chávez in March 2013, the Venezuelan currency has been devalued multiple times,[5] and inflation has risen to 56 percent—the highest rate on the planet. Venezuela's capital has one of the highest murder rates in the world, and shortages of basic food items and toiletries have become part of daily life for millions of Venezuelans. Due to these crises, protests are increasing, as are government efforts to influence online discussions and to restrict online content.[6] In response to the threat of growing online activism, Minister of Communication and Information Delcy Rodríguez has identified social networks as a breeding ground for "perpetrators of coup-leading violence" and others seeking to "cause large-scale psychological distress in the population."[7] In a move that is rather unsurprising given its distrust of social media, the Maduro administration recently created a regulatory body known as the Vice Ministry of Social Networks specifically focused on this new arena.[8]

The state has long held near complete control of the digital environment through Venezuela's main internet service provider (ISP), the National Telephone Company of Venezuela (CANTV), and through the communications regulator, the National Telecommunications Commission of Venezuela (CONATEL).[9] In recent years, however, citizens have persevered in creating online forums for propaganda-free news, social activism, and the voicing of critical opinions. In response, the

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1   ComScore, "Futuro Digital Venezuela 2013," [Venezuela Digital Future 2013], December 9, 2013, http://goo.gl/qYzuo8

2   Irene Sarabia, "La Libertad de Expresión No Es Para Que Los Medios Digan Lo Que Quieran," [Free Speech Is Not For The Media To Say What They Want], *Ultimas Noticias*, January 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/eqkkrJ

3   Antonio María Delgado, "Venezolanos Burlan El Acoso a La Prensa de Maduro Gracias a Internet," [Venezuelans Outsmart Maduro's Harassment of The Press Thanks to The Internet], *El Nuevo Herald*, December 4, 2013, http://goo.gl/cAKxZa; See also: *El Universal*, "EUTV: Vanguardia Digital" [EUTV: Digital Vanguard], *El Universal*, November 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/hHb5Dm; and John Otis, "Web-Based TV Opens Space for Critical Voices in Venezuela," Committee to Protect Journalists. December 19, 2013, http://goo.gl/AhMquK; and Gisela Salomón, "Lanzan TV Venezolana en Miami, [Venezuelan TV Launches in Miami), Yahoo (website), January 23, 2014, http://goo.gl/5NGnOK

4   Thirty digital media outlets are grouped into the "block" of digital press founded in August 2013; See: http://www.bloquedeprensadigital.org/empresas/; accessed April 25, 2014; See also: Uptick in Conversations on Venezuela on Twitter, Note the 12th, http://goo.gl/PTYXiS and Alexa.com http://goo.gl/51PAGp; accessed April 20, 2014.

5   In 2013-2014, the largest devaluation in Venezuela´s history took place. According to the different exchange rates, it represents a devaluation between 358 and 722 percent. See: Miguel Angel Santos, "Lunes Negro y Los Huecos del Ajuste Rojo," [Black Monday and the Holes of the Red Cut], *El Universal*, March 26, 2014,  http://goo.gl/lmKzt2

6   Alejandra Romero Beaujon, "Anuncios Cambiarios Resonaron en Redes Sociales," [Currency Exchange News Resounded on Social Networks], *El Universal*, January 25, 2014, http://goo.gl/qIafZ8

7   *Ultimas Noticias*, "Delcy Rodríguez: Redes Sociales son Utilizadas para Crear Angustia," [Delcy Rodríguez: Social networks are Used to Create Anxiety], February 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/zpzVz2

8   Vanessa Arenas, "Gobierno Crea Viceministerio para Redes Sociales," [Government Creates Vice Ministry for Social Networks], *Ultimas Noticias*, January 12, 2014, http://goo.gl/BnQROP

9   *El Nacional*, "El Lápiz Rojo," [The Red Pencil], January  18, 2014, http://goo.gl/CA5hDY

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government has increased efforts to block the circulation of political and economic content through the web—as well as at times restricting internet access itself—initiatives that have slowed the growth of internet penetration rates and connection speeds.

By mid-2014, CONATEL had ordered the blocking of some four hundred sites and portals containing economic and political information. It is worth noting that such blockings were carried out as discretionary measures, executed without legal procedure. Private ISPs complied with government orders on blocking out of fear of the severe sanctions threatened by CONATEL for those providers that allowed the circulation of such content.[10] In February 2014, following widespread protests over violence, insecurity, shortages of basic goods, and an increasingly hostile political environment, connection to the broadband service provided by CANTV (which accounts for the majority of internet subscriptions) was unavailable for over 36 hours in San Cristóbal. The website that hosts Twitter images, as well as the apps Zello and Tunnel Bear, were each sporadically blocked; foreign news media was barred; and the cellphones of those recording government abuses were confiscated.

By the time the protests, which lasted from February to June, had ceased, thousands had been arrested on political grounds, hundreds had been injured, and over forty had been killed. Allegations of state brutality ran rampant, and international organizations, such as the United Nations and Human Rights Watch,[11] decried the Venezuelan government's infringement on freedom of expression, both online and off, as well as its treatment of its own people. The hacking of political websites and the usurpation of the Twitter profiles of political activists, critical journalists, and dissident voices—a damaging trend which began in 2012— also continued to plague Venezuelans, as did harassment targeting opposition members and those critical of the ruling party.

## Obstacles to Access

The internet arrived in Venezuela in 1992, with CONATEL granting licences to the first ISPs in 1996.[12] While the 1999 constitution obligates the state to provide the public with access to new information and communication technologies (ICTs),[13] the Organic Law of Telecommunications, which was reformed in December 2010, declares ICTs an area of state interest, priortizing government use over public access to ICTs.[14] In several recent cross-country studies assessing ICT trends over the past

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10    Maru Morales, "Conatel Negó Censura en Internet" [Conatel Denies Internet censorship], *El Nacional*, March 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/hTcD5e; See also: Correo del Orinoco,  "Conatel Abre Procedimiento a Proveedores de Internet: Digitel, Movistar, Movilnet y Otros," [Conatel Opens Procedure Againsts ISPs: Digitel, Movistar, Movilnet and Others], November 9, 2013, http://goo.gl/Pvgw4i

11    Roque Planas, "U.N. Condemns Violence in Venezuela After Government Breaks Up Protest." The Huffington Post, May 12, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/12/venezuela-un-violence_n_5310432.html.

12    UNDP, "Las Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación al Servicio del Desarrollo," [Information and Communication Technologies for Development], (Caracas: UNDP, 2002), p.249.

13    See: Article 108 and Article 110 of the Venezuelan Constitution: http://www.tsj.gov.ve/legislacion/constitucion1999.htm.

14    In July 2008, a plan to reform the law was met with great opposition. As a result, the measure was not introduced or approved in the National Assembly until December 2010. See: "Ley Organica de Telecomunicaciones," [Organic Law of Telecommunications] Scribd, http://www.scribd.com/doc/45293016/Nueva-Ley-Organica-de-Telecomunicaciones, accessed January 13, 2013

five years, Venezuela is among the countries that have fallen farthest in the rankings relative to its peers, such as Colombia and Ecuador, whose internet environments have been improving.[15]

The Venezuelan government hopes to expand and improve internet access via the National Transportation Network,[16] through which it will install nearly 7,000 kilometers of fiber-optic cable.[17] Official sources indicate that between 40 and 60 percent of the works commissioned by CANTV have been concluded,[18] but the projects are reportedly behind schedule and no independent firm has yet conducted an audit.[19] The government is also hoping to increase computer literacy through its CANAIMA project, which aims to bring computers to classrooms throughout the country. According to official figures, over three million laptop computers[20] have been given to Venezuelan elementary school students to this end. However, while not all computers are equipped with internet connectivity, they are equipped with proselytizing educational materials that glorify the administration[21] In April 2014, CONATEL announced a new National Telecommunications, Information Technology, and Postal Services Plan, which promises an internet penetration rate of 100 percent by 2020. While it seems doubtful that Venezuela will be able to increase penetration from 55 percent to 100 percent in six years, it will be interesting to follow the progress of the Plan, which also contains strategies to develop political content supporting revolutionary democracy and socialist ethics.[22]

The latest data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) reveals that internet penetration in Venezuela increased by approximately six percent between 2012 and 2013, rising to 55 percent by year's end.[23] According to data provided by the consultancy firm ComScore, Venezuelan internet users are predominantly young and urban, with 72 percent falling between 15 and 34 years of age.[24] Venezuela is home to nearly 12 million Facebook users and over 3 million

15    Kai Bucher, "Las Economias Latinoamericanas Todavia Estan Atrasadas en el Aprovechamiento de las Tecnologias de la Informacion..." [The Latin American Economies are Still Behind in the Use of Information Technologies], World Economic Forum, 2010-2011 Report,  http://bit.ly/gnrzob;  ITU, Time Series by Country (2000-2012) "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet," ITU World Data – Statistics, http://goo.gl/TMYtwL

16    CONATEL, "Red Nacional de Transporte," [National Transport Network], http://goo.gl/ARvE4s, accessed January 27, 2014

17    The National Transportation Network should connect the Orinoco-Apure region (the southern half of the country) with the northern coastal region, with 213 nodes distributed in 18 states. The states the network goes through are: Amazonas, Anzoátegui, Apure, Aragua, Barinas, Bolívar, Cojedes, Falcón, Guárico, Lara, Mérida, Miranda, Monagas, Portuguesa, Sucre, Táchira, Trujillo and Zulia. See: CONATEL, "Conatel Abandera Inclusion Social con la Red Nacional de Transporte," [Conatel Championed Social Inclusion with the National Transport Network], January 31, 2014, http://goo.gl/ppj1GV

18    Medios Comunitarios (website), "Conatel Abandera la Inclusión Social con la Puesta en Marcha de la Red Nacional de Transporte, [Conatel Champions Social Inclusion with the Launch of the National Transport Network], October 18, 2013. http://goo.gl/ceBqsF

19    Inside Telecom Bulletin,  March 15, 2014, Vol. XI No. 20.

20    Ultimas Noticias, "Gobierno Venezolano Ha Entregado 3,3 Millones de Canaimas," [The Venezuelan Government Has Delivered 3.3 Million As Part of Canaima], November 8, 2013, http://goo.gl/2T9zgL

21    The program started in 2009 and aims to provide computers to children in elementary schools. In 2014, high school students were incorporated into the program. This strategy has been questioned because it includes software containing government propaganda. For more, see: http://www.canaimaeducativo.gob.ve/; See also: Fidel Salgueiro, "Acumuladores Duncan: Una Historia para Tenerla Presente," [Acumuladores Duncan: A Story to Keep in Mind], Inside Telecom, Vol. XIV, #45, November 28, 2013.

22    CONATEL, "Plan Nacional de Telecomunicaciones, Tecnologías de Información y Servicios Postales 2014-2019," [National Telecommunications, Information Technology, and Postal Services Plan 2014-2019], April 2014.

23    ITU, Time Series by Country (2000-2013) "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet," ITU World Data – Statistics, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx; accesed June 1, 2014

24    ComScore, "Futuro Digital Venezuela 2013," [Venezuela Digital Future 2013], December 9, 2013, http://goo.gl/kjJfc8

Twitter users.[25] Key topics disseminated and debated through these mediums include politics and news, and, increasingly, concern over shortages of basic goods and rising inflation.[26]

According to CONATEL's latest statistics, 61 percent of internet subscriptions are fixed household connections and 32 percent are wired connections. The remainder are classified as "non-residential," but it is not clear if this refers to mobile phone subscriptions or business accounts. While more people are now connected to the internet,[27] the majority of the population has access only to narrowband service.[28] Although the average regional speed of internet connection for Latin America is 2.5 Mbps, according to the latest report from Akamai, Venezuela has an average of only 1.27 Mbps. For comparison, Bolivia, which is much less developed, ranks last, with a speed of .95 Mbps.[29] Nationally, state-owned CANTV—which holds over 80 percent of internet subscriptions in Venezuela[30]—offers prepaid plans with minimum connection speeds of 1 Mbps at a cost of about US$10.50 per month, or 1.5 Mbps at a cost of US$22.81 per month, as compared to a minimum wage of approximately US$519 per month.[31] In late 2013, a 6 Mbps plan was announced at a cost of US$95.23.[32] The fee for this plan, however, represents a significant portion of the minimum wage and is only available in select areas. The second most widely used ISP, Inter, offers a connection speed of 10 Mbps for US$88.25—seven dollars less for a connection that is 66 percent faster.[33]

In addition to poor quality and low internet speeds, geographic isolation in rural areas, low computer literacy, and the expense of necessary equipment also pose substantial obstacles to access. The regional divide in internet access in Venezuela is noteworthy; while in the Capital District and the State of Miranda the percentage of individuals with internet access exceeds 90 percent, in states such as Amazonas, Yaracuy, and Apure, penetration hovers around 15 percent.[34] Connectivity in rural areas has been further compromised by a severe electricity crisis that has led to rationing in every city but the capital. Regional disparities are also evident in the expansion plans

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25    Social Bakers, "Facebook Statistics by Country," Accessed January 13, 2014, http://goo.gl/HFbz5L; See also: Carlos Jiménez, "Penetración y Usos de Internet en Venezuela," [Internet Penetration and Usage in Venezuela] *Tendencias Digitales*, 2013.

26    *El Universal*, "Facebook y Twitter en Venezuela," [Facebook and Twitter in Venezuela], June 25, 2012, http://bit.ly/Q2TOBj

27    Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, "Cobertura de Internet en Revolución Ha Crecido Hasta Abarcar 291 Capitales de Municipios," [During the Revolution Internet Coverage Has Grown to Encompass the Capitals of 291 Municipalities], May 13, 2014, http://goo.gl/Ki3lrr

28    Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, "En Cuatro Años CANTV Pasó de 0, 7 a 1, 5 Mbps de Velocidad en Internet," [In Four Years CANTV Went from 0.7 Kbps to 1.5 Mbps in Internet Speed], May 3, 2014, http://goo.gl/7EKQoX

29    Akamai, "State of the Internet Map Visualizations, Q1 2014," accessed June 1, 2014, http://www.akamai.com/stateoftheinternet/soti-visualizations.html#stoi-map; See also: Akamai, "The State of the Internet: Volume 6, Number 2," 2nd Quarter, 2013 Report, accesed April 30, 2014.

30    This figure is based on a personal analysis that takes into account sources such as CONATEL and the ITU, as well as interviews with experts and representatives of national telecommunications companies who prefer to remain anonymous.

31    The mínimum wage had been calculated at the *official rate* of 6.30 Venezuelan Bolivars per $1 USD. For more, see: *El Universal*, "CANTV Mejora Velocidad de Conexión a Internet," [Cantv Improves Internet Speed], September 3, 2012, http://bit.ly/REHRjy; CANTV, "Planes y Servicios del Servicio de Banda Ancha (ABA)," [Service Plans and Broadband Services], January 2014, http://bit.ly/qlCVIQ; See also: Atilio Hernández, "El Nuevo Salario Mínimo en Venezuela," [The New Minimum Wage in Venezuela], Provea (Website), January 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/VFoWWD; and Girish Gupta, "The 'Cheapest' Country in the World," TimeWorld, January 24, 2013, http://goo.gl/2DPPc1

32    See: CANTV´s Connection Plans, accessed January 27, 2014, http://bit.ly/f42m4R

33    The services of Inter are offered only in major cities. The 10 Mb plan has been offered since April 2011. At first it had a limit of 25Gb of consumption, but it was later turned into an unlimited consumption plan.

34    CONATEL, "Estadisticas Preliminares del Sector Telecomunicaciones IV Trimestre 2013," [Preliminary Telecommunications Sector Statistics, Quarter IV, 2013, http://conatel.gob.ve/files/Indicadores_2013/PRESENTACION_IV-TRIMESTRE2013.pdf; accessed January 27, 2014; See also: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (IDB), 2014, http://goo.gl/kLoFMK Accessed May 16, 2014.

of telecommunications companies, which typically focus new investments on the most economically vibrant cities and surrounding areas.[35]

By the end of 2013, mobile phone penetration in Venezuela reached 101.6 percent.[36] This figure does not necessarily reflect a population saturated with mobile technology, however; some Venezuelans have as many as three phones, each of which is associated with a different mobile provider, in order to ensure countrywide coverage. Over one third of Venezuela's mobile subscriptions utilize CDMA technology. Digitel began offering 4G LTE services at the end of 2013, but only to limited cities.[37] While there are approximately 30 telecommunications operators in Venezuela, only three provide mobile phone services. Movistar, the Venezuelan unit of Spain's Telefónica, has nearly 11 million subscribers; Digitel, a locally owned private company, has approximately 5 million subscribers; and CANTV's Movilnet, which leads the market, has 16 million subscribers out of a total of 32 million.[38]

As of 2014, mobile internet penetration in Venezuela was measured at seven percent.[39] Venezuela ranks fourth in Latin America in terms of connection speeds via smartphone, with connections surpassing 1.5 Mbps only in a few zones.[40] Those who do have smartphones typically live in urban areas and have higher than average income levels. Although the number of users with smartphones and data plans is growing, currency exchange controls and the devaluation of the Venezuelan bolivar have resulted in high prices and limited supplies.[41] The networks run by private mobile service providers suffer from severe congestion and require further development, yet discriminatory currency controls have forced providers to ration their services and decrease investment in infrastructure.[42] An industry executive who chose to remain anonymous for fear of governmental reprisals stated that during 2013, the private sector received 50 percent *less* foreign exchange assignment than state enterprises, evidence of biased funding.[43]

Further complicating matters, the CANTV initiative, "Buy Made in Venezuela," which aims to give preference to locally produced cell phones manufactured by Vtelca and Orinoquia in partnership with the Chinese firms ZTE and Huawei, has not satisfied demand, and the state's blocking of

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35    Carolina Contreras, "Venezuela Ya Dispone de Red 4G LTE Para Teléfonos Celulares," [Venezuela Already has 4G LTE Network for Cell Phones], *El Universal*, September 8, 2013, http://goo.gl/ilqTxe; See also: CONATEL, "Estadisticas Preliminares del Sector Telecomunicaciones IV Trimestre 2013," [Preliminary Telecommunications Sector Statistics, Quarter IV, 2013, http://conatel.gob.ve/files/Indicadores_2013/PRESENTACION_IV-TRIMESTRE2013.pdf; accessed January 27, 2014

36    ITU, Time Series by Country (2000-2013) "Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions," ITU World Data – Statistics, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx; accesed June 1, 2014; For population estimate, see: CIA, The World Fact Book-Venezuela, last updated June 20, 2014, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ve.html

37    CONATEL,  "Estadisticas Preliminares del Sector Telecomunicaciones IV Trimestre 2013," [Preliminary Telecommunications Sector Statistics, Quarter IV, 2013, http://conatel.gob.ve/files/Indicadores_2013/PRESENTACION_IV-TRIMESTRE2013.pdf; accessed January 27, 2014

38    Lucia Bibolini, Venezuela: Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband, and Forecasts, Budde.com,July 2013, http://goo.gl/SjjzsC; accessed April 30, 2014

39    CONATEL,  "Estadisticas Preliminares del Sector Telecomunicaciones IV Trimestre 2013," [Preliminary Telecommunications Sector Statistics, Quarter IV, 2013, http://conatel.gob.ve/files/Indicadores_2013/PRESENTACION_IV-TRIMESTRE2013.pdf; accessed January 27, 2014

40    William Peña, "A Paso de Tortuga, [At a Snail's Pace], *Tal Cual*, October 18, 2013, http://goo.gl/ZLxupW

41    Producto Magazine, "Movistar y Digitel Sin Inventario," [Movistar and Digitel without Inventory], January 24, 2013 http://goo.gl/A8knk2; accessed April 15, 2014

42    Websites of the three companies, accessed January 10, 2013: http://bit.ly/19NJUeJ; http://bit.ly/qlCVIQ; http://goo.gl/rHlms2

43    Inside Telecom, Vol XV No. 4, January 30, 2014.

foreign currency has made it difficult to import mobile phones from foreign manufacturers. [44] These two factors have resulted in a shortage of cell phones within the country which has led to price speculation (in this case, the artificial inflation of the cost of mobile phones) and which has weakened the sustainability of mobile phone businesses. [45] As of the second quarter of 2014, the inventories of mobile phone operators were practically empty.[46]

In a disturbing trend, substantial interruptions of telecommunication services have begun to occur.[47] During the highly contested April 2013 presidential election, CANTV shut down broadband service for approximately 30 minutes, leaving 95 percent of Venezuelans disconnected from the internet at a crucial time. In September 2013, reported damage to a section of fiber-optic cable left three regions without internet service.[48] In the November 2013 lead-up to municipal elections, CANTV's broadband internet service was down for approximately two hours.[49] Disruptions were reported in Caracas, Maracaibo, and Mérida, among other cities. As in previous instances, authorities offered no explanation for the service disruptions, all of which occurred at critical times.

The latest—and longest—service interruption occurred in San Cristobal in mid-February 2014 during nationwide protests. CANTV's internet service was unavailable for 36 hours in the city, as well as in other parts of Táchira state. Although the government denied responsibility, alleging that the blackout was due to vandalism or fire damage, the disruption occurred during an announcement from the Minister of Defense about measures to control political demonstrations in San Cristobal, which had been underway for approximately 15 days at that point.[50] Such restrictions on ICT connectivity during pivotal times is a continuing concern in Venezuela. Service disruptions and rumors of internet throttling—the intentional slowing down of service to effectively cripple online activity—were also common during the 2014 protests.[51] Applications such as the walkie-talkie program Zello (which the Minister of Communication and Information claimed was a platform for the promotion of terrorist activity)[52] and Tunnel Bear VPN Service,[53] often used by protesters as a

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44    The state controls the importation of cellphones at regulated prices and distributes them through its own network or assigns them in a discretionary way to private operators. Individuals (and companies) import them at black market dollar prices, which are 12 times more expensive than the official exchange rate, and which continue to increase every day. As a result, cell phones are worth any price people will pay as there are no reliable price references.

45    Marinelid Marcano, "Adquirir un Celular se Convirtió en Misión Imposible en la Zona Sur," [Acquiring a Cellphone Became Misión Impossible in the South], *El Tiempo,* February 9, 2014, http://goo.gl/D8BA0G

46    JL Sabella, "Estantes Vacíos es lo Que se ve en Las Tiendas de Tecnología," [Empty Shelves are What You See in Technology Stores], Tecnomovida (Website) January 16, 2014, http://goo.gl/xEnjZ6

47    Notitarde, "Falla en el Sistema 'nic.ve' Mantiene Sin Servicio a Todos los Dominios '.ve'" [System Failure 'nic.ve' Leaves all '.ve' Domains without Service], May 28 2012, http://bit.ly/19ehDgg

48    Mariana De Barros, "Doble Corte de Fibra Optica Dejó sin Servicio ABA a Tres Regiones del País," [Double Cut of Fiber Optics Left Three Regions without ABA], *El Carabobeño*, September 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/NVMXbn

49    *El Universal*, "CANTV Presentó Problemas con su Banda Ancha en la Noche del Lunes," [CANTV had Problems with its Broadband Monday Night], November 12, 2013, http://goo.gl/QD4yVH

50    Correo del Orinoco, "Restituyen Servicio Aba en Táchira Tras Hechos Violentos," [Aba Reinstitute Táchira Service After Violent Incidents], February 21, 2014, http://goo.gl/pMPfls

51    Doug Madory, a Senior Analyst at Renesys Corporation, reported that the "increased latency" in speeds "suggests that... CANTV's connection to the outside world is [overloaded]." Madory noted that it was difficult to prove whether it was the result of deliberate throttling or a lack of infrastructural upgrade.

52    Twitter account of Ministra Delcy Rodríguez, (Twitter page), accessed April 30, 2014, https://twitter.com/DrodriguezMinci/status/435792460082450432; See also: "Petición: Comunidades de Software Libre Repudian la Manipulación Mediática y el Uso de Internet Para Fomentar Terrorismo Contra Venezuela," [Petition: Free Software Communities Repudiate Media Manipulation and Use of the Internet to Promote Terrorism Against Venezuela]; http://goo.gl/FrrhHQ; accessed April 30, 2014.

53    ALT1040 (website), "Gobierno de Venezuela Bloquea el Acceso a Tunnel Bear, un VPN Para Evitar la Censura," [Venezuelan Government Blocks Access to Tunnel Bear], March 12, 2014, http://goo.gl/Xvu8de

means of communication and to bypass censorship, were both blocked by the government during protests. The director of technology for Zello, who believes that the Venezuelan government was behind the block, responded actively, adapting the app with a changing IP address that makes it more challenging to obstruct.[54]

While there are no special restrictions on the opening of cybercafes in Venezuela, their numbers have been declining because of a marked drop in interest among youth. Observers suspect the decline is the result of government restrictions on the types of games that can be installed on computers at cybercafes. Among its restrictions, the 2009 Videogame Law,[55] which has only recently been enforced, prohibits the installation of "war related games" and bans students in school uniforms from entering cybercafes unless accompanied by a teacher.[56]

Although privately owned ISPs do exist, the state monopolizes the internet market through CANTV, a factor that allows for greater government control of internet services. Following its 2007 renationalization, a move that benefited CANTV significantly in regard to currency controls,[57] an improvement in service was expected, but, to date, quality remains poor. All earnings obtained by the company are reserved for social programs rather than being reinvested to improve ICT offerings.[58] Despite CANTV's poor service record and slow connection speeds, its relatively low prices allow the company to remain dominant.[59] Private providers have had difficulty competing with CANTV's rates,[60] and the lack of competition has reduced incentives for providers to retain high quality service or to expand their offerings.[61] Investment in and expansion of the private ICT sector are further complicated by an economic environment characterized by very strict and politically discriminatory foreign currency exchange controls that make it difficult for private companies to access foreign currency in order to invest, maintain infrastructure, and repatriate their earnings.[62] For

54    *Últimas Noticias*, "Zello Modifica su App Para Evitar Bloqueos en Países como Venezuela," [Zello Modifies App to Avoid Blockages in Countries Such as Venezuela], February 23, 2014, http://goo.gl/hZZ0o8

55    Luis Carlos Díaz, "Videojuegos para Milicianos," [Video Games for Militants], Periodismo de Paz (Blog), April 3, 2011, http://goo.gl/I4nNfU

56    The "Video games" Law  was passed in 2009 and can be accessed here:  http://www.scribd.com/doc/83657622/Ley-para-la-Prohibicion-de-Videojuegos-Belicos-y-Juguetes-Belicos-3-de-marzo-del-2009. From the sanctions in Article 13: "Whoever promotes by any means the purchase or use of war related videogames or toys defined in this law will be sanctioned with a fine of two thousand to four thousand tributary units." Article14: "Whoever imports, produces, sells, rents, or distributes war-related videogames, or military toys, will be sanctioned with prison from three to five years. The penalty provided in this article, and imposed by a final veredict, entails the seizure and destruction of the war-related videogames and war toys."

57    As a state company, CANTV enjoys preference for CADIVI's currency approvals. See: Casetel Chamber of Business Telecommunications Services, "Oswaldo Cisneros Sigue Apostandole a Venezuela: Digitel Busca Vías para Consolidarse en 3G," [Oswaldo Cisneros Keeps Betting on Venezuela: Digitel Seeks Ways to Consolidate in 3G] June 23, 2010, http://goo.gl/BP2RrX

58    Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología, "Gobierno Nacional Honra Pagos de Prestaciones con Dividendos de CANTV" [National Government Honors Benefit Payments with Dividends from CANTV], April 4, 2012, http://goo.gl/c5zwmO ; See also: Luigino Braci, "¿Las Peores Velocidades de Internet Están en Venezuela? Sí, pero..." [Does Venezuela have the Worst Internet Speeds? Yes, but...], May 31, 2013, http://goo.gl/QTP5y5

59    Hernan Galperin, "Precios y Calidad de la Banda Ancha en America Latina: Benchmarking y Tendencias" [Prices and Quality of Broadband in America: Benchmarking and Trends], Universidad de San Andrés (Argentina), accessed January 30, 2014, http://bit.ly/PsBDoY; See also: Budde.com, "Venezuela - Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts," accessed January 7, 2014, http://bit.ly/1dPLzoe

60    Inside Telecom, Volume 7 No. 86 (2011): In late 2012, after 14 months of request, Movistar was given the authority to increase its rates from 9-17 percent for annual inflation. Movilnet, for its part, increased 32.6 percent (excerpt from newsletter; not available online).

61    Jorge Espinoza, "Argumentos in Situ de Las Operadoras Móviles Privadas: Smartphones e Internet Móvil Suplen Carencias Fijas," [Arguments in Situ of Private Mobile Phone Operators: Smartphones and Mobile Internet Fized Unfilled Gaps], Inside Telecom, May 25, 2012.

62    Reuters, "Venezuela Blocks Telefonica's Price Hikes," October 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/Ysw2hF

small enterprises and individuals, exchange controls have also complicated the process of paying hosting providers, acquiring electronic devices, and conducting online shopping.[63]

In addition to owning and operating Venezuela's leading telecommunications operator, the state also controls CONATEL, the body responsible for regulating and licensing of the telecommunications sector. While Article 35 of the Organic Law of Telecommunications provides for CONATEL's operational and administrative autonomy, the president has the power to appoint and remove the agency's director and the other four members of its Directive Council. A series of presidential decrees over the past decade has shifted oversight of the commission to various ministries, the vice presidency, and finally, in December 2013, to the Ministry of Communication and Information.[64]

In addition to making oversight nearly impossible, these arbitrary shifts in control are evidence of CONATEL's lack of independence from the executive. The state also controls CENCOEX (the body formerly known as CADIVI). CENCOEX is the body responsible for unilateral control of the allocation and repatriation of foreign exchange, which is required by private telecommunications companies to improve and maintain their infrastructure. Given the near total control of the ICT sector by the government and its proclivity to exercise bias and avoid rule of law, any independent oversight of these bodies is impossible.

## Limits on Content

In late 2013 and early 2014, the Venezuelan government blocked nearly 400 websites providing information on politics and economic issues, such as currency exchange rates and political demonstrations. In February 2014, CONATEL blocked the website of NTN24, a Colombian news group, after it aired video of a protester being killed; the regulator also blocked images of the protests on Twitter.

Venezuelans are avid users of digital media, which has emerged as an important platform for circulating information and expressing opinions at a time when independent television and radio stations have come under increased pressure.[65] Over the past few years, however, the state has begun turning its attention to the internet as well. In December 2010, the National Assembly adopted a reform of the 2004 Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television (the ResorteME Law), extending regulation to online and electronic media. Under this law, online media outlets must establish mechanisms to restrict content that violates the law; however, matters are complicated by vague descriptions of prohibited content. Article 27, for example, forbids messages that promote anxiety among the population or alter public order, that disregard legal authorities, or that promote the violation of existing laws. Websites found in violation may be fined up to VEF 25,000

63   Small entrepreneurs use credit cards to pay for services or make purchases. The amount of foreign exchange they are allowed to use has been reduced from $3000 to $300 per year. See: Luis Carlos Díaz, "Venezuela: Compras por Internet Están Bloqueadas Desde Inicios de 2014," [Venezuela: Internet Purchases Blocked Since Early 2014], CNET (Website), January 23, 2014, http://goo.gl/xk2qUY

64   El Siglo, "En Gaceta Traspaso de Conatel al Minci," [In Gazette, Conatel's Transfer to Minci], December 10, 2013, http://goo.gl/rGCMZR

65   Antonio María Delgado, "Venezolanos Burlan el Acoso a la Prensa de Maduro Gracias a Internet," [Venezuelans Outsmart Maduro's Harassment of the Press Thanks to the Internet], El Nuevo Herald, December 4, 2013 http://goo.gl/Vr8mKz

(approximately US$4,000); service providers who do not respond to government inquiries risk temporary suspension of operations.[66]

CONATEL has demonstrated a progovernment bias since it began to make administrative decisions under the banner of the ResorteME Law, such as blocking websites without judicial process and threatening to hold ISPs who object legally responsible.[67] Venezuela has a history of placing restrictions on websites containing important social and political information, yet decisions to block content are neither transparent nor accompanied by an appeals process. In a move uncharacteristic of state regulatory bodies, the government did make an open announcement in November 2013 detailing CONATEL's blocking of websites[68] that informed citizens of the price of the so-called "parallel dollar;"[69] however, the block—which has been in place for over six months—has now extended to nearly all sources of economic information.

CONATEL also urged the e-commerce portals Tucarro.com and Tuinmueble.com not to publish prices of vehicles and real estate.[70] Both sites were threatened with closure for their alleged role in what the government is calling an "economic war" against the president. CONATEL further claimed that the sites were in violation of Article 27 of the ResortME Law and threatened to hold ISPs responsible as intermediaries, making them legally liable for hosted content.[71] The regulator also requested that Twitter block accounts linked to websites that show prices of foreign exchange differing from Venezuela's official rates; however, Twitter refused the request.[72] The domain .co and others such as popular link shorterner bit.ly were also temporarily blocked,[73] reportedly to prevent Venezuelans from accessing an audio file, circulated primarily on Twitter, that featured the voice of deceased President Hugo Chávez, for fear that it might cause unrest.[74]

Pro-opposition and independent news websites have also been blocked or disabled at various times, along with the website of the country's National Electoral Council, which was temporarily unavailable

66    República Bolivariana de Venezuela, "Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio, Television y Medios Electronicos," [The Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, Television and Electronic Media] SIBCI, accessed January 26, 2014, http://www.leyresorte.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Ley-de-Responsabilidad-Social-en-Radio-Television-y-Medios-Electr%C3%B3nicos.pdf

67    William Castillo, director of CONATEL: "No Permitiremos Que Se Use el Espectro Radioeléctrico para Otro Golpe de Estado," [We Will Not Allow the Use of Radio Spectrum for Another Coup d´Etat], CONATEL (website), February 14, 2014, http://goo.gl/s6yw07; See also: Espacio Público, "Espacio Público Rechaza Medida de CONATEL Contra Proveedores de Servicios de Internet," [Espacio Publico Rejects CONATEL's Measure Against Internet Service Providers], November 19, 2013, http://www.espaciopublico.org/index.php/noticias/1-libertad-de-expresi/2782-2013-11-19-18-46-10

68    El Nacional, "CONATEL Bloqueó Más de 100 Webs Que Informaban Sobre Dólar Paralelo, " [CONATEL Blocked More Than 100 Sites Reporting On Parallel Dollar], November 15, 2013, http://goo.gl/oFZagQ

69    The "parallel dollar" is the black market rate, which is 12 times more expensive than the official dollar. A foreign currency exchange control has been in place in Venezuela since 2003 and, progressively, the distance between the official exchange rate and the black market dollar price has been widening. Currently, this rate is about 10-12 times higher than the official one. For more, see: John Otis, "Venezuela Tries to Suppress Reports of Economic Upheaval," Committee to Protect Journalists (Blog) December 3, 2013, http://goo.gl/im3z20.

70    SIBCI, "Conatel Efectúa Reuniones Para Aplicar Regulaciones a Sitios Web Que Ofertan Bienes," [Conatel Makes Meetings to Implement Regulations to Websites that Offer Goods], November 9, 2013, http://goo.gl/2InuKw

71    John Otis, "Venezuela Forces ISPs to Police Internet," Committee to Protect Journalists, December 12, 2013 http://goo.gl/Q1jjcm

72    Noticias 24, "Conatel Solicita a Twitter Bloquear Cuentas Vinculadas con Webs Que Ilícitamente Cotizaban Divisas [Conatel Asks Twitter to Block Accounts Linked to Websites That Illegally Quote Currencies], November 19, 2013, http://goo.gl/7colPS

73    Joshua Goodman, "Venezuelan Cyber Crackdown Ensnares Web's Bitly," The Big Story, December 5, 2013 http://goo.gl/5h102v; See also: Mark Josephson, "Bitly is Blocked in Venezuela and Why We Care," Bit.ly blog, December 5, 2013, http://blog.bitly.com/post/69096442727/bitly-is-blocked-in-venezuela-and-why-we-care

74    Marianne Díaz, "Venezuela: Chavez Recording Hits the Web, Top-Level Domain is Blocked," GlobalVoices Advocacy, October 14, 2013, http://goo.gl/2vOEpW

from both inside and outside of the country at key political moments.[75] Despite the availability of human rights websites such as Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and Amnesty International, and the growing popularity of social media networks,[76] websites such as Diariodecuba. com, Analisis24.com, and even Anonymouse.org—an anonymous proxy service—remain inaccessible to Venezuelans who access the internet via CANTV. Sites like Infodio.com, dedicated to revealing corruption among high government officials, have been blocked by CANTV as well as by private ISPs.[77] Between February and May 2014, some 184 websites were inaccessible to CANTV internet subscribers.[78] Freedom of information activists José Luis Rivas, Andrés Azpúrua, and Oliver Rivas have further suggested that private ISPs blocked additional sites at the behest of the government. [79]

Venezuela has more than three million registered Twitter users, occupying thirteenth place in the world and the fourth place in Latin America.[80] Media with high circulation, such as the newspaper *El Universal*, have also started to circulate via the internet, which has become a forum for voices not supported in traditional, state-run media.[81] Due to exclusion from public channels and reduced space in private media during the 2013 presidential campaign, opposition candidate Henrique Capriles launched his own channel on the internet, Capriles.tv.[82] Although Capriles.tv is seen by few people due to lack of necessary bandwidth, Capriles has also made active use of Twitter to connect with his supporters, and has now surpassed the four million followers claimed by late President Hugo Chavez.[83]

As use of social media has flourished, online campaigns in support of political figures and basic civil rights have become ubiquitous, and social media has become the last space in which Venezuelans do not practice self-censorship. A message from Capriles, which translates as "Venezuela, to take care of you I have only this, my life, [84]" became the most retweeted message in Venezuela to date.[85] Celebrities joined in, using the hash tag #yosoyvenezolano (#iamvenezuelan), which at one point ranked first in Twitter's worldwide trending topics, to show their support for Capriles.[86] After the presidential elections, cyber activists joined forces through the website of human rights NGO Provea to dismantle fake news spread by the government in which the opposition was blamed for setting

75    Alek Boyd, "Venezuela Suspende Acceso a Internet Durante Elecciones Presidenciales," [Venezuela Suspends Internet Access During Presidential Elections], April 15, 2013, http://goo.gl/PAcLuo

76    Alexa, "Top Sites in Venezuela," accessed April 27, 2014, http://goo.gl/fFWD3w

77    Alek Boyd, "Inter, Movistar, Supercable y CANTV Bloquean Acceso a Portal Anti-Corrupción en Venezuela," [Inter, Movistar, CANTV, Supercable and CANTV Block Access to Anti-Corruption Web Site in Venezuela], *Infodio*,  January 17, 2014, http://infodio.com/node/604

78    Herdict.org  report on Venezuela, February 1st to April 30, 2014, accessed April 30, 2014, http://goo.gl/Nty0Li

79    José Luis Rivas, Ghostbar (Blog), accessed April 30, 2014, https://medium.com/@ghostbar; See also: Andrés Azpúrua, Vesinfiltro, (website), accessed April 30, 2014, http://vesinfiltro.com/bloqueos/; and Oliver Rivas, "Sites Blocked by Movistar," Orvtech.com (website), April 2014,  http://orvtech.com/bloqueo-dns.txt

80    Marjuli Matheus, "Venezuela es el 13º País Más Activo en Twitter," [Venezuela is the 13th Most Active Country on Twitter] *Últimas Noticias*, January 7, 2013, http://goo.gl/j2yB65

81    *El Universal*, "EUTV: Vanguardia Digital," [EUTV: Digital Vanguard], November 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/Eg2A8u

82    Charlie Devereux and Corina Pons, "Capriles Starts Internet TV Show to Skirt Venezuelan 'Censorship,'" Bloomberg Technology (Blog), June 11, 2013, http://goo.gl/rW4eA5

83    Twitteros en Venezuela, accessed April 30, 2014, http://www.twven.com/

84    Quote taken from Henrique Capriles' Twitter page, April 5, 2013, https://twitter.com/hcapriles/status/320241677115731968

85    MiamiDiario, "Tuit de Capriles se Convierte en el Más Retuiteado en Venezuela," [Capriles' Tweet Becomes the Most Retweeted in Venezuela], April 5, 2013, http://goo.gl/QDgDS7

86    La Patilla, "#YoSoyVenezolano se Posiciona de Primero en el Trending Topic Mundial," [# YoSoyVenezolano Ranks First in the World Trending Topics], April 5, 2013, http://goo.gl/imyttg

fire to several medical centers staffed by Cuban personnel—fires which, it turns out, never occurred.[87]

A number of other initiatives, like the Twitter account @ustedabuso (you were abused), were created to allow citizens to report on violations of electoral law and to mobilize support for candidates. During the election, the so-called #Operacionavalancha, which sought to mobilize opposition voters, became a trending topic and garnered, on average, more than 120 messages per minute with thousands of retweets. Not all online campaigns have been as successful, however. In March 2014, a movement aimed at drawing international attention to the protests spread under the hashtag #OscarsForVenezuela, asking celebrities to mention the repression in their acceptance speeches. In response to the popularity of the campaign, Venezuelan authorities banned the airing of the awards show within the country for the first time in 39 years.[88]

Manipulation of online content by the ruling party and its supporters has compromised the atmosphere of free online debate of sociopolitical issues, and has further suggested systematic controls on content.[89] CONATEL has urged the media to avoid using the word "looting" in reports on citizens' responses to shortages of food and basic supplies.[90] In response, journalists from TV channels Venevision and Globovison opened Twitter accounts in order to inform their followers about the pressure they were under from the government and station owners alike to censor themselves.[91] In May 2013, Google's transparency report included a request for removal of content from a Venezuelan state agency for the first time.[92] Although the specifics were not published, it is assumed that the content in question was related to one highly publicized case, in which the Venezuelan government accused Google of ridiculing President Nicolás Maduro by allowing a distorted image of the President to appear in search results.[93] Google appears to have responded to the request in a manner which satisfied the Venezuelan government, although the details are unclear.[94]

The government is also making substantial use of social media platforms to propagate its point of view and counter political opposition. The Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) proactively disseminates its views and counters opponents through progovernment platforms, such as the website Apporrea.org, launched in 2002, and the Twitter feed @RedVergataria, launched in 2011 with the support of CANTV's Movilnet and the Ministry of Popular Power for Science and

87    Provea (Website), http://www.derechos.org.ve/; See also: Rafael Uzcátegui, "Provea y la Quema de Los CDI," [Provea and the CDI burning], April 22, 2013, http://goo.gl/Fzygwq

88    Brian Ries, "Venezuelan Protesters Ask Oscar Winners to Speak Up," Mashable, Mar 2, 2014, http://goo.gl/m8ltNH

89    Gaby Castellanos, "La Estrategia Digital del Gobierno Venezolano," [The Venezuelan Government's Digital Strategy], El Nacional, April 10, 2014, http://goo.gl/jhIaiX; See also: Noticias 24, "Conatel Abre Procedimiento a Proveedores de Internet: Digitel, Movistar, Movilnet y Otros," [Conatel Opens Procedure Against ISP's: Digitel, Movistar, Movilnet, and Others], November 9, 2013, http://goo.gl/DCNrLt; See also: Ultimas Noticias, "Van 111 Páginas Bloqueadas por Dar Precio del Dólar Paralelo," [111 Pages Blocked for Showing Price of the Parallel Dollar], November 15, 2013 http://goo.gl/wvNv0j

90    Alfredo Meza, " 'Saqueo,' Esa Palabra Proscrita," ['Looting,' That Banned Word], El País, November 14, 2013, http://goo.gl/6fPmu1

91    For example, @VVperiodistas  and @GVSinCensura from TV Channels Globovisión and Venevisión

92    Google, "Transparency Report," January-June 2013, accessed January 24, 2014, http://goo.gl/a9heF2

93    Europa Press, "Venezuela Acusa a Google de Ridiculizar a Nicolás Maduro con una Imagen Distorsionada," [Google Accused of Ridiculing Nicolas Maduro with a Distorted Picture], May 17, 2013. http://goo.gl/gldUkt

94    Ultimas Noticias, "Google Retira la Imagen que Distorsionaba el Rostro de Maduro," [Google Removes the Image that Distorted Maduro's Face], May 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/o2Pmxf

Technology.[95] President Nicolás Maduro has also urged his followers to fight opponents through social networks and via a "virtual army" known by the acronym #TROPA (Revolutionary Tweeters Organized for the Homeland) whose mission is to disseminate government propaganda and catapult anti-opposition messages to the top of Twitter's trending topics. [96]

In recent years, the government has begun to blame unrest on social media. In May 2013, after the highly contested presidential election, National Assembly deputy Pedro Carreño blamed ensuing violence on posts published on Twitter, and subsequently announced a bill to regulate social networks.[97] In December, the same deputy announced that the ruling party (which has the parliamentary majority) would promote the enactment of a "unique communication law" and that the ResorteME Law would be reformed again.[98]

Continuing its trend of shifting focus to social media, the government recently created a body known as the Vice Ministry of Social Networks, which is focused solely on observing, regulating, and utilizing this new medium.[99] In March 2014, the government created a database known as "Troop of Joy and Peace," to face what it calls the "Twitter War." Chavista militants can register to "defend the revolution" through the portal Tuiteros.org.ve.[100] The government has also published governing regulations for a new body known as the Strategic Center for Security and Protection of the Country (CESPPA)[101] created in autumn 2013 to monitor the internet for content that might affect "state policies."[102] CESPPA's specific response plan for such content remains unclear, but the vague language used in the new regulation appears to give it great discretionary authority.

Between February and March 2014, petitions were launched by the Venezuela chapter of the Internet Society (ISoc),[103] the Acceso Libre initiative,[104] and a group of free software activists,[105]

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95    Government of Hugo Chávez, Red Vergataria (blog) http://www.redvergataria.com/; See also: (1) Rachel Glickhouse, Explainer: Twitter in Latin America, Americas Society/Council of the Americas, January 18, 2013, http://bit.ly/YdKylj

96    *Infobae*, "Maduro Lanza Ciberguerra Contra la Oposición," [Maduro Launchs Cyberwar Against Opposition], August 23, 2013, http://goo.gl/9faWx2; See also: Mireya Tabuas, "El Ejército Virtual del Chavismo," [The Virtual Army of Chavez], *El Nacional*, May 26, 2013, http://goo.gl/V04Y4A

97    *Últimas Noticias*, "Pedro Carreño Anuncia que Hablará con Twitter por Violencia Postelectoral" [Pedro Carreño Announces That He Will Talk to Twitter About Post-Election Violence], May 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/11iwwBo

98    Maru Morales, "Parlamento Quiere Ley Unica de Periodismo y Medios," [Parliament wants a "Unique" Law of Journalism and Media], *El Nacional*, December 13, 2013, http://goo.gl/jlXUCC

99    Vanessa Arenas, "Gobierno Crea Viceministerio Para Redes Sociales," [Government Creates Vice Ministry for Social Networks], *Ultimas Noticias*, January 12, 2014, http://goo.gl/VIJYAf; See also: Pedro Peñaloza, "Nuevo Viceministro de Redes Sociales Entró Ayer en Twitter," [New Deputy Minister of Social Networks Entered Yesterday on Twitter], *El Universal*, January 22, 2014, http://goo.gl/zFZBSy

100    *Últimas Noticias*, "Crean Portal Web Para Tuiteros Chavistas," [Government Launches a Website for Chavistas Twitter Users], March 18, 2014, http://goo.gl/v0c52R; The first Venezuelan "Twitter Users for Peace" meeting was also recently hosted at the headquarters of state-owned CANTV, where the president announced that the government was planning to organize a regional, Latin American meeting, of "Tweeters for Peace." See: Samantha Badgen, "Venezuelan President Calls for Latin American Summit of Chavista Twitter Users," Journalism in the Americas, March 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/KyjBG5

101    República Bolivariana de Venezuela, CESPPA Gaceta Oficial [CESPPA Offical Newsletter], N° 40.279 del 24 de Octubre, accessed April 30, 2014, http://uncdn.blob.core.windows.net/undescargables/Gaceta-Oficial-numero-40355.pdf

102    Danny O´Brien, "Venezuela's Internet Crackdown Escalates into Regional Blackout," Electronic Frontier Foundation, February 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/sarvls

103    ISOC-VE, "Isoc Venezuela Llama a Libertad de Internet," [Venezuela ISOC Calls for Internet Freedom], March 13, 2014, http://goo.gl/YuDN9H

104    Lucena Manuel, "Comunicado a Favor de la Libertad y Neutralidad de la Red," [Statement in Favor of Freedom and Net Neutrality], accessed April 30, 2014, http://goo.gl/caLOjG

105    Change.org, "Internet Libre Demandamos el Cese de la Censura en Internet en Venezuela," [We Demand an End to Internet Censorship in Venezuela], accessed April 30, 2014, http://goo.gl/L1JDHj

advocating for freedom on the internet and the end of internet censorship in Venezuela. During a late April teleconference in Estonia, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also publicly asserted that the Venezuelan government had restricted freedom of expression online, impeding internet access and blocking websites in order to counter what he called peaceful antigovernment protests.[106]

Despite the state's growing barriers to diversity of opinions online, in May 2014, the NGO Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS) launched a collaborative platform known as *Poderopedia,* which, with the use of data visualizations, provides an unbiased "who's who" in business and politics.[107] Renowned freedom of information activists, such as Luis Carlos Díaz and Naibet Soto, have also recently launched live feeds on YouTube where they discuss political issues; both of these channels have become very popular among young Twitter users, and, as yet, remain unhampered by any state monitoring.[108]

Although social media has rarely been used to mobilize people in the past, on February 11, 2014, local opposition leaders, students, and journalists alike began to turn to social media to organize protests. Hundreds of journalists turned out for a rally, spreading the word on Twitter under the hashtag #MarchaPorlaPrensa (March for the Press). Twenty-four hours later, on National Youth Day, nascent popular demonstrations were bolstered by thousands of students voicing their frustration with the country's growing economic insecurity. Around the same time, Leopoldo López, the leader of the small but emerging political party Voluntad Popular (Popular Will), called on his supporters to take to the streets to protest worsening conditions, using the hashtag #LaSalida to get the word out.

In response to the protests, the administration greatly intensified its crackdown on both traditional and new media. After graphic images of injured protesters appeared on Twitter under the hashtags #12F and #SOSVenezuela, Venezuelan ISPs blocked Pbs.twimg.com, the site that hosts Twitter images, rendering photos inaccessible within the country. A separate block prevented Venezuelans from reaching the text-hosting site Pastebin.[109] No official explanation was provided for the loss of access to these general-purpose communications platforms; however, Nu Wexler, a spokesperson for Twitter, affirmed that the government was behind the blocking.[110] Twitter also posted a tweet explaining how to use the service through SMS in case of restrictions on access to the site.[111] Although many government supporters denied any CONATEL responsibility, a government representative later allowed that "some blocking" was necessary to combat online attacks and acknowledged having blocked 384 sites.[112]

106    *El Universal*, "John Kerry Reports Venezuelan Gov't Restrictions on Internet Access," April 29, 2014, http://goo.gl/Hu3sMm

107    Official Site of Poderopedia, http://poderopedia.org/ve, accessed May 3, 2014

108    Luis Carlos Díaz and Naibet Soto, "HangOut Político," [Political Hang Out], accessed April 1, 2014, http://goo.gl/iY32FF

109    José Luis Rivas, "Yes, We Were Censored. Proof of the Block on Twitter Images and Pastebin in Venezuela," blog of José Luis Rivas, accessed on April 30, 2014; See also: Pastebin Account, https://twitter.com/pastebin/status/435879980707225600

110    Patricia Laya, Sarah Frier and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Venezuelans Blocked on Twitter as Opposition Protests Mount," Bloomberg, February 14, 2014, http://goo.gl/LNLq0S; See also: *Ultimas Noticias*, "William Castillo: Twitter No Se Pronunció Sobre Venezuela," [William Castillo: Twitter Did Not Rule on Venezuela], February 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/Ma1D4v

111    BBC, "Twitter Confirma Bloqueo de Imágenes en Venezuela," [Twitter Confirms Blocking Images in Venezuela], February 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/iTPcU6

112    *El Impulso*, "Conatel Admite Bloqueo de Sitios Web," [Conatel Supports Blocking Some Websites], February 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/eFypwg; See also: William Castillo, (Twitter account), "Conatel Ha Bloqueado 384 Enlaces," [Conatel Has Blocked 384 Links], accessed April 30, 2014, https://twitter.com/planwac/status/43343564120103731

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The Maduro administration also revoked (and soon restored, presumably due to international pressure) the credentials of CNN reporters, pressuring them to leave through threats and harassment. The government then banned coverage of the protests by all nonstate outlets, removing Colombia-based news channel NTN24 from Venezuelan cable services and blocking its website after it aired footage of a student who was shot and killed during the protest.[113] The Twitter account of the news channel NTN24 was also hacked.[114]

During the protests, Juan Comerma, vice president of technological infrastructure for Movistar, stated that data consumption rose by more than 35 percent, primarily due to images and YouTube videos linked from platforms such as Twitter.[115] While most of the protest images that were uploaded were legitimate, a handful of social media users began posting forged images from unrest in Egypt or the Palestinian territories, and claiming that they were photos of the violence underway in Venezuela. Although small, this campaign of disinformation provided the government with the evidence it needed to call into question *all* of the protest photos that had been shared on social networks. At the same time, the government made use of a similar technique as part of a ruse to present evidence that news of the protests had been exaggerated.[116]

Despite the dual campaigns of disinformation, the true scope of the unrest and the police response were eventually disseminated online. During the demonstrations, online activists and citizen reporters recorded serious attacks on human rights by security agencies such as the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the National Guard and disseminated them via YouTube and Twitter. Professional journalists then used these sources to assemble coverage that made the repression evident and forced the government to arrest those responsible, many of whom were members of the police and other bodies of state security.[117]

## Violations of User Rights

In Venezuela, there are many avenues by which bloggers, journalists, and private citizens can be punished for content posted online. The Venezuelan constitution prohibits anonymity—a rule that applies to all media.[118] The tracking of mobile phone users is an increasing problem. Since 2005, CONATEL has required mobile phone operators to collect copies of subscribers' identity documents, addresses, fingerprints, and signatures.[119] According to the Computer Crimes Act, this information must be delivered to state security agencies upon presentation of a judicial warrant. Service providers are also obligated to keep detailed logs of all calls, including the phone number and location of both the caller and the recipient.

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113    Dennis Lynch, "Four Websites that Are Down in Venezuela and More," *International Business Times*, February 21, 2014 http://goo.gl/QGM5wo

114    César Miguel Rondón, Twitter, https://twitter.com/cmrondon/status/433936066043580416, accessed April 30, 2014.

115    La Patilla, "Internet Echa Humo en Venezuela," [In Venezuela Internet Is On Fire], February 21, 2014, http://goo.gl/2yuH4L

116    Gaby Castellanos, "Caso Venezuela: La Verdad de Las Fotos Falsas," [Venezuela Case: The Truth of Fake Photos], March 3, 2014, http://goo.gl/M68uy6

117    *Ultimas Noticias*, "Funcionarios del Sebin y 'Vinculados al Chavismo' Presos por Sucesos del 12F," [SEBIN Officials and Prisoners 'Linked to Chavez' by Events of 12F], February 22, 2014, http://goo.gl/pFKgHN

118    Article 57 establishes freedom of expression and freedom from censorship, but also forbids anonymity. Official site of The Supreme Court: http://goo.gl/mt9okw; accessed April 15, 2014.

119    Gaceta Oficial No. 38.157, April 1, 2005,  http://goo.gl/zhWjGo; accessed April 30, 2014.

**Venezuela**

Despite these challenges, government opposition and independent bloggers are active on social media platforms. In 2013 and 2014, such expression was met with increased physical and technical violence extending to harassment, intimidation, detentions, and cyberattacks. Numerous fatalities were reported in the early 2014 protests, many of which appear to have been at the hands of government employees. Digital impersonations are also on the rise, and have compromised the integrity of a number of digital identities and websites.

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are constitutionally guaranteed in Venezuela, and a 1999 provision requires the state to provide public access to ICTs.[120] Various laws, however, have been used to undermine online freedoms and to restrict media. When coupled with CANTV's market dominance, the lack of institutional checks and balances in Venezuela makes it possible for the government to monitor and harass political opponents with impunity. Since 2001, the Supreme Court of Justice has issued no fewer than 10 judgments curbing freedom of expression, evidence of the Court's susceptibility to influence from the executive branch, particularly with regard to cases of political importance.[121] Vague wording in the country's penal code, which criminalizes the dissemination of "false information" with prison terms of two to five years, encourages self-censorship.[122] Article 147 of the penal code further criminalizes defamation of the president with penalties of 6 to 30 months in prison.[123] Given that the internet is classified as a channel of mass distribution of information, some violations of the penal code—such as defamation or incitement—may be considered more severe online than in other mediums.[124]

The Venezuelan government has historically had an antagonistic relationship with users of traditional and social media. In the summer of 2013, however, one case of censorship set precedent as the country's first formal measure forbidding a citizen from using such platforms. Judge María Lourdes Afiuni was barred from social media after using her Twitter account, @Mariafiuni, to report on the abuse she suffered while in prison and to voice her opinion of the Venezuelan penal system. Ms. Afiuni has been held on corruption charges since making a 2009 ruling that complied with United Nations guidelines concerning unjust imprisonment, but which angered then-president Hugo Chavez. On June 15, 2013, as part of the decision that granted her parole for health reasons, a Caracas court extended a precautionary measure forbidding Ms.Afiuni from expressing herself on social media. On July 31, the Court dismissed Ms. Afiuni's appeal. While there is only one such example of court-ordered online censorship to date, it sets a disturbing precedent.[125]

Detentions of Twitter users and citizen journalists have become increasingly common in recent years. In March 2013, after the death of President Chávez, private citizen Lourdes Alicia Ortega Perez was arrested for "spreading false information" via Twitter after making a sarcastic comment about plans for the president's funeral. She was released one week later, but is required to make monthly court

120    Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, Constitution [in Spanish], March 24, 2000, 108:110 http://bit.ly/tXiOk

121    Juan Francisco Alonso, "Jueces Buscan Limitar Libre Expresión" [Judges Seek to Limit Free Speech], *El Universal*, August 21, 2010, http://goo.gl/Oze6FL

122    Gaceta Official, "Summary of the National Assembly" [in Spanish], Gaceta Oficial No. 5.763 (March 16, 2005) http://goo.gl/y8jE6g; accessed on April 30, 2014

123    Sumate, "Respeto a la Libertad de Expresión: ¿Limita el Código Penal la Libertad de Expresión?" [Respect for Freedom of Expression: Does the Penal Code Limit Freedom of Expression?], http://goo.gl/tiDbpX' accessed April 30, 2014

124    Rafael Martínez, "Twitter: Esos Malditos 140 Caracteres" [Twitter: Those Damned 140 Characters], *SoyRafael.com* (blog), February 22, 1010,  http://goo.gl/ea7j8b ; See also: Article 285 of the Penal Code

125    Insituto Prensa y Sociedad, "Caracas: Court Prohibited Judge from Expressing Herself Through Social Networks," June 15, 2013, http://goo.gl/ocQYPk

appearances until further notice.[126] In previous years, others were similarly arrested for "spreading false information" and "plotting to destabilize the government" under measures that seem designed to generate self-censorship and fear.[127]

Although a positive "infogovernment law" was approved in October 2013, encouraging governmental transparency and setting the groundwork for public access to information,[128] such ideals appear to function solely in theory.[129] Venezuela's Special Law against Information Crimes and its Communications Privacy Protection Law, both of which safeguard privacy and impose prison terms for those who illegally intercept others' communications,[130] are similarly overlooked when privacy breaches target members of the opposition.[131] Reports have trickled in of ongoing, extralegal tapping of the phones and other private communications of key opposition figures.[132]

Monitoring of the digital environment by the state is widespread and extends to both the government and the private sector. Government officials reportedly monitor members of the opposition and occasionally publish their private information as a means of intimidation. In January 2014, for example, Minister of Communication and Information Delcy Rodríguez tweeted the names, ID numbers, vacation destinations, and dates of departure of 27 opposition politicians, in a clear violation of their privacy.[133] In March, Congresswoman Maria Corina Machado, who was stripped of her parliamentary seat for an alleged plot to overthrow the government, was also victim to an invasion of privacy. After slandering Ms. Machado, who was a supporter of the 2014 protests, state media obtained and aired her phone records. The complaints of Ms. Machado's attorneys, who pointed out that interception of private communications violates the constitution, were ignored.[134]

CANTV employees have been fired following the tapping of their phones, suggesting a targeted attempt by the administration to ferret out those who support the opposition and to staff the

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126   *La Patilla*, "Detienen a Tuitera por Generar Rumores Desestabilizadores" [Twitter User Was Arrested for Generating Destabilizing Rumors], March 13, 2013, http://bit.ly/WnBZBY

127   Urribarrí, Raisa, "El Año en que Tuiteamos en Peligro," [The Year We Tweeted in Danger], *Periodismo en Línea*, November 15, 2010, http://goo.gl/dyQFFA; accessed on April 30, 2014

128   Law available at the following link: http://alertalaboral.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/ley-infogobierno.pdf; accessed April 30, 2014

129   Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) http://goo.gl/z7FqQA ; See also: Espacio Público (Blog), "Tribunales Niegan Información Sobre Actuaciones de CONATEL," [Courts Refuse Information on CONATEL'S Actions], June 13, 2013, http://goo.gl/EObHOY

130   The National Assembly, Special Law Against Cybercrime [in Spanish], accessed January 7, 2014,  http://bit.ly/gmLBCi; For the full law on Protection of Communications Privacy, see Biblioteca Susuerte: http://bit.ly/15Ck5Nv; and "Ley Sobre Protección a la Privacidad de las Comunicaciones" [Law on Protection of Communications Privacy], http://bit.ly/15Ck5Nv, accessed April 30, 2014

131   Gregorio Salazar, "Under Chávez: Media Harassed with Online Hacking, Phone Tapping and Censorship," *Sampsonia Way*, January 23, 2012,  http://bit.ly/xZWdVq

132   Analisis24, "Venezuela: El Ultra Secreto 'CASO 1' que Genero Zozobra en el Gobierno de Hugo Chávez" [The Top Secret "CASE 1" which Generated Anxiety in the Government of Hugo Chávez], January 20, 2013, http://bit.ly/WiNbxq

133   Twitter account of D Rodriguez, "Trilogía del Mal-Dirigencia Opositora en Vacaciones de Lujo en el Exterior," [Trilogy of Evil-Opposition Leaders in Luxury Vacations Abroad], January 1, 2014, https://twitter.com/DrodriguezMinci/status/418588045563428864; See also: *Ultimas Noticias, Ministra Rodríguez Publicó Lista de Salida al Exterior de Líderes Opositores, [Minister Rodríguez Published List of Opposition Leaders' Trips Abroad] January 2, 2014,* http://goo.gl/t7d5Qx

134   *El Universal*, "Abogados de Machado Denunciaron a Moderadores de VTV Ante Fiscalía," [Machado Denounced VTV Moderators to Prosecutor], March 19, 2014, http://goo.gl/gf29bX

regulator with government supporters.[135] Members of independent and state-run media have also been subject to observation and termination based on their posts on social media. In February 2014, Globovisión journalist David De Matteis was allegedly fired from his position because of critical comments he posted on Twitter while covering a presidential press conference.[136] During the same month, Alexander Zapata (@vozcontalento), a journalist with state-owned station VTV, was fired for criticizing the work of the Venezuelan Institute of Social Security through his Twitter account.[137]

While the full scale of surveillance in Venezuela is unclear, the lack of independent oversight of the country's media regulator has raised concerns about the ease with which systematic content filtering and surveillance could be implemented.[138] In a concerning revelation, a recent study by Citizen Lab provided evidence that Venezuela is a client of Blue Coat Systems, a computer security company often used by authoritarian governments for monitoring, spying, and censorship of networks.[139]

In April 2014, the portal of the Confidential Report (reporteconfidencial.info) was raided and intelligence agents took its director, Braulio Jatar, for interrogation. Neither the authorities nor the director explained the rationale for the court-ordered raid, which involved the seizure of the site's computers. Although Jatar was released several hours after his detention, his computers were not returned. Despite the interruption, Jatar's YouTube channel, which covers protests and demonstrations in Tachira and Caracas, remains one of the most watched in Venezuela with more than 18,000 subscribers and more than a million views.[140]  As of June 2014, the site of Reporte Confidencial was also back up and running.[141]

Opposition members and independent journalists who make use of Twitter have also frequently been targeted by government officials as agents of violence or instability for posts on their profiles. In July 2013, renowned journalist Nelson Bocaranda was accused of instigating a series of (fictional) attacks after posting a message about presidential election irregularities on Twitter.[142] In December, journalist Lisseth Boon of *Últimas Noticias* was likewise the target of intimidation and belittling when she tweeted about the process surrounding the municipal elections.[143]

Threats against journalists and opposition members also increased during the 2014 protests. President Maduro threatened to bring journalists and artists to court for being "agents of violence"

135    Inside Telecom Vol XIV No. 15. April 18, 2013; See also: Luisana Colomine, "En la Web de Cantv, Sección de Foros, le Hacen Propaganda a Capriles. Mosca, Manuel Fernández e Ilva Calderón," [On Cantv's Webpage, in the Forum Section, People Are Spreading Propaganda for Capriles. Watch out, Manuel Fernández and Ilva Calderón], accessed April 30, 2014, https://twitter.com/LuisanaC16/status/250268235826597889

136    Sofía Marcano, "David De Matteis fue Despedido de Globovisión," [David De Matteis Fired from Globovision], *Ultimas Noticias*,  February 26, 2014, http://goo.gl/Pgwusk

137    La Patilla, "Botan a Periodista de VTV por Criticar al Seguro Social," [VTV Journalist Discharged for Criticizing Social Insurance], February 28, 2014, http://goo.gl/h66Lc8

138    Ryan Gallagher, "Report: Silicon Valley Internet Surveillance Gear Use by Authoritarian Regimes," *Slate*, Jan 16, 2013

139    Citizen Lab, "Planet Blue Coat: Mapping Global Censorship and Surveillance Tools," January 15, 2013, http://goo.gl/C9VGUf

140     *El Comercio,* "Venezuela: Allanan Portal Que Cubre Marchas Contra Maduro," [Venezuela: Office of Website that Covers Marches Against Maduro Was Raided], April 29, 2014, http://goo.gl/MeDeDt

141    Official site of Reporte Confidencial, http://www.reporteconfidencial.info, accessed June 1, 2014

142    IFEX, "Venezuelan Journalist Subpoenaed, Accused of Post-Election Violence," July 11, 2013, http://goo.gl/5OmMDO

143    IFEX, "Journalist Berated on Twitter After Tweeting About Elections in Venezuela," December 17, 2013, http://goo.gl/gFrKQp

and for allegedly using their Twitter accounts to urge protesters to commit violent acts.[144]  The governor of Mérida likewise requested an investigation into an account, @trafficVZLA, due to its alleged role in "spread[ing] psychological attacks against the people.[145]" Journalist Vicelyz Fadul (@vicelyz) later announced that the so-called Chavista Troop had repeatedly threatened her on Twitter because of her opinions on the protests.[146] Lorena Arraíz (@lorenaarraiz), a journalist from *El Universal* who was also covering the protests, received the following message on Twitter in February: "We are going to get you and yours! Nobody is safe here." The account responsible for the threat also displayed Ms. Arraíz' ID number and date of birth. The aggressor's account was deleted after complaints to various associations and the police.[147]

In a trend that began during the protests, intelligence agents began seizing protesters' phones in order to make organization of dissidents more difficult, to delete images and videos of the protests and of abuse of protesters, and reportedly, to analyze the data on the phones in order to identify and penetrate the opposition's communication networks. [148] In March, one protester died as the result of National Guard agents attempting to seize his phone. Alejandro Márquez was recording abuses of protesters when guards pursued him and brutally beat him until he surrendered his phone. Márquez, one of more than 40 protest casualties, was pronounced brain dead at the hospital.[149]

The hacking of the websites and the accounts of opposition netizens and politicians continued to be an issue in late 2013 and early 2014. Due to the lack of any independent institution through which individuals can pursue complaints, many observers believe that the government may be directly or implicitly supporting the attacks. Although the Computer Crimes Law condemns the interception, alteration, or disclosure of any private information stored via ICTs, and specifies severe punishment for such crimes, no penalties have yet been imposed.[150] In late 2013, a long list of opposition leaders, humorists, and writers were all victims of hacking or identity theft. According to *La Patilla* editor David Moran, the website of the popular independent news portal has also been victim to Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks.[151]

In addition to the targeting of opposition websites, government accounts have also been subject to hacking in recent years. During the 2014 protests, the government blamed the opposition for the fall

144    *Ultimas Noticias*, "Presidente Amenaza a Periodistas y Artistas Por Ser 'Aagentes de Violencia'," [President Threatens Journalists and Artists as 'Agents of Violence'], February 20, 2014, http://goo.gl/N5dkcp

145    *Espacio Público*, "Gobernador de Mérida Pedirá a Conatel Investigar Tráfico Venezuela," [Merida Governor will ask Conatel to Investigate Traffic Venezuela], February 12, 2014, http://goo.gl/iiqii3

146    *Espacio Público*, "Le Dan Ultimátum a Periodista Por Opinar en Twitter," [Journalist Receives 'Ultimátum' Because of  Her Tweets], April 4, 2014, http://espaciopublico.org/index.php/noticias/1-libertad-de-expresi/2950-2014-04-02-20-27-50

147    Instituo Prensa y Sociedad Website, "Táchira: Amenazan a Periodista a Través de su Cuenta de Red Virtual de Twitter," [Táchira: Journalist threatened via Twitter], February 13, 2014, http://goo.gl/qUJsF3

148    Venezuela al Día (Website), "Te Ordeno Que Borres el Video o Te Quito el Teléfono," [I Order You to Erase the Video or I Will Take Your Phone], March 31, 2014, http://goo.gl/evUoVV; See also: Javier Ignacio Mayorca, "GNB Infiltró Protestas y Espió a Opositores," [GNB Infiltrated and Spied on Opposition Protests], *El Nacional*, March 2, 2014, http://goo.gl/JmTdGr

149    La Patilla (Website), "Murió Alejandro Márquez, Golpeado Por la GNB en Manifestación de la Candelaria," [Alejandro Marquez Died, Hit by GNB in Manifestation of Candelaria], February 23, 2014, http://goo.gl/nAKNKx

150    *Espacio Público*, "Espacio Público Exige al Estado Venezolano que Investigue y Sancione a los Responsables de los Ataques a Cuentas de Correo y Usurpación de Identidad en Redes Sociales," [Espacio Público Demands that the Venezuelan State Investigate and Punish those Responsible for Attacks on Email Accounts and Identity Theft on Social Networks], February 1, 2012, http://bit.ly/1bRp5F2

151    Antonio María Delgado, "Nicolás Maduro Busca Poner Cerrojo a la Internet en Venezuela," [Nicolas Maduro Seeks to Put a Padlock on the Internet in Venezuela], *El Nuevo Herald*, April 30, 2014, http://goo.gl/dIKaKM

of nearly 200 state websites.[152] In February, the official Twitter account of the Maduro administration (@PartidoPSUV) was also compromised.[153] Hackers replaced the administration's profile picture with an ironic image of late President Hugo Chávez, flanked by a photo of Bassil Da Costa, a young opposition member who was shot to death during the protests. Hackers also manipulated messages and tweeted against the government.[154] The ruling party claimed that the Twitter attacks were intended to suspend the accounts of three Venezuelan ministers, two state media companies, two ministries, and other prominent users who sympathize with the government. The attacks were also allegedly intended to reduce the number of followers President Nicolás Maduro has on the social network.[155] In light of these incidents, the head of state has proposed the creation of a "Bolivarian Twitter," a social network "free from the empire and the oppression of the big corporations."[156] Such rhetoric is typical of the government, which often makes pronouncements to draw attention to certain issues but only sporadically follows through on its threats to create and utilize new bodies or platforms.

152    *El Universal*, "Manuel Fernández: 'Venezuela enfrenta un agresivo ataque informático'"[Manuel Fernández: 'Venezuela Faces an Aggressive Cyber Attack'], February 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/bfMX6O  and Ministra Delcy Rodríguez Twitter Account https://twitter.com/DrodriguezMinci/status/435614140317851648, accessed on April 30, 2014

153    Infobae Website, "Tras la Censura a Fotos en Twitter, Hackearon la Cuenta del PSUV," [After Censoring Photos on Twitter, PSUV Twitter Account was Hacked], February 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/3jfg5b

154    *Ultima Noticias*, "Cuenta del PSUV Fue Hackeada," [PSUV Twitter Account was Hacked], February 14, 2014, http://goo.gl/EIvxIL

155    *Espacio Público*, "Maduro Denuncia Eliminación de Seguidores en Twitter," [Maduro Denounces Elimination of Twitter Followers], November 6, 2013, http://goo.gl/IeyzSX; See also: PSUV online, "Atacan Cuentas Revolucionarias en Red Social Twitter," [Attacks Against Revolutionary Accounts on Social Network Twitter], November 1, 2012, http://goo.gl/CDqRy0

156    Eduardo Marín, "Gobierno de Venezuela Propone un 'Twitter Bolivariano' Luego de Percances con la Red Social," [Venezuelan Government Proposed a 'Bolivarian Twitter' After Mishaps with the Social Network], November 6, 2013, http://goo.gl/uzc1Xc