

Venezuela's RCTV: Sine Die and Good Riddance

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Venezuelan TV station Radio Caracas Television's (known as RCTV) VHF Channel 2's operating license expired May 27, and it went off the air because the Chavez government, with ample justification, chose not to renew it. RCTV was the nation's oldest private broadcaster, operating since 1953. It's also had a tainted record of airing Venezuela's most hard right yellow journalism, consistently showing a lack of ethics, integrity or professional standards in how it operated as required by the law it arrogantly flaunted.

Starting May 28, a new public TV station (TVES) replaces it bringing Venezuelans a diverse range of new programming TV channel Vive president, Blanca Eckhout, says will "promot(e) the participation and involvement of all Venezuelans in the task of communication (as an alternative to) the media concentration of the radio-electric spectrum that remains in the hands of a (dominant corporate) minority sector" representing elitist business interests, not the people.

Along with the other four major corporate-owned dominant television channels (controlling 90% of the nation's TV market), RCTV played a leading role instigating and supporting the aborted April, 2002 two-day coup against President Chavez mass public opposition on the streets helped overturn restoring Chavez to office and likely saving his life. Later in the year, these stations conspired again as active participants in the economically devastating 2002-03 main trade union confederation (CTV) - chamber of commerce (Fedecameras) lockout and industry-wide oil strike including willful sabotage against state oil company PDVSA costing it an estimated \$14 billion in lost revenue and damage.

This writer explained the dominant corporate media's active role in these events in an extended January, 2007 article titled "Venezuela's RCTV Acts of Sedition." It presented conclusive evidence RCTV and the other four corporate-run TV stations violated Venezuela's Law of Social Responsibility for Radio and Television (LSR). That law guarantees freedom of expression without censorship but prohibits, as it should, transmission of messages illegally promoting, apologizing for, or inciting disobedience to the law that includes enlisting public support for the overthrow of a democratically elected president and his government.

In spite of their lawlessness, the Chavez government treated all five broadcasters gently opting not to prosecute them, but merely refusing to renew one of RCTV's operating licenses (its VHF one) when it expired May 27 (its cable and satellite operations are unaffected) - a mere slap on the wrist for a media enterprise's active role in trying to overthrow the democratically elected Venezuelan president and his government. The article explained if an individual or organization of any kind incited public hostility, violence and anti-government rebellion under Section 2384 of the US code, Title 18, they would be subject to fine and/or imprisonment for up to 20 years for the crime of sedition.

They might also be subject to prosecution for treason under Article 3, Section 3 of the US Constitution stating: "Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort" such as instigating an insurrection or rebellion and/or sabotage to a national defense utility that could include state oil company PDVSA's facilities vital to the operation and economic viability of the country and welfare of its people. It would be for US courts to decide if conspiring to overthrow a democratically government conformed to this definition, but it's hard imagining it would not at least convict offenders of sedition.

Opposition Response to the Chavez Government Action

So far, the dominant Venezuelan media's response to RCTV's shutdown has been relatively muted, but it remains to be seen for how long. However, for media outside the country, it's a different story with BBC one example of misreporting in its usual style of deference to power interests at home and abroad. May 28 on the World Service, it reported RCTV's license wasn't renewed because "it supported opposition candidates" in a gross perversion of the facts, but that's how BBC operates.

BBC online was more nuanced and measured, but nonetheless off the mark in key comments like reporting "Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Caracas Sunday, some to celebrate, others to protest" RCTV's shuttering. Unexplained was that Chavez supporters way outnumbered opponents who nearly always are part of rightist/corporate-led staged for the media events in contrast to spontaneous pro-government crowds assembling in huge numbers at times, especially whenever Chavez addresses them publicly.

BBC also exaggerated "skirmishes" on the streets with "Police us(ing) tear gas and water cannons to disperse (crowds) and driving through the streets on motorbikes, officers fired plastic bullets in the air." It also underplayed pro-government supportive responses while blaring opposition ones like "Chavez thinks he owns the country. Well, he doesn't." Another was "No to the closure. Freedom." And still another was "Everyone has the right to watch what they want. He can't take away this channel." BBC played it up commenting "As the afternoon drew on, the protests got louder." The atmosphere became nasty. Shots were fired in the air and people ran for cover. It was not clear who was firing" when it's nearly always clear as it's been in the past - anti-Chavistas sent to the streets to stir up trouble and blame it on Chavez.

BBC's commentary ended saying "The arguments highlight, once again, how deeply divided Venezuela is." Unmentioned was that division is about 70 - 80% pro-Chavez, around 20% opposed (the more privileged "sifrino" class), and a small percentage pro and con between them.

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