

Interview with social researcher Gustavo Hernández

"RCTV will not be a public channel, but a government channel"

For Hernández, no public TV service should belong to the private sector. It should be independent and autonomous in nature

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Gustavo Hernández, head of the Communication Research Institute (Ininco), does not believe in a public service TV in Venezuela in the face of communication hegemony, the prevailing concept in government decisions. Nor he sticks his neck out for private TV channels and urges them to revision. However, he regards as political retaliation the government decision not to renew a broadcast license for Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV).

Q: What does public service TV mean?

A: It is a television that does not depend on the present government or political parties; it is independent of any power trying to define the programming contents. A public TV model should be nonpartisan.

Q: It should not belong to any private corporation either.

A: No public TV service should belong to the private sector. It should be independent and autonomous in nature. It is supposed to be a nationwide viewers' association, composed of users. Users should pay the public service TV a quota or tax in order to demand high quality, that is, plural contents in accordance with the psychological and social health of children and adolescents, in accordance with culture and all citizens' views. There should not be exclusion.

Q: What is the difference between this concept and the community media presently in Venezuela?

A: I would not like to put them all in one single bag. However, most of them follow the government guidelines, President Hugo Chávez' guidelines. And, we know, as publicly said by Telesur CEO Andrés Izarra, that the President's code boils down to communication hegemony. Based on the theory of communication, hegemony is unidirectional and one-dimensional. It is aimed at influencing the public ideologically, taking into account their feelings.

Q: Is there a concept of communication hegemony as academic theory? What is it?

A: In academic terms, there is the concept of communication hegemony based on the theory of one of the classic authors of political communication called Harold Lasswell. In the twenties, he developed a formula to understand mass communication. It works this way: Who says what? To whom? In what channel? With what effect? This is the present government unidirectional model of communication. That is: I want to influence the audience without taking into account their view, their vision of the world, their relationship with society. I do not really care about dissent, but I do want to capture the people from the ideological point of view, which is the President's view, the view of the 21st century socialism.

Q: How can you confront such hegemony?

A: By means of education. But not an ideological, indoctrinating education, as intended by the government based on one of its driving forces in order to make us think as they want us to think. Education should foster freedom of expression, which is freedom of knowledge, producing knowledge from sciences, culture, economy... In the absence of freedom of expression, we cannot speak of building and production of knowledge. Hegemony is not a term coined by the President and its government. It is a way of saying that they are concentrating their technological park, their TV channels, radio stations, and community radio stations -not all of them. And they should act in line with the government policy. Otherwise, they will be taken off the air.

Q: Are there any instances of public TV in the world that deserve to be replicated?

A: Italian RAI, Spanish TV Española, London's BBC. They are good models. However, they cannot be transferred automatically to Venezuela because this would be like squeezing a methodology from an extended reality, with its own troubles. But we could take their fundamentals, particularly autonomy.

Q: What, in your opinion, is the bottom line in the RCTV case?

A: On December 28th, 2006, the Fool's Day, President Chávez appeared, in uniform and escorted by the military High Command and said that he was to close a TV channel. Based on image analysis, as appears from these shots, he was telling us in an authoritarian manner that, on a government whim, he was to close a channel. There is political retaliation here. He could close also (TV channel) Venevisión or the channels regarded by him as 'coupsters.' What happened to Venevisión? They yielded totally to the Chávez' government policy. What do you see in programming? Newscasts reporting in such an aseptic and neutral way that they show no dissent at all. What happened to that deal with (Venevisión tycoon) Diego Cisneros, (US ex President) Jimmy Carter, Hugo Chávez? Please, remember. They made a deal and the Cisneros Corporation was left alone. Instead, RCTV kept a dissenting stance, showing the social problems. Watch out. I am not taking sides with Grupo 1BC. This channel, as every channel, should revise and redefine itself as a private service bound to meet the society's needs. However, the point here is freedom of expression, the power to say things, and the ability to tell the society what is going on -corruption, insecurity. We cannot shut our eyes! We cannot let the TV channels disappear!

Q: You have made reference to closure, but the government insists on calling it "non renewal of a broadcast license."

A: This is very euphemistic. The National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) bowed down to President Chávez. Should there be the rule of law, Conatel had told the President: 'Wait a minute. We are an autonomous, technical agency. We must prove theoretically and methodologically whether the channel should close or not.' Note, however, that there is a sort of domino effect. The President speaks and Conatel replies, with no substantiating report.

Political communication

Before and after President Chávez, channels have followed the same pattern. However, under the Chávez government, political communication has been prominent -to show on the media any information related to the president's management.

Q: But the private media have played the role of political parties.

A: The media should not act as political parties. They should lead citizens to democratic participation. It seems to me unacceptable that the media took a specific ideological stance to try to exacerbate the moods some time.

Q: How will be the day after May 28th? What else will be lost, in addition to a TV channel?

A: A significant portion in the history of the Venezuelan TV will be lost. A channel that has made history in informational, cultural and educational programs will be lost. A space for freedom of expression will be lost. Freedom of expression will be lessened. And the government will add another channel to its technological park for strictly doctrinarian purposes. RCTV will not be a public channel. It will be a government channel, considering the Chávez' code, which is a code based on communication hegemony. There is need to land in and hold talks. But this does not mean, he listening to what he says. Dialogue means to accept different opinions, accept different ways of living, and accept also that he should be tolerant. Polarization should be mitigated. We need to come closer in order to build a country together, instead of making it tailor-made for him. He is leaving aside a critical, conscious, insightful sector that, like all Venezuelans, is facing the problems of today's society.

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