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## Dead Air in Caracas

By Jackson Diehl  
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For years defenders of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez have harped on what they described as the domination of the country's independent media by his opponents -- proof, it was said, that Chávez was no dictator. Two weeks from today that argument will lose all credibility. By then, Radio Caracas Television, or RCTV, Venezuela's most popular television network, will almost certainly be off the air -- on Chávez's personal order.

A lot has been happening in Venezuela the past few months. Having obtained the power to rule by decree from a rubber-stamp congress, Chávez has nationalized telecommunications and electricity companies, taken over oil fields developed by multinationals, and formed a single pro-regime political party. For Venezuelans, however, the loss of RCTV will be the greatest shock. For 53 years the television network has been a national institution, counted on for its wildly popular soap operas and variety shows as well as for its news coverage. It was on RCTV that Venezuelans saw Neil Armstrong step onto the moon in 1969, the first live-from-satellite broadcast in the country's history.

The young technician who managed to set up that first link, Marcel Granier, passed through Washington recently on a somewhat forlorn tour of Western capitals. Now the director of RCTV, the 65-year-old Granier was playing his last cards in an attempt to save the network that has been his life's work. Vilified as a traitor and counterrevolutionary by the four television networks that Chávez now controls -- as well as by surviving private stations that struck deals with the strongman -- Granier looks more like a grandfather than a political warrior and sounds more analytical than angry about his predicament. He makes a good case that RCTV's closure will be seen as the final turning point in Chávez's journey from freely elected president in 1999 to neo-socialist dictator.

It's not just that Chávez is eliminating, at a stroke, the media that gave the biggest platform to his opponents. Almost as significant is the way he has gone about it. The process against RCTV has consisted almost entirely of statements by the president on television. The law governing the license Chávez says he is withdrawing has been ignored; RCTV's appeals to the courts have gone unanswered. Protests and appeals from the Organization of American States, the Chilean senate, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter American Press Association, and countless human rights and press freedom NGOs have been answered with crude insults. Chávez called OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza "pendejo," a vulgarism referring to pubic hair.

"Say what they say, do what they do, howl where they want, the license will not be renewed," was the way Chávez put it. In other words, neither domestic nor international institutions matter in a regime that is becoming increasingly personal. "Chávez's position is that 'no one can change the decisions I make,' and anyone who tries to do so is a traitor," Granier says. "That includes the judges on the Supreme Court, the OAS -- anyone who disagrees with him is an enemy."

Those whom Chávez calls enemies suffer more than insults. Granier says some 150 journalists and station

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workers have been assaulted by pro-government thugs. He distributes photos of one of several attempts to storm the station made by Ch?vez's gangs, who set a truck on fire and sent it hurtling at RCTV's front entrance. No one has been held accountable for the attacks.



In his countless television appearances, Ch?vez has made clear that his problem with Granier and RCTV is political. He accuses both of supporting an abortive coup against him in 2002. There's no question that Granier and most of his journalists oppose the government. During the attempted coup the network broadcast movies and music videos. Granier says that if Ch?vez believes that amounts to treason he's welcome to prosecute the station or its directors in the government-controlled courts. "If I'm guilty, charge me," Granier said. "He's never done it."

Ch?vez apologists frequently claim that his actions might look bad to foreigners but are hugely popular in Venezuela. This one is demonstrably not. A poll in April by the firm Datanalisis showed that 70 percent of Venezuelans oppose the closure of RCTV, including 40 percent of those who call themselves Ch?vistas. Demonstrations in support of the network have attracted thousands to the streets of Caracas.

That's not likely to matter much more than the statements of support Granier has been collecting in the United States and Europe. "I take responsibility before the entire world" for shutting the network, Ch?vez said recently. Granier notes somberly that there is no statute of limitations for human rights crimes in Venezuela. He can only hope that one day, that statement will be part of the case in which Ch?vez is held accountable.

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