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From the Los Angeles Times

Hugo Chavez versus RCTV

Venezuela's oldest private TV network played a major role in a failed 2002 coup.

By Bart Jones

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VENEZUELAN President Hugo Chavez's refusal to renew the license of Radio Caracas Television might seem to justify fears that Chavez is crushing free speech and eliminating any voices critical of him.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists and members of the European Parliament, the U.S. Senate and even Chile's Congress have denounced the closure of RCTV, Venezuela's oldest private television network. Chavez's detractors got more ammunition Tuesday when the president included another opposition network, Globovision, among the "enemies of the homeland."

But the case of RCTV — like most things involving Chavez — has been caught up in a web of misinformation. While one side of the story is getting headlines around the world, the other is barely heard.

The demise of RCTV is indeed a sad event in some ways for Venezuelans. Founded in 1953, it was an institution in the country, having produced the long-running political satire program "Radio Rochela" and the blisteringly realistic nighttime soap opera "Por Estas Calles." It was RCTV that broadcast the first live-from-satellite images in Venezuela when it showed Neil Armstrong walking on the moon in 1969.

But after Chavez was elected president in 1998, RCTV shifted to another endeavor: ousting a democratically elected leader from office. Controlled by members of the country's fabulously wealthy oligarchy including RCTV chief Marcel Granier, it saw Chavez and his "Bolivarian Revolution" on behalf of Venezuela's majority poor as a threat.

RCTV's most infamous effort to topple Chavez came during the April 11, 2002, coup attempt against him. For two days before the putsch, RCTV preempted regular programming and ran wall-to-wall coverage of a general strike aimed at ousting Chavez. A stream of commentators spewed nonstop vitriolic attacks against him — while permitting no response from the government.

Then RCTV ran nonstop ads encouraging people to attend a march on April 11 aimed at toppling Chavez and broadcast blanket coverage of the event. When the march ended in violence, RCTV and Globovision ran manipulated video blaming Chavez supporters for scores of deaths and injuries.

After military rebels overthrew Chavez and he disappeared from public view for two days, RCTV's biased coverage edged fully into sedition. Thousands of Chavez supporters took to the streets to demand his return, but none of that appeared on RCTV or other television stations. RCTV News Director Andres Izarra later testified at National Assembly hearings on the coup attempt that he received an order from superiors at the station: "Zero pro-Chavez, nothing related to Chavez or his supporters.... The idea was to create a climate of transition and to start to promote the dawn of a new country." While the streets of Caracas burned with rage, RCTV ran cartoons, soap operas and old movies such as "Pretty Woman." On April 13, 2002, Granier and other media moguls met in the Miraflores palace to pledge support to the country's coup-installed dictator, Pedro Carmona, who had eliminated the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and the Constitution.

Would a network that aided and abetted a coup against the government be allowed to operate in the United States? The U.S. government probably would have shut down RCTV within five minutes after a failed coup attempt — and thrown its owners in jail. Chavez's government allowed it to continue operating for five years, and then declined to renew its 20-year license to use the public airwaves. It can still broadcast on cable or via satellite dish.

Granier and others should not be seen as free-speech martyrs. Radio, TV and newspapers remain uncensored, unfettered and unthreatened by the government. Most Venezuelan media are still controlled by the old oligarchy and are staunchly anti-Chavez.

If Granier had not decided to try to oust the country's president, Venezuelans might still be able to look forward to more broadcasts of "Radio Rochela."

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