

# NEW YORK POST

## HUGO & THE MEDIA KINGS

By THOR HALVORSEN

**THIS SUMMER,  
AMERICA  
RUNS ON  
DUNKIN'  
DONUTS  
ORIGINAL  
DOUBLE BREWED  
ICED  
COFFEE**

GET SOME FLAVOR ☞



June 6, 2007 -- ON our TV screens in America, we see Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his army of thugs cracking down on the hundreds of thousands of students protesting the shutdown of the nation's last truly independent TV station. Yet, inside the story of "the dictator vs. the forces of freedom," is a tale of two Venezuelan media kings - one heroic, one craven.

Chavez's shutdown of RCTV late last month (by refusing to renew its broadcast license) was meant to be the final move in his drive to shut down all independent voices.

In the eight years since he took the presidency, journalism has become one of Venezuela's most dangerous professions. The government and its supporters have regularly harassed, frequently beaten and sometimes killed reporters. Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House and Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and others have all condemned the Chavez government's war on the media.

RCTV had broadcast for 50 years and had become a strident critic of the Chavez regime. As the last major voice reporting anything but the government line, it was the country's most popular TV station.

The hero is RCTV's director, Marcel Granier - who received no legal notice of the shutdown. He first learned of it when Chavez announced that RCTV would be punished for criticizing the government, for being "bourgeois" and for "coup plotting." (As a final insult, the government two days before the shutdown produced a judge who ordered RCTV's equipment seized and "loaned" to a new government station that has now replaced it.)

In response, Granier has risked his life and fortune for the sake of freedom of expression. He has kept his TV reporters working; they're now broadcasting news segments on the student protests via YouTube, other Web sites and viral videos. The Congress' vice president has called for his arrest for "destabilizing."

A Venezuelan official openly described the RCTV closing as part of a plan for "communicational hegemony" over information and programming. One free TV station remains, Globovision, but its coverage is not nationwide and its viewers are limited to Venezuela's middle class.

Plus, a day after the RCTV shutdown, Chavez called for a probe of Globovision and threatened to cancel *its* license. He also taunted the station's director: "Are

you prepared to die?"

Regime apologists will point to one other "independent" station, the privately held Venevision - which brings us to our media villain.

At first, Venevision did indeed harshly criticize Chavez. But in 2004 Chavez accused the station's owner, New York-based Gustavo Cisneros, of being behind a plot to overthrow the government. After a private meeting between the two (attended by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter), Venevision changed course: Political commentary disappeared; opposition marches and statements by opposition leaders began getting short shrift; news became entirely rosy coverage of government activities.

How deep is the collusion between Cisneros and Chavez? Consider a December 2006 phone conversation between Cisneros' senior deputy at Venevision, Carlos Bardasano, and Jesus Romero Anselmi, head of the government TV channel, Venezolana de Television. (The recording was posted anonymously on YouTube.com; "mirror sites" have defeated the regime's attempts to suppress the record.) In the call, the executives agree that "together, we are unstoppable." They also joke about how Venevision might undergo a name change to reflect government ownership.

Cisneros, a Fifth Avenue socialite, is a media giant. He's on the board of Univision, the United States' largest Latino broadcaster; his firm owns dozens of radio, TV and other telecom properties.

He's also wont to attend media conferences in the United States, delivering speeches about the media's duty to ensure that the public gets the information it needs and ensure government transparency. But back in Venezuela, Venevision executives have yet to even make a statement about the RCTV shutdown. Of course, Cisneros also stands to benefit enormously from the ad revenue that used to go to the rival channel.

Fascism doesn't triumph without help.

*Thor Halvorssen is president of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, which chronicled the shutdown of RCTV at FreeRCTV.com.*

## **Home**

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