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**What New Labour did for free speech**

**Index 2/07: Index on Censorship** takes a critical look at the health of free speech in the UK on New Labour's tenth anniversary in power. New restrictions on what you can say and where you can say it mean we have to mind our language more than we used to.

Has the UK become a less tolerant society? How much has been sacrificed in the name of national security?

Leading commentators examine the defining influences of the decade on free speech in the UK and assess how far New Labour has delivered on its promises to introduce more open government.

**WITH**

**Alistair Beaton, Martin Bright, A L Kennedy, Conor Gearty, AC Grayling, David Leigh, Anthony Lester, Martin Rowson, Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, Oliver Kamm, Nasar Meer, Julian Petley and Peter Wright**

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**Hrant Dink:** an exclusive extract from one of his last



## International Censorship in Venezuela: the RCTV case

Why did Hugo Chavez shut down his country's main private TV station? *by Daniel Duquenal*



**The non-renewal of the licence of the main opposition station is part of a broader trend in Chavista Venezuela, says Daniel Duquenal**

The non-renewal of the licence of RCTV, Venezuela's main private TV station, has been portrayed very differently depending on whom you ask. From the perspective of Chavez admirers it was a simple matter of putting some order in the airwave spectrum distribution. From the point of view of Chavez opposition and most of the media and democracies it seems that Venezuelan freedom of expression has received a mortal blow.

Hugo Chavez In closing RCTV Chavez and his supporters offer two reasons. First, the state needed the favorable VHF range of RCTV to use it to create an independent public service, away from crass commercialisation, with a truly educational content. And second, the state decided that RCTV's concession should not be renewed because of its political involvement, including an alleged participation in the 2002 coup against Chavez.

These arguments are not valid. There have been no serious investigations or judicial actions taken against RCTV since 2002, only verbal attacks. On the technical issue, the state disposes of enough VHF and UHF frequencies to create its own network or, if necessary, to force RCTV to trade its more favorable slots. In fact the state had no problem setting up ViVe TV while denying expansion slots to private networks such as Globovision, the 24 news channel.

Whether RCTV was 'closed' or merely had its concession not renewed is an irrelevant discussion: there are appeals as to the legality of the governmental schedule in setting the concession period. But these appeals languish at tribunals while other legal questions are speedily decided in favour of the Chavez administration. For example, the bad faith of the government was stressed when a judicial decision was taken 24 hours after its submission: it allowed the state to use all of the relay stations of RCTV. This way, not only did RCTV lose its wavelengths, it also lost all of its transmission equipment, without compensation.

Even the idealistic notion of creating public service TV does not hold. The board of TVes, the new state 'cultural' network that was created to replace RCTV, had all of its directors named directly or indirectly by the government. TVes starts under the auspices of becoming just another network at the service of the political agenda of Chavez. The regulatory agency, CONATEL, is also completely under Chavez control. There was no attempt to maintain even an appearance of impartiality.

What we should understand is that the real interest of the government is the control of the information that hits the free airwaves.

The Chavez administration had decided long ago to saturate the air waves with pro government messages, in particular in the more remote areas of the country where independent media depend for survival on advertisement monies from the state or local authorities. Only media located in the urban centers of Caracas, Valencia and Maracaibo can get enough independent revenue to survive without any state or local administration advertisement. In addition, over the last 5 years the state reinforced the reach of the state TV, VTV, added one open air signal network ViVe, and two other part open signal and part cable networks, ANTV and the response to CNN, TeleSur. The latter's reach is on the rise: for example in Caracas pro-Chavez groups bought local CMT, fired its staff and made it a simple relay for TeleSur for open air reach. Today in some areas of Venezuela you only can get half a dozen of radio stations, all of them are either music only or state stations, with no opposition message crossing the local airwaves.

Since 2004, two open air signal private networks with nationwide coverage have caved in to government pressure and became neutral, if not pro governmental. After Chavez's 2006 reelection RCTV was the only critical network left with national open air coverage. The other critic, Globovision, has open signal in Caracas and Valencia and requires cable elsewhere. Cable systems only reach about 25 per cent homes in Venezuela. With the closing of RCTV, maybe 70 per cent of Venezuelans have nothing for information but a deluge of pro governmental propaganda. This percentage is much higher among those on lower incomes, who depend more on free open air transmissions.

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The closing of RCTV was a strictly political decision, designed to limit criticism to Chavez. Recent attacks on the remaining critical network, Globovision, imply that the government is considering closing the last outlet left for the people's complaints to be made public on TV. The head of the station was yesterday summoned before the attorney general, after it was claimed that Globovision had attempted to incite an assassination attempt on the President.

With the loss of RCTV Venezuela lost its freedom of information. Information is crucial to allow people express themselves. Freedom of expression is as of now under serious threat.

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