

**Media Censorship in Venezuela: A Quantitative Report on the Relationship Between Media
Censorship and Venezuelan College Students' Awareness of News**

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Introduction:

Hugo Chavez became President of Venezuela in 1998. Over time, he installed a socialist government in the South American republic. Since then, Chavez, his successor Maduro, and their followers have placed strict laws in order to maintain their strong hold of power. These laws include media censorship laws which prevent media outlets from publishing stories that paint the government in a negative light in any way- even if they are factual. The severe punishments of these laws, which range from expensive fines to complete shutdown of the outlet of publication- have caused media outlets to shy away from publishing any story that will upset the government. This is highly problematic because the media is an important source of information that can be used as a tool to spread awareness in modern society, be it social, political or economic. The media also makes us aware about our rights by exposing evils in our society, such as corrupt politicians. Furthermore, although this is an issue that affects the entirety of the Venezuelan population, a great group of worry is from current college students, or Venezuelans born between 2000-2003. This is because, since they have only lived during the Chavista regime, they have only experienced living under a severely restricted and censored society, which could cause a lag in their awareness of current news and events.

Media censorship is an issue of worry because of what it entails, especially in today's interconnected world. In "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," Denis McQuail writes that media is important because it directs the attention of the public to problems, solutions or people and correlatively divert attention from rival individuals or groups, as well as confer status and confirm legitimacy (McQuail, 1979). By not having a free press, the information that reaches the public can be limited and even inaccurate. This then, directly affects the population of the specific country in which said censorship is taking place, in this case, Venezuela, and even more specifically, those citizens in the country who have only lived under the censoring regime, in the case of Venezuela, the youth. Because the media is a tool to spread information and raise awareness, by having a limited media, people will most likely have a lack of knowledge. This can result in Venezuelans falling behind. For Venezuelans who decide to stay in the country, their outdated knowledge will prevent them from improving and developing the country in the future, as they will lack the resources and awareness to do so. For Venezuelans who decide to flee the country and maybe look for job or academic opportunities elsewhere, other people with different backgrounds and coming from countries where they have been better prepared may be favored. All in all, lack of accurate and free news results in the country and its citizens falling behind intellectually with the rest of the world.

I aimed to know if the censorship put in place by the government in the media has had any effect on college students' knowledge of current news. I conducted an experiment to test this question, in which I found that although college students believe that national news outlets are not legitimate, they have found other ways to acquire news through alternatives such as social media.

The following study regarding the relationship between media censorship and college students' awareness of the news is important because this can be used as background information for deeper and more extensive studies in the communications and international affair areas. As of right now, probably due to the exodus of academics from the country as well as the country's lack of resources, there is not an abundance of studies that focus on this South American country, and the ones that do exist are often from the early-2000s and even prior to that. Therefore, it can be assumed that these studies are now outdated. Because this is recent research and it has focused on people who still reside in the country, then the data collected reflects a better image on what the current state of Venezuela and its censorship looks like. At the same time, the questions in this experiment can be used by other Venezuelan college students as a self-check on their knowledge of current news, and therefore raise self-awareness on areas they need to improve on regarding their interests.

In this study, the term “**media**” refers to any platform used to spread and communicate information, such as social media, magazines, newspapers, etc. While the term “**censorship**” refers to any restriction placed by the government in order to silence or restrict the public as a way to help themselves maintain power. Similarly “**media censorship**” refers to the relationship between the two. In other words, restrictions put on media outlets such as social media, magazines, newspapers, etc. that the government has placed in order to help themselves maintain their strong hold of power. Furthermore, “**awareness of news,**” is used to describe how much or how little the subjects of the study, Venezuelan college students, know about current events that are happening all over the world that also get a high amount of coverage by the media.

Literature Research:

It is true that nearly every Latin American country has some sort of law in their constitution that prohibits disrespectful or abusive speech toward the president, high officials, or government institutions; these are usually called **insult laws**. This in turn has created a de facto privileged class of people- constituted by politicians and other officials in power- to enjoy stronger legal protection than everyone else. In Venezuela, the so-called “insult law” has been in place since 1964 (Atwood, 2006). They say that people who “offend in speech or writing or in any other way show disrespect for the president” may be

threatened to go to jail. Although it does not explicitly mention the press, it is clear that these laws are an infringement in **freedom of speech**- the principle that supports the idea that individuals and communities have the liberty to express their opinions without fear of retaliation or legal sanctions. By not allowing people to express their discontent with the government because they may be threatened with jail, Venezuelans usually decide to not express their opinions to avoid any troubles with authority. Not only that, but even news organizations in the country prefer not to uncover issues in the government for fear that they will be punished. More than a dozen Venezuelan newspaper editors in 2005 mentioned the penal code reform- with its potential for financial ruin for the newspaper, the reporter or both- as one of the main reasons why they shied away from investigating reports of venality in government (Atwood, 2006).

At the same time, Venezuela has seen a deterioration in **press freedom**- the right of newspapers, magazines, etc. to report news without being controlled by the government- in the last couple of years. According to Statista, in their global ranking, the greater the index score, the worse the situation is regarding press freedom in a given country. In 2021, Venezuela had a press freedom index of 47.6 points, up from 45.66 a year earlier. In the years from 2015 to 2021, the index score increased by 6.99 points, decreasing press freedom in Venezuela (Watson, 2021). Furthermore, the origins of this trend can be traced back to the insult laws as well as other laws established by **The Chavistas** (the name of Chavez's political party). One of the most strict laws regarding censorship in the country is called "**la Ley Resorte.**" This law states that its aim is to improve public access to broadcast media, encourage them to reflect the interests and needs of a wider cross-section of the Venezuelan public, and end the practice of showing sex and violence on television when children should be watching. But in practice, the law did more than that. The law's strict guidelines and severe sanctions for violators put broadcasters on notice that, henceforth, the government would be watching mass media content carefully, therefore, they needed to be on their "best behavior" as to not upset the government. Under the Ley Resorte, if a station runs afoul twice in any way during a three-year period, it could be shut down for seventy-two hours. Two or more violations within five years after that would give the government the right to close a station for up to five years. More recently, a 2017 hate-speech law approved by the **National Constituent Assembly**- a committee made up by politicians in 2017 elected to draft a new constitution for Venezuela- mandates fines and up to 20 years imprisonment for anyone who disseminates information deemed "intolerant" via traditional or social media. Additionally, in 2021, more than 35 arbitrary detentions of journalists in the first two months of the year alone took place, according to the National Press Workers' Union (Freedom House, 2021). Clearly, the strict laws and the fear that the government is watching, makes people less likely to freely share information.

Similarly, press freedom is not the only thing that has come under increasing control of the government. **Academic freedom**- a scholar's freedom to express their opinions without risk of interference or professional disadvantage- is yet another aspect of the Venezuelan society that has been taken by the government. School curriculums have been changed to emphasize socialist concepts. Furthermore, the Venezuelan governments are the ones that provide the budget for university funding, which has suffered from increasing cuts. This has undermined universities' autonomy and has prompted an exodus of academics from the country. In August 2019, the Supreme Court of Justice suspended the head of the Central University of Venezuela, the largest and one of the most powerful universities in the country, changed the voting rules, and ordered elections at nine public universities considered opposition strongholds. Under the directive, if elections are not held within six months of the decision, the court will choose the new authorities. The same month, Maduro assigned Cesar Trompiz, a close ally, to lead the cabinet bureau responsible for university education. Trompiz was tasked with putting the education system at "the service of the greater interests of the nation." In a score out of 4, Freedom House gave Venezuela a score of 1, because since March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, classes have been conducted online, and abandoned universities have been targeted with vandalism. At the same time, the Maduro regime has intensified its interference with the operations of the country's universities, including replacing leaders, and making activism at universities extremely unsafe.

Methodology:

Overview:

Based on the above review of literature, I propose the following:

Research Question: Is there a relationship between censorship of the media placed by the government in Venezuela and the awareness of current events among Venezuelan college students?

Based on the literature research and my own personal experience of interacting with Venezuelan college students, I hypothesize that because of media censorship, awareness of current events by Venezuelan college students is low.

This hypothesis was tested via an online survey questionnaire.

Participants:

The participants of this study were current Venezuelan college students who have also lived most of their lives in the South American country. These students are between the ages of 22-18. All of them were selected based on the fact that they currently attend a Venezuelan university, be it private or public, and can base their responses upon their own personal experiences.

Survey Questionnaire:

In order to test the above hypothesis, I designed a 9 multiple choice and 2 open-ended online questionnaire. The questions were designed to test students' knowledge of important news currently happening in the world, as well as their own experience accessing news in Venezuela. The survey was conducted in Spanish, the native language of all respondents.

The following questions were designed to know more information about each respondent and their interest in news:

1. Do you go to a public or private university?
2. What is your major? (open-ended)
3. How frequently do you read/watch the news?
4. What is the reason for the frequency in which you watch/read the news?
5. Where do you get your news?

The following questions were designed to test respondents' actual knowledge of current events:

6. Which of the following is an event that will occur in the Middle East this year?
7. What is China doing currently that is causing political tensions with other countries?
8. Which of the following Latin American presidents has been heavily criticized by other countries by how he has handled the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. Which of these following Venezuelan politicians recently made a call to union?

The following questions were designed to know the respondents' opinions on media censorship:

10. On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you think the media is censored in Venezuela? 1 being "not censored at all" and 5 being "they are extremely censored."
11. How do you think access to information in Venezuela can be improved? (open-ended)

The platform, Google Forms, was used to design and distribute the questionnaire. The survey link was shared with a friend of mine in Venezuela, who then shared it with 23 peers of his and who are current college students who attend an institution in Venezuela. In total, there were 24 responses to the survey. The survey responses however were completely anonymous and confidential in order to preserve the respondent's safety in Venezuela. The survey was not designed to capture extremely personal data that could identify respondents' identities.

Results:

Respondents' information and interest in news

The first question asked in the survey was “do you go to a public or private university?” For this question, respondents had an option on choosing between public or private. This was a relevant question, as public universities in Venezuela are usually less-funded and have less academic freedom. Out of the 24 answers, 54.2% attend a private university while the other 45.8% attend a public one. Because private universities in Venezuela usually have more resources when it comes to education, and tuition can sometimes be expensive, it can be assumed that 54.2% of respondents are economically stable, and therefore, have more resources to access different media outlets.

The second question in the survey regarded people’s majors, this was one of the open-ended questions. There were a variety of majors present among the respondents, these varied from business administration, commercial music, economics, engineering, international affairs, psychology, etc. But the major with more representation in the survey was Communications, as 7 interviewees are studying in this major. This question was also relevant to the study, as people’s majors are a reflection of their personal interests. For example, a person in a STEM major is less likely to see or watch the news as much as someone in an International Affairs, Communications or any other similar majors, simply because their focus and interest is not in that area.

The following three questions in the survey are somewhat linked to each other. The first one had to do with the frequency in which each person sees or reads the news. Respondents were given 5 options. 1) multiple times a day 2) once a day 3) once a week 4) once a month 5) less than once a month. For this question, 37.5% of respondents said multiple times a day, 33.3% said once a day, and 29.2% said once a week. It is clear by these results, that the majority of respondents pay at least some degree of attention to the news. The next question was “what is the reason for the frequency in which you watch/read the news?” For this question, respondents were able to choose multiple options, as there may be more than one factor affecting this frequency. The options for this question were “I do not have enough time,” which 10 people chose. “I do not care about the news,” which 3 people chose. “Accessing legitimate news is difficult,” which 11 people agreed with. And “I do not think that news outlets in this country are legitimate,” which 9 people concurred with. The next question was “where do you get your news?” For this question, students were also able to choose multiple answers, as in today’s highly technological world, there is more than a single way to access information. Students were given three general options: 1) social media such as Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. 2) National news outlets such as “El Nacional,” “Ultimas Noticias,” “El Universal,” etc. 3) International news outlets such as “AP News,” “CNN,” “The Guardian,” etc. For this question, an overwhelming majority of 95.8% of respondents chose social media, while 54.2% chose international news outlets, and only 20.8% chose national news outlets.

Respondents' knowledge on current events

In order to test students' knowledge of current news, I gathered 4 events that have gotten high media coverage. All of the following questions were multiple choice. The first question in this section was "Which of the following is an event that will occur in the Middle East this year?" The choices were "presidential elections in South Korea," "Winter Olympics in France," "Soccer World Cup in Qatar," "Mid-term elections in the United States." For this question, 91.7% of the respondents correctly answered "Soccer World Cup in Qatar," 4.2% answered "mid-term elections in the United States," and the other 4.2% answered "Winter Olympics in France." The second knowledge question was "What is China doing currently that is causing political tensions with other countries?" The choices were "China is committing a genocide and other abuses such as forced labor, forced abortions and arbitrary detention toward the Uyghurs," "China is committing a genocide and other abuses such as forced labor, forced abortions and arbitrary detention toward the Hans," "China has announced they plan to invade their neighbor, Philippines," and "the Chinese Prime Minister, Xi Zhongxun, has eliminated term limits for all politicians." For this question, 58.3% of students answered correctly about the Uyghur homicide.

The third knowledge-based question was "which of the following Latin American presidents has been heavily criticized by other countries by how he has handled the COVID-19 pandemic?" The options were "Juan Duque Marquez of Colombia. In Colombia, more than 254,000 people have died from COVID-19," "Sebastian Pinera of Chile. In Chile, more than 700,000 people have died of COVID-19," "Lenin Moreno of Ecuador. In Ecuador more than 650,000 people have died of COVID-19," and "Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil. In Brazil, more than 640,000 people have died of COVID-19." For this question, 66.7% of respondents answered correctly, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil has been one of the most criticized Latin American Presidents in regard to his handling COVID-19.

The last knowledge-based question was "which of these following Venezuelan politicians recently made a call to union?" The options were "Nicolas Maduro," "Juan Guaido," "Delcy Rodriguez," "Lorenzo Mendoza." 58.3% of respondents answered correctly, Juan Guaido was the politician who most recently asked the people of Venezuela to unite.

Respondents' opinion on media censorship in Venezuela

The first question in this section was "On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you think the media is censored in Venezuela? 1 being 'not censored at all' and 5 being 'they are extremely censored.'" 79.2% of students believe that it was a 5, meaning that the media is extremely censored, 8.3% believe it is a 4, that

they believe it is censored, and 12.5% believe it is a 3, neither censored nor not-censored. The last question in this section, and in the survey, was an open-ended question designed to know more specifically how students believed access to information could improve in Venezuela. Although responses varied, common themes among these answers were, a change in government, lifting of censorship laws, or for media outlets to report directly through social media, which the government has less control of.

Conclusion

From the answers regarding respondents' information and personal interests, I can conclude that the reasons why students often choose not to read the news is because they either do not think the news they are reading and the outlets that present them are factual and legitimate, or they are simply too busy. Overall, most students do have exposure to media outlets and information about current events, whether that be through the classroom, social media, or international news outlets. However, there is skepticism about the news they receive, as most people do not think the news they are getting is legitimate.

When it comes to knowledge, although response accuracy percentage varied throughout the questions, overall, the majority of students got each question right. This can be used to disprove part of the original hypothesis. College students in Venezuela do not have a lack of knowledge of current events. In other words, they have some awareness of the news, despite the censorship placed by the regime.

Additionally, from the data gathered, it can also be concluded that Venezuelan college students do believe there is a high level of media censorship in the country. When it comes to possible solutions to this issue, these students believe that change is necessary. A change in government, lift of restrictions, and change in the way the media reports news are some of the changes these students came up with. Overall, there is a high dissatisfaction with the media when it comes to Venezuelan college students.

After analyzing the research results, it can be concluded that despite the high levels of media censorship placed by the government in Venezuela, it seems that this has not negatively affected college students' awareness of current news. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. However, it also seems that due to the illegitimacy of news outlets in the country, people turn to other forms of media in order to access their desired information. The most popular of these alternatives is social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Because these companies are not based in Venezuela, the government has little ways to restrict and/or control these platforms. Therefore, reporters and citizens have turned to these apps to either spread or gather information. This development could be both beneficial and detrimental to citizens. On one hand, it can be beneficial because they can freely access information almost instantly.

Because of the nature of social media, people are able to share posts about almost any topic, and the audience will instantly see it. No longer do people have to wait until the next morning to grab a newspaper to see what happened the day before. With social media, accessing information has become extremely easy, even in such a censored country like Venezuela. Therefore, with more accessed information, it will be more difficult for these citizens to fall behind intellectually compared to the rest of the world. Social media allows for the public to stay aware of their surroundings. On the other hand, information can be freely shared by any user, which leaves room for misinformation to easily spread. Prior to social media, it was mostly journalists' jobs to be the ones to make the public aware of events. And while some reporters do suffer from bias, for the most part, journalists are trained to deliver facts. In other words, when it was mostly journalists the ones delivering information, it was safe to assume that stories were accurate and fact-checked. However, because of instantaneity and freedom in social media, people can now be the ones to share their own thoughts and opinions on events, which can be taken as facts, and eventually as misinformation.

Limitations:

While this study offered some insightful revelations regarding the relationship between media censorship and knowledge of current events among Venezuelan college students, it is important to note that this study suffers from limitations that could alter the rate of which students actually know about news.

The first limitation being the sample size. In a country of 30 million people, 2 million of which are enrolled in universities, only 24 students can be a complete misrepresentation of this group. However, time and resource constraints in this project prevented a larger, more accurate, representation of this group.

The second limitation, and probably the most important one, is the fact that, because it was a link that was sent out, rather than interviews conducted real time and face-to-face, there is no concrete way of knowing that the respondents were entirely truthful during the survey. For this experiment, it is necessary to trust the honesty and honor of students, which is a big leap of faith in some cases. No one likes to be proven wrong, therefore it is a possibility that in order to get the knowledge-based questions right, students either asked other people for help, or searched for the answers to the questions. If this is the case, then results could vary to show that media censorship does in fact affect people's awareness of current events despite social media and other alternatives.

References:

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Appendix:

Link for online survey conducted via Google Forms:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyxn2WUOnscfM1DJbhOs7s3aiBuSII7teSp0qbe1TKQgTfAA/viewform?usp=sf_link