



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

VENEZUELA
COUNTRY REPORT

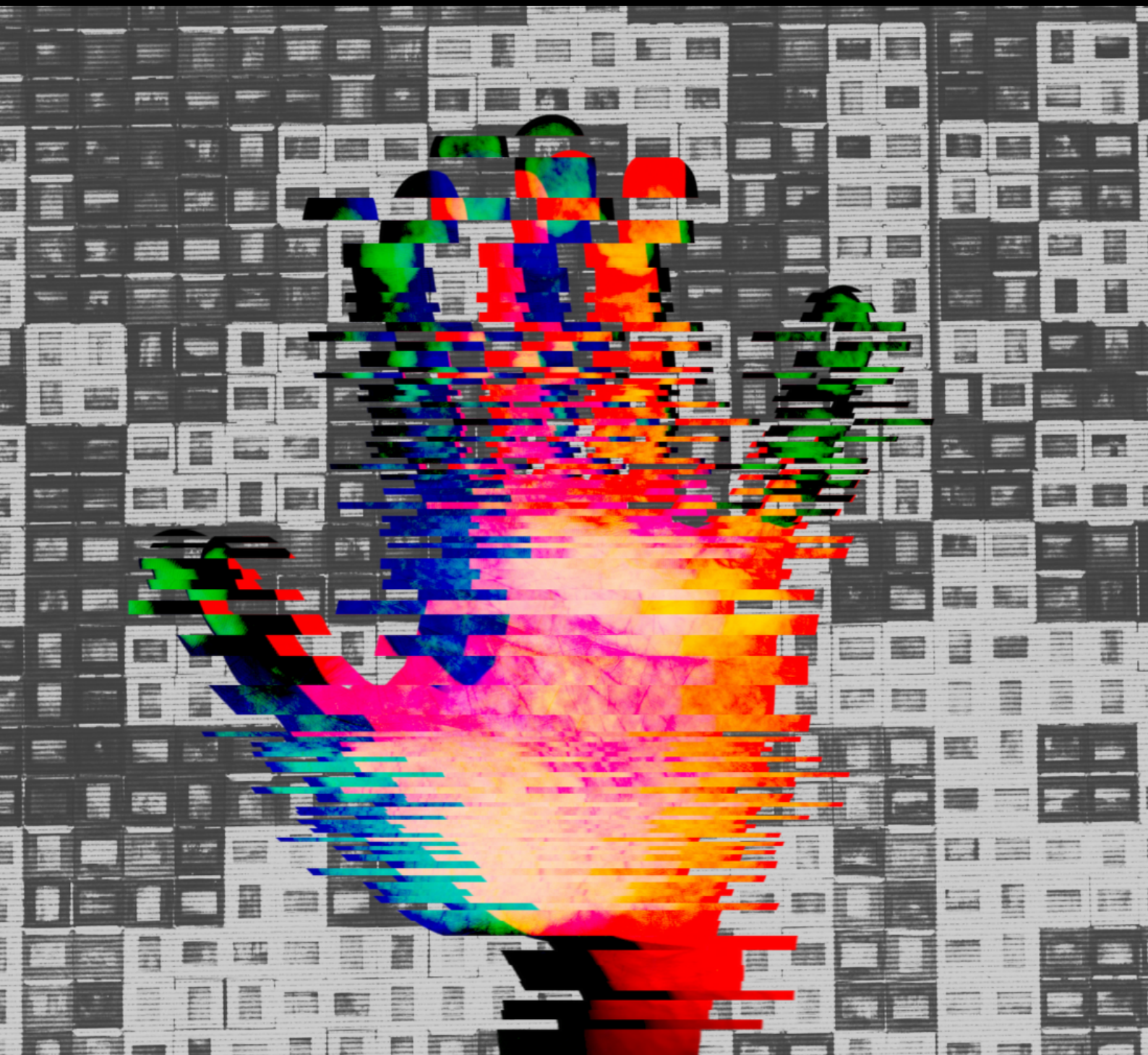


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2007, democracy and freedom of expression in Venezuela have been disrupted through severe censorship and legal strategies against traditional and independent media, and the reductions of separation of powers to the point where they are practically non-existent. In this context, the role of digital and social media are fundamental elements to overcome the government's dominance of print and broadcast media and evade the censorship established by the Venezuelan regime.

However, the use of digital tools to fight back against repression has been accompanied by another phenomenon: the use of these very tools of digital communications to repress citizens. This is the effect of "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 32–43). The use of digital media to guarantee access to information has been met by the government's disinformation campaigns, internet blocking and judicial persecution of journalists and activists that investigate Maduro's government or talk about the humanitarian emergency.

Internet blockades and censorship of digital media don't only affect journalists and human rights defenders: they also control and silence opinion and public discussion, the diffusion of free and diverse thought, and inhibit the work of opposition politicians, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, activists, public personalities, and citizens in general that question and report the actions of the Venezuelan regime.

Surveillance without legal justification, arbitrary monitoring of citizens, and the use of technology to manipulate election results have also changed the political and social landscape in Venezuela, and have established a surveillance state focused on the persecution and criminalization of dissident voices.

The key motives for digital authoritarianism in Venezuela are focused on the crackdown on opposition political actors and dissident voices, the distribution of propaganda to justify and falsify support for Maduro's government, and the use of technology to falsify the numbers of such support. In this sense, identification systems have also been used to discriminate between Maduro's critics and supporters.

Venezuelan dissident voices have been largely ignored since the early 2000s, despite substantial political and civil coordination against Chávez's and Maduro's authoritarian practices. It must be noted that political and civil structures are both equally stigmatised, criminalised, and persecuted by security bodies and legal institutions across the country.

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BACKGROUND

Venezuela is a presidential constitutional republic under a military regime. The current president, Nicolás Maduro Moros, elected in 2013, is a socialist politician who started his political career during the Hugo Chávez presidency and was elected after being appointed by Chávez before his death as his chosen candidate. Chávez was a charismatic and agile left-wing leader who charmed his way into power as an outcast politician, despite his military career and his coup attempt in 1992. Despite Maduro's lack of a military career, his administration is considered a militarised regime, with autocratic tendencies, and a dominant ruling party — the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) — founded by Chávez, that has controlled the political sphere and the country's autonomous entities since the early 2000s. Venezuela has a strong military presence in public life and political entities. Maduro's administration has had the highest number of military personnel working within the executive and legislative branches since the beginning of its democratic period in 1958.

From 1998, slowly but effectively, former president Hugo Chávez built the foundations of a civic-military regime that stripped autonomy from the country's most important institutions: the Supreme Court, Congress, universities, and political parties. The lack of separation of powers in Venezuela has been one of the biggest threats to the democratic system since 2012, when Hugo Chavez issued a political takeover of Venezuela's Supreme Court, which led to a considerable rise in the executive's power and a decrease in its accountability. The military sphere has also become more politicised in Venezuela, which has led to the permeability of military forces and everyday life. The increasing role of the military in executing civilian control has led to violations of human rights and corruption across the country. Currently, state entities meant to function as autonomous institutions don't have real independence from the government and the ruling party.

Maduro's arrival to power in 2014 triggered many of the country's current challenges. Maduro's election led to one of the biggest protest waves since 2001, with demonstrations that erupted across the country with slogans against his election, corruption, lack of political liberties, and the pending social crisis. According to the Venezuelan Program of Human Rights Education, ([Provea](#))¹, these protests were violently repressed by security and paramilitary forces and had more than 5,500 arbitrary detentions, 1,400 instances of torture, police brutality, and/or mistreatment, 854 wounded and 43 deaths at the hands of security officials. Since 2014, there have been 333 murders of protestors at the hands of state authorities ([Provea](#)). The protests had a diffuse agenda and no clear leadership, but opposition parties and members of Mesa Unida Democrática (MUD) — an entity that unites most of the political parties critical of Maduro, made up of trends of democratic socialism, progressivism, social Christianity and mainly social democrats — like Voluntad Popular or Vente Venezuela appropriated the movement through the slogan *La Salida*, which led to the arrests of opposition political actors.

According to Provea, these protests also led to a rise of paramilitary forces across the country: "In the context of the 2014 protests there was a dangerous increase in the performance of paramilitary actors in efforts to contain and repress demonstrations. Although, in previous years, the country's human rights organisations had recorded the participation of these

1. Provea (Venezuelan Program of Education-Action in Human Rights) is a Venezuelan NGO born in 1988. It has become one of the most prestigious human rights organisations in the region.

groups in the dispersal of protests, in 2014 their ability to deploy in several cities in the country at different times and their actions in coordination with police and military agencies, constituted a turning point and an important indicator of the growth of these groups.” ([Provea](#))

In 2014, the UN and the European Council also warned about an unpreventable humanitarian crisis — which was officially declared a complex humanitarian emergency by the National Assembly in 2016 — due to severe medicine and food shortage across the country, hyperinflation, and a rise in violence, political persecution, and organised crime. However, Maduro’s administration denies the existence of a complex humanitarian emergency, which, by definition, is a consequence of political instability that produces social conflicts. The government’s denial of the failure of its public policies has led to a complete lack of transparency with official data since 2014 about its economic, social, and health balances, despite access to information being considered a constitutional value. That means the Venezuelan government hasn’t shared any official information about the economy, health, migration, poverty, violence, or gender-sensitive data for the past eight years.

The complex humanitarian emergency also led to Venezuela’s biggest migration crisis, which currently has 7.1 million migrants and refugees according to the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, which translates to 21 percent of the population. Nearly six million of those migrants and refugees are currently in adoptive countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The causes of migration or forced displacement are usually associated with the economic crisis, persecution, violence from authorities or common and organised crime, and the fall of Venezuela’s public health system. The Venezuelan migration crisis is the biggest in the region and has currently surpassed the Syrian migrant and refugee population, and is only behind the Ukrainian refugee crisis ([Alvarez, 2022](#)).

Elections in Venezuela are questionable and have been compromised, especially after the 2017 Constituent Assembly elections, when the Smartmatic system used for voting machines uncovered that Maduro’s government had falsified one million votes. This has deeply affected the political landscape in Venezuela. Since 2017, the Venezuelan government hasn’t regularly held its yearly elections, which has led to a rapid contraction in the democratic space due to the persecution and legal disqualification of opposition political actors and dissident voices.

Since 2015 only one political party from MUD has survived the government’s legal purge: “For the past six years, the Bolivarian Revolution has been focusing on its strategy to consolidate a political system with a hegemonic party. In 2015, the Venezuelan opposition managed the greatest electoral victory in 20 years with the National Assembly. Now, only the party led by former presidential candidate Henri Falcón remains legal.” (“[Only One Party from 2015’s MUD Survives the Government’s Purge](#)”).

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However, according to experts, the strategy of arbitrarily forbidding the registration of opposition political parties started in 2012 and has been centred on cracking down on political opposition parties through bans on candidates for administrative reasons, suspensions, or the withdrawal of the most recognized leaders or members of some parties.

By 2018, Venezuela's opposition political figures had broken into four groups:

1. Traditional parties, also known as members of MUD, that claim Venezuela's political crisis must be solved internally.
2. Left-wing parties critical of Maduro's government that denounce the human rights violations across the country
3. Right-wing parties that believe that a US intervention will remove Maduro from power and reconstitute the government cabinet with interim members until a fair presidential election is held.
4. Hired politicians from opposition parties that promote chavismo's agenda, also known as "Pret a porter" opposition controlled by Maduro's government.

But, in 2019, Juan Guaidó changed the world's relationship with Venezuela when he was presented as Venezuela's interim president by the 2015 elected National Assembly. This led to 53 countries supporting his presidency, including the US, the countries of the European Union, and most countries of the Latin American region. The presidential crisis has had little effect on the Venezuelan population though, as Maduro has managed to keep control over national and international institutions.

However, Guaidó did manage to accelerate the sanctions against Venezuela. Venezuela is currently sanctioned by the United States of America and the European Union. While the EU sanctions are focused on political authorities with a history of human rights violations and participation in corruption networks, the US has imposed sanctions on political actors and Venezuelan companies, such as PDVSA, Venezuela's oil industry. Most recently, the World Bank determined Venezuela owes ConocoPhillips more than eight billion dollars, for the seizure of the oil and gas companies in 2007. Sanctions have had a polarising effect on the country's economy: while they have paved the way for new economic policies that have improved investment in private companies, they have also fueled the humanitarian emergency across the country.

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, in order to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries, like Hungary, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse.

This study focused on Venezuela has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2020–2022), and then a group of 20 media items related to each of the incidents were collected and analysed. The qualitative analysis of these 40 items in total was predefined for all the countries participating in this project, in this way a framework can be consistently applied across different national, political and technological contexts. The items included publications by local and international news media, reports by independent organisations, and social media posts, particularly from Twitter and Facebook.

In the case of the first incident, digital rights organisations warned about the rise of website and digital media blocking, especially during relevant political seasons such as elections. In the 2021 regional elections, 60 websites revealed that they were blocked by internet companies such as the state-owned CANTV. This situation deeply affects media and journalists but also impacts citizens' right to information. In the last 10 years, more than 150 newspapers have closed because of censorship, persecution, or a lack of paper. This has shaped the media ecosystem in the country, which highly relies on digital media.

The second incident references the case of oil worker and union leader Eudis Girot, who was imprisoned after he warned of oil shortages during the pandemic. This incident was an entry point to explore narratives about the general criminalisation of journalists, activists, humanitarian workers, unionists and citizens who criticise, make fun of or state their opinions against Maduro's government. Since 2021, there have been more than 20 detentions of people who use social media. It must be noted that online protests are very common in Venezuela due to the repression and the extreme levels of state violence in the context of street protests (since 2014, 333 people have been murdered by security bodies during protests). Many of these detentions have been justified through the Law Against Hatred, a law passed in 2016 that targets public speech through media, social media and political communications, which is purposely vague and has been criticised by national and international organisations.

In the selection process the researcher looked for social media posts and editorial publications by local, regional, national and international media, human and digital rights activists, government entities, organisations, journalists and civil society leaders. These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating on this project.

The crucial research questions were: how does digital authoritarianism in Venezuela work and how are digital technologies being used by the government to advance its political interests while harming citizens' rights, like privacy or freedom of expression? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in Venezuela and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues means that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available. Sometimes, civic discourse happens in closed spaces like Telegram channels and private groups, which are difficult to access.

This study constitutes a significant step for analysing the characteristics of digital authoritarianism in Venezuela, where Maduro's government seems to copy other mechanisms and methods used by authoritarian governments in Latin America, such as El Salvador, Cuba and Nicaragua. Even though this study has limitations, it provides a framework and key aspects for future research that can include some statistical analyses of social media narratives, the use of cyber troops and the deconstruction of disinformation campaigns. This dataset can also be used as the basis for policy recommendations, awareness campaigns and cross-border consultations.

MAPPING VENEZUELA'S CHALLENGE WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

There are many strategies behind Maduro's government's digital authoritarianism: internet blocking against digital media; censorship; detention of people who use social media to criticise Maduro's government, denounce human rights violations or the humanitarian emergency; electrical outages that hinder internet access; surveillance of private communications without legal justification; electoral manipulation through technology; and misinformation, disinformation campaigns and inorganic promotion through paid social media users.

Electoral manipulation

Elections in Venezuela are questionable and have been compromised since 2006 when Tibisay Lucena became president of the Electoral National Center (CNE)². Her position paved the way for the end of the autonomy of the electoral institution and allowed for electoral irregularities that range from illegal state use of resources to coerced voting.

But it wasn't until 2017 that most of the Venezuelan population stopped participating in the electoral process, after the Constituent Assembly elections when the Smartmatic system used for voting machines revealed that Maduro's government had falsified one million votes. The election of the Constituent Assembly was strongly questioned by critics, was deemed illegitimate and considered a political strategy designed to give the Maduro administration powers to rewrite the constitution and sideline the opposition-led congress, fairly elected in 2015 by the majority of the popular vote.

Currently, electoral abstention stands at "58.2 percent of the voting population" (CNE)³. But lack of confidence in the electoral process dates back to Maduro's arrival in power. In 2015, the Electoral Integrity Project Venezuela of the Andrés Bello Catholic University wrote a report about citizen perceptions of the Venezuelan electoral system and concluded there has been "a continuous and increasing loss of credibility of the citizens in the CNE." According to this study, 50 percent of Venezuelans did not trust the electoral body at all, 14 percent trusted it a little and 13.2 percent trusted something. Only 22.9 percent said they trust the CNE's process ([Proyecto Integridad Electoral Venezuela](#)).

The Constituent Assembly elections and the takeover of the opposition-led National Assembly are also good examples of the lack of separation of powers in Venezuela, after Maduro's administration designed a National Constituent Assembly, which would replace the National Assembly's functions. The National Constituent Assembly only allowed candidates that were militants of PSUV, and the election took place on the most violent day of the 2017 protests, during which 147 protestors were murdered at the hands of police and military forces during the four-month-long protests. Despite this international scandal, after Smartmatic's revelation of electoral manipulation, the National Constituent Assembly

2. The CNE has traditionally been an autonomous institution, constitutionally forbidden to support political figures.

3. CNE, (@CNEvzla), [Participation Rate Regional Elections](#). Twitter. November 22, 2021. Accessed August 8 2022.

took over the National Assembly's functions until the end of its elected term.

Ever since, the Venezuelan government hasn't regularly held its yearly elections. After the country's last regional elections in 2021, Human Rights Watch made a report saying, "the reconstitution of the Electoral Council in 2021 (...) was not enough to ensure an election that fully respected voters' and candidates' rights" ([Human Rights Watch](#)). Likewise, a report by the European Union Election Observation Mission underscores that Venezuelan citizens faced serious obstacles in voting. The EU electoral report also highlighted arbitrary disqualifications, unequal access to media, lack of judicial independence, and misinformation campaigns through social media. The report called attention to the need for substantial reforms to guarantee free and fair elections and the fact that opposition politicians running for office were also unable to fairly access the electoral agenda ([EU Election Observation Mission to Venezuela](#)).

“**Censorship and persecution of activists and journalists have turned social media into the most relevant source of information and “a big tool of information, resistance and protest**

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Internet and digital media blocking

In 2007, Hugo Chávez began an open attack against the free press, especially television, with the closure of RCTV, one of Venezuela's most popular TV news and entertainment channels. That same year, the government started a strategy to suffocate print media and stopped selling paper to media critical of Chavez's government, which led to the closure of over 150 local, regional and national newspapers across the country. Today, the media ecosystem consists solely of digital media, and social media in Venezuela is more than a source of entertainment: censorship and persecution of activists and journalists have turned social media into the most relevant source of information and “a big tool of information, resistance and protest” as described by Mariví Marín, director of ProBox, a digital rights agency in Venezuela, on a phone call.

According to Datareportal⁴, there were 15.45 million social media users in Venezuela in January 2022 (53.3 percent of the total population, even though social media users may not represent unique users): Facebook has 12.20 million users, Twitter has 1.55 million users, and Instagram has 6.35 million users ([Kemp](#)).

However, Maduro's government has been more restrictive and aggressive than the previous government. Even though patterns of restrictions date back 20 years, Reporters Sans Frontières states that, since 2017, Venezuelan security forces, authorities, and intelligence services have escalated repression against the media, with the Maduro regime trying to silence any content that questions him or his government ([Reporters sans Frontières](#)). According to Espacio Público, an NGO that promotes freedom of expression, in the last three years, criminal persecution and harassment have increased, and legal proceedings have been

4. Datareportal is a digital platform designed to help people and organisations to find the data, insights, and trends about digital contexts across the world.

opened not only against journalists but also citizens who report information about their communities, especially those who mention the humanitarian emergency through social media ([L. Martinez](#)). The report also states that citizens have been forced to install VPNs on their computers to avoid web blocking. The constant failures in the electrical service and the difficult connection to the internet, especially outside of Caracas, further limit access to information ([ProBox & Caracas Chronicles](#)).

Internet was introduced in Venezuela in 1995, when CANTV Servicios was launched by CANTV, the biggest public and state-owned telecommunications company in Venezuela. According to Datareportal, there are 20.87 million internet users in Venezuela in 2022 (out of a population of 28.98 million). Venezuela's internet penetration rate stood at 72 percent of the total population. Eighty-eight percent of them use the internet through their cell phones. Most internet providers in Venezuela are national, and most internet users (67 percent) use CANTV. Other service providers are private companies like Intercable (12 percent), Net1 (2 percent) and other small companies.

However, The Venezuelan Observatory of Public Utilities ([OVSP](#)) said in their 2021 report that 61.8 percent of Venezuelans don't have internet in their homes. While 38 percent have internet service, 50 percent of those negatively rated the service. The OVSP also highlights a big difference between Caracas, the capital city, and rural regions in the country. While in Caracas 49 percent of users have internet service in their homes, in other cities or towns it may only reach 28 percent.

Internet access has been particularly affected by electric outages across the country since 2018, when daily outages started in cities like Mérida, San Cristóbal, and Maracaibo. In 2019, there was a historic national electric blackout that lasted 7 days. This made it nearly impossible for the entire population to access the internet or use cell phone data. Since 2019, daily electric outages have become common across the country, and can go from 1 hour to 17 hours. Today, these outages usually occur in specific neighbourhoods and service failures are considered one of the most important consequences of the humanitarian emergency regarding access to information.

While service failures are considered a relevant issue, there is little evidence to support the notion that these blackouts are targeted by the government to isolate certain regions during social and political crises. This is not the case with website blockings in Venezuela, which have extensive evidence of the correlation between relevant information and targeted blockings. According to The Press and Society Institute⁵, currently, more than 60 digital media are regularly and systematically blocked, among them are investigative media Armando.info, news-based media Efecto Cocuyo, Caraota Digital, La Patilla, Tal Cual, NTN24; humans rights website Provea, Prepara Familia, Acceso a la Justicia, Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón and others ([IPYS Venezuela](#), 2018).

During politically and socially relevant incidents, however, this number might fluctuate. During the November 2021 regional elections, for example, VE Sin Filtro reported that 40 web domains of digital media were continually blocked during the electoral campaign: "During the election and the entire electoral campaign, the vast majority of internet blocks were directed against the media and other websites whose content is primarily news.

5. IPYS is an NGO that monitors violations against freedom of speech and access to information.

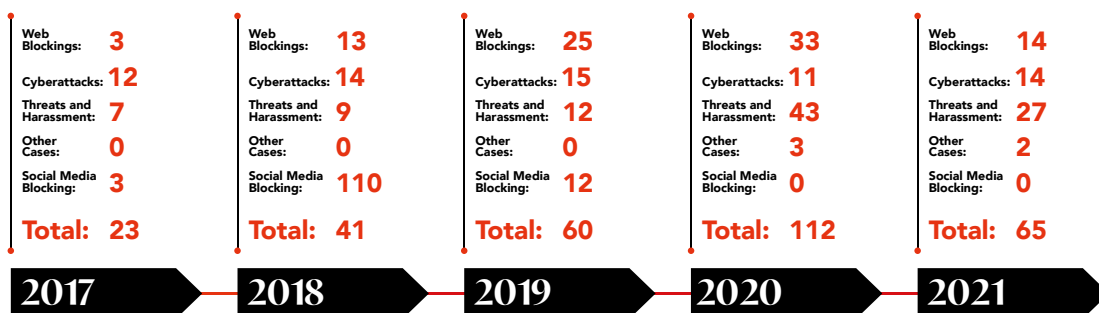
The blocks also affect platforms used to disseminate multimedia content, portals with political content openly critical of the government, platforms that have been affiliated with programs promoted by the opposition, among other categories” ([VE Sin Filtro](#)).

According to a 2021 Telefónica transparency report ([Telefónica](#)), Venezuela has the highest number of requests from authorities to block websites in Latin America, and one of the highest in the world: Argentina (0.05 percent), Brazil (0.28 percent), Chile (0.05 percent), Colombia (0 percent), Ecuador (0 percent), Mexico (0 percent), Peru (0.03 percent), Uruguay (0.09 percent) and Venezuela (20.5 percent).

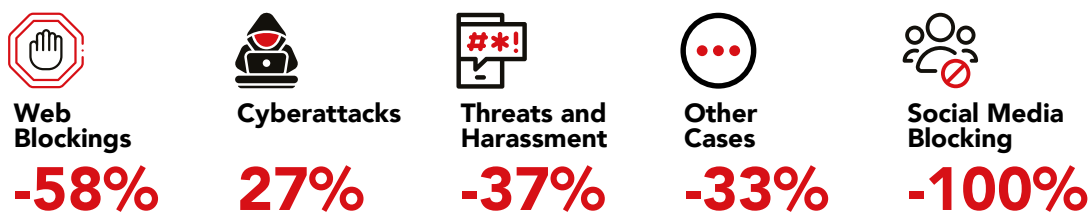
However, according to The Press and Society Institute’ report, the website categories most likely to be blocked are those related to the parallel dollar market (44 percent); the media (19 percent); blogs critical of the ruling party (12 percent); and online gambling and betting (9 percent) ([IPYS Venezuela](#), 2018). Websites related to the parallel dollar were born after the exchange control implemented by Chávez in 2003. Cadivi was a dollar restriction program aimed at maintaining the price of the bolivar against the dollar at a fixed rate.

ATTACKS AGAINST ONLINE FREE SPEECH

PER YEAR



INCREASE vs 2020 (per attack)



TOTAL INCREASE vs 2020 **-42%**

Fig 1: Attacks against online free speech

Criminalisation of social media users and digital media

Opposition politicians, journalists, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers and citizens have been victims of actions from Maduro's government that range from harassment campaigns (insults and threats through social media or physical harassment with security forces or paramilitary corps), to arbitrary arrests and judicial proceedings (most of them with many legal irregularities), accusations and arrests because they gave their opinion, reported or expressed themselves in the digital space. According to Redes Ayuda's yearly report, "Error 404: Democracy Not Found", a total of 65 attacks against digital media were registered during the year 2021, and 11 people were detained and charged for incidents in digital spaces ([Serrano](#)).

It must be noted that, if we compare the numbers to the 2020 data, there is a decline in the number of detentions. Redes Ayuda reports a decline of 68 percent in the number of detentions (25 detentions in 2020, and 11 in 2021).

Venezuela's District Attorney from the Prosecutor's Office, Tarek William Saab, has played a fundamental role in understanding the criminalization of free speech and free information in digital spaces. Saab is usually referred to as "The Social Media DA," because of the way he monitors social media and digital media expression. Some even believe he only investigates and reacts to cases that go viral on social media or that include people who use social media to express themselves. Saab is known for his authoritarian practices within the Venezuelan legal system, as he has systematically abused his power and promoted detentions and investigations with political motives against people who have criticised or made fun of him.

One example is the case of Olga Mata, a 72-year-old woman who made a comedic Tik Tok video selling arepas with the names of Venezuelan politicians. Among them, she mentioned Maduro, Diosdado Cabello, Delcy Rodríguez, and Tarek William Saab. She was detained in 2022 and charged with a hate crime and for promoting the assassination of politicians, but

“ [Usually referred to as The Social Media DA,] Saab is known for his authoritarian practices within the Venezuelan legal system, as he has systematically abused his power and promoted detentions and investigations with political motives against people who have criticised or made fun of him

the government offered her parole if she recorded an apology video. The original video is no longer available on Mata's TikTok account, which has 156,000 followers and 763,000 likes. Mata was arrested, along with her son Florencio Gil, who appeared in a police report photo but wasn't charged ([Singer](#)).

This isn't the first detention of a citizen for making jokes about government officials on social media. In 2018, Ricardo Prieto Parra and Carlos Varón García, two firemen from Mérida state, were detained after making a video calling a donkey "Maduro." They were imprisoned for a month, and threatened with a 20-year-long sentence, but were liberated a month later with restrictive measures. According to Redes Ayuda, a total of 11 citizens have been detained for using social media to criticise Maduro's government ([Serrano](#)).

”

Despite Venezuelan citizens being vulnerable to state persecution, journalists and digital media are more exposed. In 2015, Diosdado Cabello, a deputy in Maduro's National Assembly and vice president of PSUV, issued a lawsuit against the media outlets El Nacional, Diario Tal Cual, and La Patilla, after they published an ABC article in which they pointed out that Cabello was linked to drug trafficking. In 2018, the Supreme Court of the regime forced El Nacional⁶ to pay the sum of VED 1,000 million (about 50,000 USD) as compensation for "moral damages." However, it was not until April 16, 2021, that the Supreme Court ordered the recalculation of the amount established in 2018, for which El Nacional had to pay more than USD 13 million to Cabello, who also threatened to seize the media company's goods if they did not pay in cash. On May 14, 2022, the headquarters of El Nacional were seized.

“ Maduro sells his regime as a socialist government meant to protect “the people, the workers and the marginalised,” but, in reality, left-wing political and social actors have been increasingly exposed to criminalisation. ”

Another relevant case is the exile of four journalists and editors from digital investigative media Armando.info — Alfredo Meza, Ewald Scharfenberg, Joseph Poliszuk, and Roberto Deniz — after being sued by Colombian businessman Alex Saab for a series of publications about Saab's corruption network as Maduro's financial asset.

In 2021, four digital media were legally prosecuted for reporting on different events in the social and political context in Venezuela: VPI TV, Diario el Panorama, Efecto Cocuyo and El Nacional. The director of Efecto Cocuyo Luz Mely Reyes and her family had to flee the country after threats of imprisonment, after she published a tweet citing a report that mentioned the presence of authorities from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Venezuelan military uniform and in Venezuelan territory.

Political actors, workers' representatives, and union leaders are also at risk in Venezuela's digital spaces. This is particularly relevant because Maduro sells his regime as a socialist government meant to protect "the people, the workers and the marginalised," but, in reality, left-wing political and social actors have been increasingly exposed to criminalisation.

Such is the case of Eudis Girot, oil worker's union leader who was arrested for warning about fuel shortages in Venezuela in 2021, due to concerns that his tweets would "generate commotion and panic." Prosecutors charged Girot with crimes including terrorism, the release of confidential information, the instigation of others to commit a crime, and illicit possession of a firearm.

But Girot isn't the only left-wing leader who has been persecuted by Maduro's government. In July 2022, Bandera Roja, one of Venezuela's historic socialist parties, revealed that their party and the Venezuelan Communist Party have been subject to persecution since 2019, and denounced the arbitrary detention of 10 political leaders of their parties.⁷

6. El Nacional has been one of Venezuela's biggest newspapers since 1943. Since the early 2000s, however, the many strategies of the government have plummeted its audience numbers.

7. Bandera Roja (@Bandera_Roja), List of Political Prisoners 2022. Twitter. July 25, 2022.

Surveillance and data governance

Since the early 2000s, Venezuelan digital rights activists and NGOs have been suspicious of the use of surveillance and the arbitrary monitoring of private communications across the country. However, there's been little evidence to determine the scope of the problem. That was until a transparency report published by Telefónica, the parent company of Movistar Venezuela, revealed data on arbitrary interceptions of the private communications of their Venezuelan subscribers by the order of government security bodies, and has shed light on what is now considered a "mass surveillance program in Venezuela," with interventions that include intercepting or "tapping" calls, monitoring their internet traffic, monitoring SMSes, and locating people through their cell phones ([Telefónica](#)).

According to the report, in 2021 Telefónica intercepted by order of Maduro's government the communications of 1,584,547 Movistar subscribers across the country. That's 20.5 percent of Movistar telephone/internet accounts. The report also underlines the relevant escalation in the number of lines affected by interceptions, which has increased seven times since 2016, when there were 234,932 breaches in total.

According to the report, Movistar Venezuela doesn't receive intervention requests through judicial orders, as stipulated by Venezuelan law, but rather from the police, the military, the Public Ministry, the General Prosecutor's office, the CICPC (Venezuela's criminal scientific investigations agency), and even the National Experimental Security University. While interception of communications can be a legitimate tool to investigate crimes, these powers must be used in accordance with national and international laws, human rights standards and due process in order to protect citizens.

There have also been worries of surveillance through el Carnet de la Patria, an alternate ID system created by chavismo that allows "government supporters" access to subsidised food and gasoline. Inherently, the Carnet de la Patria is used to divide the population into chavistas or not chavistas, and as a tool to promote social espionage within impoverished communities: "The Patria system (patria.org) and the carnet de la Patria are part of this social control strategy that the regime has been trying to implement in the country for over a decade. The attempts to create a system in which citizens are forced to inform on their neighbours' political activity, especially if they oppose the regime, go as far back as the Framework Law of National Security (2002) and the repealed Law of the National Intelligence and Counterintelligence System (2008)" ("[Maduro Takes Important Steps in Social Espionage](#)").

According to a report published by Chilean NGO Derechos Digitales, "we see a silent trend towards the implementation of different technological systems to control access to social protection, that is, the policies developed to reduce poverty, social vulnerability, and exclusion, as fundamental rights. (...) In the case of Venezuela, we observe the use of surveillance

“ [According to a transparency report,] in 2021 Telefónica intercepted by order of Maduro's government the communications of 1,584,547 Movistar subscribers across the country. That's 20.5 percent of Movistar's telephone/internet accounts.

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technologies for identity verification. While the country is facing a sustained humanitarian emergency, biometric systems have been implemented to control the acquisition of essential products, resulting in various complaints of discrimination” ([Díaz and Venturini](#), 4).

Disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda

The Maduro government’s illicit use and promotion of information through social media has also become a relevant problem that continues to grow side by side with strategies of censorship and control within digital spaces. *Transparencia Venezuela*, an anti-corruption NGO that promotes transparency in governance explains that “Consummating the information monopoly was accompanied by disinformation actions of different types, where three categories are mixed: erroneous information, disinformation and malicious information.” ([Transparencia Venezuela](#))

Attacks against print media, radio and TV have changed the media landscape in Venezuela, and the dependence on digital media has been noted in national and international reports about the human rights crisis across the country. In their 2021 report, ProBox explains that “Understanding the behaviour of the digital space in Venezuela is fundamental due to the relevance it has for citizens and political actors. Social media such as Twitter have become one of the main windows for information, digital protest, and reports of the reality of the country. This is why the hegemony that the Venezuelan state has over communication in traditional media is also gaining more and more space in the digital world through the use of automated accounts and coordinated user accounts called “Tropas” with the intent of manipulating the conversation” ([Runrun.es](#)).

Somos Venezuela, a political party founded by Maduro and allied to PSUV, paid money to those social media users “who have stood out for their support in social media during sensitive political times” (Somos Venezuela).⁸ “Tropas are coordinated groups that produce messages in favour of the government that receive payments from state funds, with the intention of promoting narratives that manipulate the perception of events in the country, generate propaganda in favour of public organisations in the context of the situation, and attack and misinform civil society and the opposition” (Uzcátegui).

In the 2021 yearly report, ProBox explains that the ruling party PSUV was the entity with the most inorganic publications on Venezuelan Twitter during the year, and the tweets with the lowest degree of authenticity come from the Ministry of Communication and Information with 76.82 percent of the total content published being inorganic, followed by users linked to the radical ruling party (44.61 percent) and government entities (41.98 percent). ProBox also explains that these types of inorganic interactions violate Twitter’s rules regarding the manipulation of trending topics, false interactions, and massive publication of messages.

8. Somos Venezuela (@MSVEnLinea), Maduro offers payment to social media supporters. Twitter. November 22, 2021.

ProBox's report also highlights that the Tropas have influenced and manipulated public opinion during times of political relevance. During the regional elections in 2021, ProBox registered 117 trending topics, but the general public drove only 2, compared to the ruling party, which occupied 92.2 percent of the messages with 59 hashtags; 65.43 percent of the interactions with these trending topics promoted by the government were made by possibly automated accounts.

The report mentions two other recent relevant cases. First, the visit of the IPC and the promotion of the hashtags #VenezuelaGarantizaJusticia (Venezuela guarantees justice) by government entities, while advocacy groups and citizens promoted the hashtag #VenezuelaExigeJusticia (Venezuela demands justice); and the manipulation of trending topics in favour of Andrés Arauz and against Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador's presidential campaign. Second, the manipulation of Twitter messages in order to justify the exile and detention of journalist Roberto Deniz and activist Javier Tarazona.

While there is a huge disproportion between Maduro's government's inorganic interaction on social media (93 percent), and the opposition (7 percent), the Venezuelan opposition has also been involved in the distribution of political propaganda through social media in countries like El Salvador. In 2021, El Faro, one of El Salvador's most influential media outlets, reported about a new alliance between President Nayib Bukele and former members of Voluntad Popular, an opposition party in Venezuela that is a member of in the International Socialist Parties, handled without transparency by Bukele's government. "The government of President Nayib Bukele has a hidden structure above his ministers, a kind of supra-cabinet made up of at least ten Venezuelan advisers whose contracts, fees and responsibilities have not been made transparent. Most of them are linked to the self-proclaimed interim government of Juan Guaidó and the leadership of the Voluntad Popular party in Maracaibo and Caracas. At least since February 2020, this parallel cabinet has given orders to ministers from the economic cabinet, health and other executive institutions. Another group, from the Presidential House, is in charge of coordinating the activities of the propaganda apparatus of the Executive Branch and New Ideas, a party founded around the figure of Bukele and which has controlled the Legislative Assembly since February 2021" (Alvarado).

Legal justifications

Despite there being little to no transparency and legal justification from the government as part of its campaign to control digital spaces, persecute and harass social media users, and block digital media, Maduro's government has created and promoted legal frameworks through the illegitimate National Assembly and the Supreme Court, that allow the government to continue regulating, controlling and criminalising dissent in the country. According to The Press and Society Institute, these legal frameworks stem from the constitution, changed during Chávez's government,

“ While there is a huge disproportion between Maduro's government's inorganic interaction on social media (93 percent), and the opposition (7 percent), the Venezuelan opposition has also been involved in the distribution of political propaganda through social media in countries like El Salvador.

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the Organic Law on Telecommunications, the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, and the Constitutional Law against Hatred and for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance, to the Anti-Blockade Constitutional Law for National Development and the Guarantee of Human Rights, and the Law of Transparency and Access to Information of Public Interest ([IPYS Venezuela, 2022](#)).

In March of 2021, the National Assembly of Maduro's administration presented a proposal to evaluate a package of 30 new laws, among which stands an expansion of the RESORTE law, a law that has controlled public expression from TV, radio and newspapers in Venezuela since 2006. The changes in the RESORTE law would evaluate adding "a chapter for the regulation of social media titled Cyberspace Law and the Defense of Venezuelan Cyberspace" (Bastidas).⁹ A first draft of this law was released in 2018, and was originally rejected and strongly criticised by various NGOs because it "justifies and further expands the powers of government to control and monitor the use of the internet without institutional checks and balances".

The Constitutional Law of Cyberspace has also been questioned by Access Now, because it "further expands the powers of the government to control and monitor the use of the Internet without institutional checks and balances, which represents a serious threat to the human rights of Venezuelans. The law promotes a national cyber defence system that regulates the vaguely defined 'Cyberspace of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela'." ([Access Now](#))

Maduro's government has also systematically used the Law Against Hatred, approved by the National Constituent Assembly in November 2017, to criminalise journalists, activists, and citizens that use digital spaces. In 2020, the Press and Society Institute determined in a yearly report that the Law Against Hatred has been used by the state as a tool of persecution and censorship in Venezuela. The report also revealed that "2020 was the year with the most people detained and prosecuted, with a total of 34 citizens who have been deprived of liberty," ([IPYS, 2021](#)): "Public officials have used the 'Law Against Hatred' to persecute and intimidate the media, journalists, religious leaders, health workers, public employees and even citizens for asserting their right to freedom of expression and opinion," they highlighted in the report.

The Law Against Hatred has been consistently questioned because it handles a vague definition of hate speech "without clear established limits on its categorization, which leaves room for interpretation, ambiguity and gives the State the power to establish which messages are generators of hate and which ones aren't" ([IPYS, 2021](#)).

9. Bastidas, Gabriel (@GBastidas) [Video of Maduro's Statement about social media regulations](#). Twitter. March 3, 2021

Citizen response and advocacy

Civil society in Venezuela has become increasingly active around and engaged in political conversations on social media. According to ProBox, while Maduro's government is the entity in their analysis with the highest presence on Twitter, civil society is the second, with around 1.9 million tweets about service failures, the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and human and workers' rights since the beginning of 2022: "The positioning of narratives that report on the crisis and document the state of human rights in Venezuela through trends in social media is essential," ([ProBox](#)).

Digital rights are also a common theme in Venezuela's social media conversation, and while these conversations are usually made from a human rights perspective, still, there is little general understanding of how these issues are advancements in digital authoritarianism. However, there are still many platforms that focus on informing the public about digital authoritarianism: digital media like Efecto Cocuyo and Armando.info regularly post information against censorship and web blockings; and recommend and explain how to use VPNs in order to access their websites. Hashtags about service failures are popular, with #SinLuz (without electricity) becoming one of Venezuela's most used hashtags, with more than 46,000 tweets since January 2022, even though electricity failures usually leave people without internet access. Cases of detained citizens, journalists, and activists usually go viral on Twitter and spark conversations about the government's arbitrary detentions and authoritarian practices to censor dissident voices.

There are also many national and local NGOs and grassroots organisations that document, and denounce digital rights violations and focus on digital rights as a fundamental issue to understanding human rights in Venezuela. Organisations and collectives like VE Sin Filtro, Redes Ayuda, ProBox, Ipys, Cazadores de Fake News, Monitoreamos, Transparencia Venezuela, Venezuela Verifica, Es Paja, VE Inteligente have made huge contributions to the digital rights ecosystem.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

With the crackdown on radio, TV, and newspapers since 2007, the Venezuelan population is largely dependent on digital spaces: social media is generally the main source of information across the country, and digital media has taken over other types of press and completely changed the media ecosystem in Venezuela.

However, digital authoritarianism has rapidly advanced in the country since 2014, with Maduro's arrival in power. Within Venezuela's political and economic crisis, complex humanitarian emergency, and polarised context, digital authoritarianism is used to crack down on dissident voices and control freedom of expression, press, and opinion.

Strategies behind digital authoritarianism in Venezuela range from internet blocking against digital media, censorship, the detention of people who use social media to express themselves against Maduro's government, electrical outages that hinder internet access, surveillance of private communications without legal justification, electoral manipulation through technology, and misinformation and disinformation campaigns, to inorganic promotion through paid social media users. Venezuela's opposition parties also take part in misinformation and export digital propaganda to countries like El Salvador.

While the Venezuelan government justifies their authoritarian practices with stigmatising narratives and a set of laws that has been illegally approved, it has also created more complex strategies to persecute journalists, politicians and civil society, like the promotion of propaganda to justify detentions.

Digital authoritarianism has also had a huge impact on public and daily life, through service interruptions, web blocking and the criminalisation of media, which results in the obstruction of access to information. The political landscape has also drastically changed, because Maduro's government has successfully purged parties and politicians through exile, imprisonment and disqualification.

While the Law Against Hatred is by far the most used legal framework to criminalise dissident voices, the National Commission of Communications is the body responsible for the regulation of content in media, radio and TV, and the closure and blocking of digital media.

It remains to be seen whether Maduro's government will positively respond to the recommendations made by international organisations like the ICP, the Fact Finding Mission of the UN, and the EU Commission, to promote democratic electoral process, stop the persecution of citizens and justify the regulation and censorship of digital media.

“ While the Venezuelan government justifies its authoritarian practices with stigmatising narratives and a set of laws that has been illegally approved, it has also created more complex strategies to persecute journalists, politicians and civil society, like the promotion of propaganda to justify detentions. ”

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