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Venezuelan Media: Powerful Opposition Stakeholders

“...They don’t say information is power for nothing... time and time again...the private media have gone on the attack, in ways that make the U.S. feeding frenzy on the Bill Clinton thong-gate look like a Victorian ladies’ tea...The thing about the Venezuelan media is, they often feed the international media. Never do they tell you that the infant mortality rate under Chávez has plummeted or that school enrollment has soared. It’s all doom and gloom ...”¹

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“After Chávez came to power in 1998, the five main privately owned channels – Venevisión, Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), Globovisión, Televen and CMT – and nine out of the 10 major national newspapers, including El Universal, El Nacional, Tal Cual, El Impulso, El Nuevo País and El Mundo, have taken over the role of the traditional political parties, which were damaged by the president’s electoral victories. Their monopoly on information has put them in a strong position. They give the opposition support, only rarely reporting government statements and never mentioning its large majority...Their investigations, interviews and commentaries all pursue the same objective: to undermine the legitimacy of the government and to destroy the president’s popular support...the media is still directly encouraging dissident elements to overthrow the democratically elected president – if necessary by force...”²

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“...The private television stations and newspapers not only helped to provoke the [April 11, 2002 coup d’etat against President Chavez,] but also played a major part while the coup was taking place. In the weeks leading to the coup, the broadcast media-with the exception of the state-run, pro-Chavez Channel 8-had been increasingly hostile in their news coverage...The five main TV channels gave advertising space to those who had called the anti-Chavez demonstration that led up to the coup....Gustavo Cisneros, a media billionaire and fishing companion of George Bush senior, is seen as a key figure in the events...Another key player, the head of Globovision, Alberto Ravell.”³

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During the coup, “...a group of top media executives rolled up in their limousines for a meeting with Mr. Carmona [the transitional president], at the 19th-century Miraflores palace.... Gustavo Cisneros, owner of the Venevision television channel and perhaps the country’s richest man, headed the group. Also

¹ Venezuelan News Media Dissected, Antonia Zerbisias, September 28, 2003, *The Toronto Star*.

² *How Hate Media Incited the Coup Against The President: Venezuela’s Press Power*, Maurice Lemoine, August 2002, Le Monde Diplomatique.

³ *It’s a coup: your sets will adjust accordingly*, Duncan Campbell, *The Guardian*, 4-29-02

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present were Miguel Henrique Otero, publisher of the *El Nacional* group of newspapers, Alberto Federico Ravell, chief executive of Globovision (Venezuela's answer to CNN) and Marcel Granier of the RCTV channel. "We can't guarantee you the loyalty of the army," a presidential guard heard one of them tell Mr. Carmona, "but we can promise you the support of the media." ...Mr. Carmona was overheard telling them: "In your hands lie the safety and stability of the government." In a desperate bid to hold on to power, the government's media allies conspired to suppress all news of its difficulties. A regime that had seized power while waving the flag of press freedom spent its 36 hours in office doing its best to keep the truth from the public..."⁴

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According to a Venezuelan journalist, "a 'diabolical blackout' ..l left most of Venezuela misinformed about what was happening..." during the short-lived coup.⁵

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"The role of the Venezuelan media prior to and during the coup is one of the more ominous developments. Far from being objective observers, the media establishment and the moguls who own it are overtly biased and active political players. All the major media outlets regularly ran free ads encouraging the middle class to take to the streets...the media moguls either control or are closely allied with most of the Spanish language media across the continent and in the U.S. The transnational character of the media and its direct role in destabilizing a democratically elected government in order to install a right wing dictatorship backed by elements of the military have sent shock waves across the hemisphere..."⁶

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"Venezuela's commercial media is a major player in the opposition. The five largest private television stations and every major Caracas newspaper except one are opposed to Chavez, and most have openly campaigned for his ouster. In addition to propagating the perception that the government is sponsoring assassinations and bombings, the media has fanned paranoia that Chavez commands an army of clandestine guerrilla groups and slum militias."⁷

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"Government officials have solid evidence to charge that the media's current behavior jeopardizes democratic institutions...For two months, they helped fuel an economically devastating and socially destabilizing general strike aimed at ousting Chávez from office, in which they heavily promoted opposition leaders while systematically slandering the president and ignoring events favorable to his side..."⁸

⁴ **Coup and Counter-Coup** from *The Economist Global Agenda*, April 16, 2002.

⁵ *Venezuelan press sidestepped leader's return*, Juan Forero, *The New York Times*, 4-23-02, A13.

⁶ *Media, Oil and Politics: Anatomy of the Venezuela Coup*, Eric Quezada, *Media/Alliance* 2002.

⁷ *Media fan anti-Chavez paranoia*, Reed Lindsay, *Sun Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL), 10-14-03, p.A16

⁸ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, Memorandum to the Press 03.18, April 30, 2003 "*COHA Research Memorandum. Venezuela's Media: More than Words at Stake*".