

Alternative media as a tool for democratic transition:
A Case Study of Venezuela's 2024 presidential elections

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Abstract

In the past two decades, Venezuela has experienced a profound socio-economic and political crisis under the regimes of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Today, the 2024 presidential elections lack transparent fair conditions, and media repression has further exacerbated the crisis, with a significant decline in traditional outlets because of government control.

This study examines (a) the factors contributing to the rise of alternative media in Venezuela amidst an autocratic administration, as well as (b) how journalists and political opposition utilised these platforms during the pre-electoral period as tools for democratic transition.

Employing a qualitative method that involves 16 semi-structured interviews with OP's (n = opposition politicians) and J's (n = journalists), this research's findings are based on five dimensions that underscore how authoritarian governance (D1) and a communicational hegemony (D2) leads to the emergence of alternative media (D3) in the first place. It also unveils the usages that journalists (D4) and opposition leaders (D5) give to these alternative outlets to sustain democratic aspirations and civic awareness despite severe oppression and electoral manipulation.

The theoretical framework situates this study within broader discussions of media resilience in authoritarian contexts, contributing to a global understanding of media strategies in restrictive environments. By shedding light on the Venezuelan case, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature and offers insights applicable to other regimes facing similar challenges worldwide.

Keywords: *authoritarian regime, media repression, freedom of speech, disinformation, pre-electoral stage, alternative media outlets*

Acknowledgements

“The Venezuelan people are admirable because their daily lives are filled with challenges. Venezuelans face severe hardships, unlike others who wake up with easy access to clean drinking water, hot showers, breakfast, news, and reliable public transportation. Many wake up without water and must use rationed buckets for bathing and brushing their teeth. Cooking is difficult too; they often lack the food or gas needed. Power outages are common, sometimes lasting six hours a day and 7 days a week, making it hard for them to communicate with family members abroad who send them remittances from places like Spain, Houston, Santo Domingo, or Bogotá. Despite these pressures, the resilience, and efforts of the Venezuelan people to stay informed and carry on with their lives deserve immense recognition.” – OP5

I want to dedicate this thesis to my parents, distinguished academics, journalists, and writers, who devoted their lives to pursuing a freer country. Despite facing persecution and the unexpected need to leave their homeland, they remained steadfast in their commitment. I deeply admire you.

And to all those Venezuelans, each of those 7.7 million people who left with just one bag on each shoulder, reinventing themselves in new homes and unable to return; and to those who remain, never losing hope and with the land’s blood flowing through their veins.

Introduction

Venezuela has seen unmatched levels of increasing poverty, rising inflation, corruption, and economic collapse over the last decade. According to a report done by the National Survey of Living Conditions in Venezuela¹(2024), 82,8% of the population lives in extreme poverty, with less than 1.90\$ dollars daily, known as the international threshold. Besides, the Central Bank of Venezuela² (2023) asserted that the country's inflation rate was 189,8%, and the minimum wage is equivalent to 3,6\$ dollars a month as of the start of 2024. As a result, the United Nations Refugee Agency (2023) specified that the authoritarian regime has led to an exodus of 7.7 million Venezuelans.

The country will hold its presidential elections in 2024³, however, the conditions for free and fair voting are not there, as indicated by Freedom House (2024) in their latest official report, the country's political rights and pluralism are null, as the electoral system is being manipulated by the interference of the PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela), the governing party of President Nicolas Maduro.

Furthermore, Venezuela has seen a major decrease in traditional media outlets in the territory, according to Human Rights Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Espacio Publico (2023), a total of 408 media have been closed since 2003 by the direct mandate of The National Commission of Telecommunications⁴. This has developed into what Reporters Without Borders (2023) has officially defined as a "Communication Hegemony". Thus, today digital tools prove key to keeping news alive, and using new tactical websites is an alternate mechanism to battle extreme media censorship (Pain & Korin, 2023).

¹ Spanish acronym "ENCOVI", a survey that assesses different aspects of the quality of life of the national households.

² "Banco Central de Venezuela" in the Reference list.

³ Presidential elections in Venezuela are set for July 28th, 2024.

⁴ Spanish Acronym "CONATEL"; <https://www.conatel.gob.ve/>

It is this study's objective to grasp the different usages that can be given by country oppositional leaders and journalists to foster a democratic transition. Building on this foundation, Venezuelan citizens should have the right to open channels that serve as a watchdog role for society⁵, and where there exists balanced political debate to influence an informed vote, nowadays alternative outlets attempt to fulfil this role. Therefore, this paper, through a qualitative approach, aims to answer two research questions:

RQ1: *“What were the main factors that led to the emergence of alternative media in Venezuela under its authoritarian regime?”*.

RQ2: *“How do Venezuelan political opposition leaders and journalists utilize alternative media platforms for democratic transition in the context of the country's 2024 presidential elections?”*.

Alternative media refers to news outlets that have been created in the last decade because of the shutdown of mainstream media, and that operate as independent, free, and solely online, and do not receive any funding from the Venezuelan government. Some examples are *Efecto Cocuyo*, *El Pitazo*, *Runrun.es*, *Media Analisis*, *Cotejo.info*, *La Patilla*, *El estímulo media*, and *Chiguire Bipolar*.

The *societal* relevance of this paper lies in the analysis of the barriers that a national media apparatus has during an openly stated communicational hegemony, highlighting the democratic aspirations of journalists and opposition politicians when producing and using alternative platforms to circumvent electoral manipulations and advocate for key global democratic values such as freedom of expression, human rights promotion, and civic engagement.

⁵ Refers to the media's responsibility to monitor and scrutinize the government's management.

By situating the Venezuelan case on a broader scale, this study provides valuable insights that can be applied in countries that face similar challenges, where oppressed journalists and politicians are confronting the struggles of an authoritarian organisation, this will ultimately serve as a guide to empower these groups in fostering political pluralism and accountability.

To my knowledge, there are no available previous studies that have examined the various indicators behind the emergence of alternative media, as well as the usages that political opposition personalities and journalists give to these platforms to champion democratic transition in Venezuela, and such research in other authoritarian contexts is rare at best. Thus, this study serves as a pioneering opportunity, given its potential to unveil new insights about the dynamics of such forms of communication, both digital and independent, amidst an authoritarian regime.

Thus, the *academic* relevance lies in the theoretical debate on communicative adaptation strategies in restrictive environments. Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2021) specifically reference the inequality that makes the Global North predominant in the production of research regarding digital journalism, ultimately impoverishing the inquiry spectrum. There is a major gap in research papers between developed and developing countries, and this study contributes to the analysis of media usage and information disorder in the global South (Dados & Connell, 2012). Understanding political communication and framing strategies has become essential in democratic and freer countries, and not so much in authoritarian regimes.

Theoretical framework

Media Censorship and the emergence of alternative outlets under authoritarian regimes

In this section, I research the literature available on the factors behind the rise of alternative media amid authoritarian rule, this guided me to build upon the specific context of *RQ1*.

Authoritarianism is defined as a form of governance in which political leaders abuse and maintain power, therefore creating limitations on political freedom and human rights (Linz, 2000). In this study, this sensitizing concept allows me to explore how a political regime can cause experiences of harassment to journalists and political figures that will ultimately lead them to find alternative ways to communicate their rights.

Levitsky and Way (2010) defined an authoritarian regime as one where (1) the channels to bring awareness to the political opposition and contest the current executive power are non-existent, (2) election time is uncertain, given the diverse strategies led by the government to repress, restrict, or fraud the election results and (3) oppression has such a high level, that the civic opposition groups must stay undercover, imprisoned, or in exile to be risk averse. The authors described a hegemonic regime where the opposition does not stand a chance to contest the current governing party in the public arena.

Further, it becomes critical to understand how this type of administration directly affects the media infrastructure of a country. In this regard, Akhrarkhodjaeva (2017) remarked that, as a regime becomes more authoritarian, the media ownership structure increases its constraints, and so does the persecution of journalists in the country. The author also theorized the weakness of democratic institutions in these electoral authoritarian regimes, classified as (1) the rulers' control over public TV channels and (2) the entire control of the traditional media apparatus. This evolves into a controlled ecosystem where the

rulers censor any public open expression opposed to their views and use conventional outlets to construct positive interpretations and propaganda on their mandate.

The specific manipulation strategies that a fully authoritarian regime exerts under media control are through the ownership of main press rooms, regulation of distribution channels, the adaptation of new jurisdiction, access to information, and co-optation by managing the opposition channels (Akhrarkhodjaeva, 2017).

Entering the regional outlook of Latin America, Hughes and Lawson (2005) stated how barely free news media are in the region from political officials' and government representatives' threats. The barriers to a more independent and pluralistic press under these regimes are authoritarian policies that prevent open and assertive reporting, verbal and physical threats to journalists, ownership of the public main media outlets, the small perimeter under which print press reaches the audience, and the new communication technologies. Their study showcases that it is not only the sociopolitical context that has shaped this region throughout history but also the long-established roles and the numerous challenges they face to evolve, given the rigidity of an authoritarian system,

Media Repression is described as the censorship and control by the government of a country of the information provided by traditional media outlets and mostly takes place during pre-election periods (Schulze & Zakharov, 2023). In this research, this sensitizing concept gives me a sense of direction when defining the suppressive policies of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro on media outlets that try to inform the public about the ongoing humanitarian crisis. It will also represent the main cause of the emergence of new platforms to disseminate impartial news by resilient journalists and opposition figures.

Kenix (2011b) found that, even though traditional media outlets can be spotted in almost every national setting, these outlets have declined over the years because of a lack of

financial support, mergers, and acquisitions of main broadcast companies, as well as the rise of the Internet.

Moreover, alternative media has emerged to fill these gaps and maintain an informed society, whether it is a democratic setting or an autocratic one. Downing et al. (2001) describe these unconventional outlets' emergence as a response to media activism in the face of repression of public expression, which has been systematically censored by a country's regime. In this case, authoritarian regimes take control over public press rooms, therefore leading to a counteraction from journalists and citizens that create alternative outlets to stay informed and subversive from the content in mainstream platforms.

Atton (2002) described the emergence of alternative outlets to encourage and normalize access to information to working people, trade unions, or lower-status citizens, and as a tool to express their case stories. The author also states how alternative media is home to stories that have been censored due to government repression, commercial pressures, or conservatism views, therefore having more in-depth information. He later defines the term as the “range of media projects, interventions, and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of ‘doing’ media” (Atton, 2004, p. ix). This prominent scholar in the field has a perception of alternative media as a platform formed with grassroots orientations, produced by smaller groups of individuals that have a high level of social engagement, participation, and innovative formats.

Furthermore, Dowmunt & Coyer (2007) categorize alternative media to be in “explicit opposition” to conventional means, which provides cultural and political content that is not present in other channels. The authors also mentioned the main factors that led to the emergence of this specific media, such as the availability of new technologies, and the increasing levels of political mobilizations in the international arena. Henceforth, this type of

media has been linked to the construction of networks that challenge the hegemonic power structure in society (Atkinson & Kenix, 2019).

Alternative media diverse usages at election time

In this second section, I explore the different alternative media practices for democratic transition and political mobilization that have been researched before. Investigating the different usages available for journalists and politicians at election time guided me to build upon the specific context of *RQ2*.

Joseph (2014) emphasized how media changes depending on the circumstances under which policymaking occurs. In the specific scenario when media are state-controlled, the reported versions of events are biased towards a more “official” discourse, and the “securitisation of the enemy”, the term refers to the framing process of a particular group that acts as opposition to those in power, and it is seen as a threat to national security.

Moreover, Dimitrova et al. (2011) contributed to the debate by affirming that digital media has a direct and positive correlation with citizens’ level of political participation. This aligns with the fact that Latin Americans have extensively adopted digital infrastructures to produce political information (Mitchelstein et al., 2020), as a reaction to traditional media frames being only supportive of the economic and social elites’ discourse (Lupien, 2014).

Holt (2019) defined different usages that alternative news media have today. First, they are utilized to *publish alternative content* which can be often marginalized or ignored on mainstream platforms. Second, *they provide another point of view* on the spectrum of a political event. Third, *the channels contest the governing body and are not supported by public infrastructure*. These usages can vary according to the economic development phase a country is in.

Besides, *Disinformation*, is a term to explain the use of false information to cause harm (Wardle, 2017), the spread of which can also bring legitimacy problems to democracies nowadays (Bennett, Livingston, 2018). This sensitizing concept adds value to the analysis of why people appear distrustful of mainstream media, or how political elites are using traditional means to spread a false image of the current situation in the country. Thus, another usage defined by Atkinson (2010) is the *fight against oppressive and hegemonic power* by political activists, which creates new formats that can not only disclose information about the political opposition but tackle mis/disinformation generated by the rulers in the conventional media apparatus.

Regarding reporters' usages, Mellado et al. (2017) found six journalistic roles that are present in Latin America. '*Interventionist*', refers to an active reporting style; '*watchdog*' refers to the monitor role that holds institutional power and public management accountable; '*loyal*' means that the media infrastructure is supportive of the political elite with prestige; '*service*' denotes the role that gives useful insights into specific contents that can help the population; '*infotainment*' is based on the sensationalist narrative of media to bring attention to the readers; and '*civic*' role aims to disseminate news that will be essential for the public to stay well-informed, aware and educated about complex issues.

Research Design and Data Collection

Venezuela, as an authoritarian regime (Roberts, 2020) lacks updated and accurate data that can be retrieved from official institutions, therefore, to answer this research question, the study employs a qualitative analysis, because it better suits the contextual and deeply rooted phenomena, which needs of nuanced insights to be evaluated. A quantitative approach would bring inherent limitations, like the inability to understand the motivations behind the

emergence of alternative media because, in Venezuela, this media is not widely accepted or visible. Moreover, it would create inadequacy in the usages of alternative media, standing on a more superficial level, instead of grasping the difficulty of an election time that directly alters a communication ecosystem. Numeric data would oversimplify our results, without the flexibility to capture changes in time and perception from different points of view.

Performing semi-structured interviews with both journalists and opposition leaders allows me to be more involved, and to appreciate firsthand the participant's historical and political context, permitting me to structure follow-up questions that would go deeper into the investigation. Their experiences give me the necessary rich and descriptive data within the country's context, as well as the main challenges that are faced.

As Braun and Clarke (2013) assert, interviews are a flexible and adaptable tool that yields unexpected and varied findings, presenting an inductive approach to the research that offers appropriate depth to the analysis. They function as a robust tool that gathers first-hand, comprehensive, and plurality of data that bolsters the credibility and validity of an investigation.

Participants and Sampling

This study uses a purposive sampling approach for the data collection (Patton, 2002), as I chose specific individuals with predetermined roles in the Venezuelan press and political environment based on substantive grounds. Furthermore, it also follows a snowballing sampling strategy, since the participants were enthusiastic and involved enough to refer to other potential interviewees from their network which ended up being of critical insight to the research. This data allowed us to have a rich insight into the context of a volatile and

vulnerable electoral campaign, which has an interpretative factor of the local context (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In total, 16 interviews were carried out with participants who all have a senior level of professional experience that ranges from 25 to 55 years. Regarding gender, the study was quite balanced, 10 of the interviewees were male and 6 were female.

I decided to interview two groups with a very specific characteristic since I noticed the high level of polarization that politics and media were having in the country, and I was interested in understanding if their functions in election time were converging towards a specific goal⁶ or if they had different purposes.

On one hand, 6 of the participants were political leaders, activists, congress deputies, governors, and presidential candidates of the political opposition alliance⁷ in Venezuela. I chose these personalities, because their years of experience provide me with a chronological context of the situation, helping the reader understand how they ended up in the current scenario. One key element I was interested in is that the people interviewed need to be still involved in the current elections. All of them are hands-on in the political race, which will give us valuable visions into the pressures they face when confronting autocratic leaders, and the strategies to get their message across in a country where censorship is very high and only increasing.

On the other side, 10 of them are journalists who are currently working on alternative and digital communication outlets such as *Efecto Cocuyo*, *Armando Info*, and *Runrun.es*. I chose them since they were reporters from traditional media outlets before and had to transition to these new platforms given the government's mandate to shut down print

⁶ (i.e democratic transition)

⁷ "Soy Venezuela" is a political alliance in opposition to the current government of Nicolas Maduro.

publications. Therefore, I wanted to immerse myself in the motivations that led to this relocation of the media ecosystem, as well as to understand which are the differences between both outlets, to grasp the evolutive and historical factors.

Finally, most interviewees were based in Venezuela, except for four personalities who are exiled in Spain, Ecuador, and the United States, given the increasing attacks, persecution, and repression against them given the role of the opposition (Human Rights Foundation, 2023).

Interview procedure

Once the list of participants was confirmed, the data collection process took place from April to May 2024. Each meeting kicked off by informing the participants of their anonymous status and asking for consent to record the audio that will be erased 3 months after the publication date. Furthermore, each discussion followed an open-ended questionnaire that was previously pilot-tested to allow a smooth flow of the conversation (*see Appendix A*).

All meetings took place online through Zoom, Google Meets, and WhatsApp platforms given the location of the participants, which presented some limitations because of the weak internet connection and lack of electricity in Venezuela (Freedom House, 2023). This was reflected in the recording time, which ranged from 20 to 50 minutes, as the infrastructure couldn't support a full hour of interviews. Consequently, our meetings were interrupted, and the audio recordings had to be done in two separate sessions. Also, the interviewees were sceptical about WhatsApp, or direct phone calls on a national number, with fear that any repercussions would be taken against them, for openly talking about sensitive topics.

The interviews were done in the mother tongue of the contestants and the researcher, Spanish, which is helpful and positive for the data collection dynamic when both members match their socio-demographic criteria (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This was followed by transcription with an online application called Notta.ai, which uses artificial intelligence to have the most accurate result. The audio was then translated into English, with Deepl, also known as a high-quality machine translator.

Finally, all data was anonymized using specific codes for each interviewee and stored in a secure way that will guarantee privacy and confidentiality, as the reader can see in *Appendix B*, “OP” was appointed to the opposition politicians, and “J” was appointed to journalists. This was done given the sensitive concept that a repressive system in Venezuela evolves around, it is important to prevent any harmful acts toward the sample members (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Data Analysis

Once the data was gathered, Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to store and analyze the information that had been transcribed from the interviews. First, quotations were made, choosing crucial information that I would want to examine from each transcript. After that, a coding scheme was developed to better segment the data, which was guided by the research question and the sensitizing concepts. Finally, these codes were organized into categories to conduct a thematic analysis that will lead to identifying major themes and trends within our research. As Braun and Clarke (2013) referred, a thematic analysis will allow overarching themes and meaningful patterns that would create a bottom-up evaluation, therefore assessing data saturation.

In the Venezuelan context, multiple components need simultaneous consideration, alongside the varying levels of heterogeneity arising from participants' personal experiences. Therefore, employing thematic analysis enabled me to unravel complexity and systematically organize the data into meaningful topics. This approach facilitated the identification of key concepts and provided flexibility and adaptability to revisit the research questions as necessary.

Results

As the interviews underlined, alternative media have emerged because of the censorship levels at the traditional outlets, therefore both Venezuelan opposition leaders and journalists use alternative platforms to stay informed, boosting mobilization for the 2024 elections despite the authoritarian regime's increased blockages. As shown in *Appendix C*, different themes will be explored in the section below to answer the two defined research questions. Firstly, the first three dimensions (**D1, D2, D3**) will answer the **RQ1** with indicators such as the roots of the current authoritarian regime and how it led to a communicational hegemony; the propagandistic behaviour of traditional media today in the country; and the emergence of alternative outlets to spread diversity and transparency.

Secondly, the last two dimensions (**D4, D5**) answer **RQ2** by understanding the different usages that political leaders and journalists give to alternative media, ensuring a higher mobilization towards the presidential elections, as well as analysing where they converge. In the first case, journalists use this independent press as a way of denouncing abuses among the population; as a watchdog role to society that secures an objective reportage of public management; creating alliances among alternative platforms to increase their audience reach; to foster citizen journalism; and finally, to tackle disinformation in a

pre-electoral stage. On the other side, being aware of the polarization logic between the traditional and alternative media, politicians use alternative to bring awareness to society of the political context, therefore generating information cascades; as a tool to voice their political campaign, which is not accessible anywhere else; finally fighting a silent election, to mobilize people for the 2024 presidential vote.

D1: Authoritarian Governance

Interviewees strongly agreed and classified the Venezuelan regime as an authoritarian one that seeks to deceive the opposition and have absolute control of the political power, which coexists with roots in totalitarianism, with features such as the state media control for propaganda and the use of terror among the population. A political leader and previous president of the Venezuelan National Electoral Council, straightforwardly stated:

“I call it without any doubt, without greater precision, a dictatorship. As far as rights are violated, all the powers of the State are controlled in an authoritarian, closed, and autocratic way. This dominant group of Venezuela is not only a dictatorship in the traditional use of the term but has created a political movement with a deep totalitarian vocation, and totalitarianism is a step much further than a dictatorship.” – OP1

Moreover, the participants shared their personal stories of violations of human rights in Venezuela as a direct result of the anti-democratic measures of those in power, which see freedom of expression as an attack on their administration. Participants have expressed their inability to oppose or have an opinion that goes in a different direction than the rulers because they will be judicially and criminally persecuted. As a key political leader with 50 years of experience and a previous mayor in the capital of Venezuela referred to:

“We Venezuelans are limited in the exercise of our right to express ourselves freely, I have been followed by rigged judicial processes under the pretext that I am declared a traitor to the homeland, because of statements I have given to fight against the dictatorship of Venezuela. That is a way of violating a person's human rights, freedom is the backbone of a democracy.” – OP5

These violations are intended as an act of oppression from the state leaders who want to manipulate the information lines, the newscasts, and opinion programs, to create a fictitious image of the country. Therefore, the apparatus is committed to seeing their view on things as the correct one, and the opposition as the enemy, creating this logic of polarization that eventually intimidates journalists, political parties, and the citizens themselves. As a political and human rights activist, with 40 years of experience indicated:

“If you become an independent journalist, you are placed as the enemy, as a person who is outside of that dynamic. They create polarization, this makes one of the parties be seen as good and the other as bad. All the media are oppositional, even if they are independent, even if they are not linked to a political party, because part of the strategy is to turn them into an enemy to justify the repression that I can then exert on that media, on those people.” – OP3

D2: Communicational hegemony

As a direct consequence of the administration that has ruled for over a decade in Venezuela, blocking the independent press was an effect of the regime's manoeuvre to take over the media ecosystem in the country to spread disinformation, political propaganda, and sponsoring the official discourse. Different actions led by those in power, have left the traditional outlets almost non-existent.

In the first place, there has been a significant acquisition of conventional media outlets by the government, as one of the political leaders interviewed indicates:

“The written press does not exist in Venezuela. The country's great newspapers disappeared or were acquired by government partners, by the new oligarchy created around the regime, and turned into propagandists.” – OP1

Furthermore, those owners who decided to fight repression and not surrender to censorship were directly cornered by a state-owned company that monopolized the supply of paper in the country, therefore suffocating those newspapers that did not want to suppress their speech or self-censor, and by default, they ended up either shut down or became digital websites that are now also blocked at a national level, such as *El Nacional*, *El Carabobeño*, or *Tal Cual*.

Secondly, this also applies to radio and television broadcasters, which were forced to self-censor by eliminating opinion programs, blocking the hosting of oppositional political personalities on national cable, or limiting the vocabulary that journalists can use, guaranteeing that the channel's content only mentions the government's ideals. As one of our currently active politicians in the country's oppositional leadership with more than 50 years of experience certified:

“The government has revoked more than 350 radio company licenses in the past two years. And the television stations also are suffering from it, Radio Caracas Television, which was the channel with greater tradition, the pioneer of Venezuelan television no longer broadcasts.” – OP2

This has eventually developed into a communicational hegemony, into a strategy in which the end game is to prevent access to information for the citizens, to make it harder for them to stay educated and aware of their surroundings, finally generating a silencing effect.

This has come at the price of censorship, self-censorship, control of open signals, administrative and fiscal repression, persecution of journalists, installing fear in the population and ultimately situating a policy of authoritarian escalation in Venezuela.

One of our interviewees, who was incarcerated for fulfilling his freedom of speech, described it as follows:

“The world should know how complex it is to do political communication amid an anti-democratic dictatorial regime from every point of view. To such an extent that they express their plan to achieve a communicational hegemony, which means, the control of the communication apparatus of the private country by buying media, radios, newspapers, and television stations, turning the official channels into puppets that spread propaganda of the governing party, the PSUV.” – J9

D3: Emergence of alternative media outlets

The participants of this study expressed how critical the emergence of alternative media has been to disseminate information to citizens and keep them updated on ongoing developments. The emergence of these new platforms has its roots in 2007 when the Republic’s Minister of Information and Communication at the time, Andres Izarra, declared the regime’s objective of achieving a communicational hegemony on the traditional sources of information, a statement that was followed by the closing of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), the country’s number one television station, as well as key radio broadcasters and printed newspapers at the national level.

However, it was in 2014, a year with significant shutdowns in the national landscape, when veteran journalists who had extensive professional experience in traditional press rooms, decided to resign given the external pressures that were exerted on them, and started

to create their outlets in alliances with other journalists that could allow them to communicate what they felt was needed. That is when these new outlets such as *El Estimulo*, *Runrun.es*, *Efecto Cocuyo*, *El Pitazo*, and *Armando.info* emerged, building a new ecosystem that has deep roots in democratic values, critical to the actions of those in power.

A distinguished journalist who was one of the most famous traditional TV broadcasters articulated the migration of journalists as follows:

“Due to the closure of traditional media, driven by global communication trends shifting towards digital platforms and exacerbated by the excesses of the dictatorship, many professionals in the field, including well-known journalists, came together to create alternative web portals. Additionally, these professionals affiliated themselves with international media chains, launching specialized online platforms. Established national media outlets like *El Nacional*, *El Carabobeño*, and *La Patilla*, along with emerging ones such as *El Pitazo*, *Efecto Cocuyo*, and *Caraota Digital* have adapted to this new digital landscape.” – J9

In the present day, these alternative media have become the main source of knowledge and evidence for the population, and this created a redistribution of the information into the digital space. A previous mayor and deputy of the congress of the Venezuelan Republic marked:

“I believe that the main difference between alternative platforms in Venezuela and in the rest of the world is that globally it is an option, people can choose between alternative newsrooms and traditional media, print or radio. However, in Venezuela there is no such choice since alternative platforms are the sole source that provide accurate information, uncovering a truthful and updated narrative.” – OP2

Some participants referred to this transition as the “spring in independent journalism” which was at first a forced migration from the editorial lines of a print publication to a more advanced space but now developed into something positive, multiplying the level of reach that this digital space can have. This effect has secured consumption by both the people inside and especially outside the country, who have unrestricted access to the pages.

Nevertheless, the data also demonstrated some challenges, as these independent ventures’ work becomes almost immediately blocked, discredited, stigmatized, and hindered. In this case, not by cutting the supply of paper, but through orders from Venezuela’s National Telecommunication Commissions⁸. This public body directly blocks access to alternative media, in a way that is arbitrary and intermittent, as one of the journalists interviewed certified:

“There is no digital medium in Venezuela that has not had its access blocked”- J7.

Additionally, these actions have increased during the pre-electoral period, documented by the president of an NGO:

“The portals are blocked and there are increasing revocations of radio licenses given the proximity of the electoral process” – OP3.

The blockages happened by both the telecommunication provision and followed by the internet providers, which comply with CONATEL’s executive orders. This resulted in people's inability to access this information and lowered the impact of reach.

Parallel to this, news jurisdiction has been created, “The Law Against Fascism, Neo-Fascism and Similar Expressions”⁹, which has already been approved by the Venezuelan parliament right before elections, that has the goal of penalizing any declaration that can be considered

⁸ Spanish Acronym “CONATEL”

⁹ 2024 Venezuelan bill received preliminary approval in April.

by the rulers as a promotion of fascism, standing in a very superficial and ambiguous ground, seeking to legalize censorship in the country. This law was criticized by one of the interviewees:

“The Law Against Fascism, Neo-Fascism and Similar Expression has been created and is being discussed by the government, which has to do with the fact that your content can be considered fascist and refers to citizen censorship and criminal punishment.” – J2

D4: Usages of alternative media by journalists

There are different usages that journalists attribute to alternative media, and interviewees assertively describe the communicational metamorphosis that is taking place in the country. The *first usage* represents how the alternative press freely files *denunciations* on any violations or abuses of power, as detailed by a founder of an alternative outlet:

“Starting in 2014, this new media ecosystem that emerged quickly became a platform for showcasing information critical of the government.” – J6.

Seconded by another senior journalist who mentioned:

“This is our way of making censorship explicit: we mention it and call it by its name, we make sure to highlight it.” – J5

The *second usage* is the creation of *alternative media alliances* between the different outlets, an action that empowers and increases the audience reach of the channels, as other founder of an independent platform expressed:

“The Venezuelan media learned a long time ago that working in alliance protects us, and makes us reach more audience. This logic of competition between the media was

replaced by the idea of information alliances. There is an investigational press alliance called Alianza Rebelde Investiga (ARI), that is formed by El Pitazo, RunRun.es, and Tal Cual.” – J10

This infrastructure has been created in a very natural way, among editors, reporters, and journalists that had the intention to do something different, to communicate what is needed in different ways. The diversity of this structure allows for different editorial lines in each press room, ones dedicated to investigative journalism, solutions journalism, and service journalism on more geographically localized content.

Thirdly, it becomes critical to highlight the political bipartition outlook that has been enforced by the ruling party in the specific Venezuelan context, where the scrutiny of public management is correlated with “oppositional values.” After analysis, I support the idea that these alternative outlets are formed by non-militant journalists who have the objective to disseminate impartial information, that even if labelled as opposition by those in power, they do not respond to political preferences, just to democratic values such as sticking to informative journalism, denouncing human rights violations, and offering a plurality of opinions, verified facts, and objective reportage. This represents the *third usage* which is *the watchdog role for society*. As one of our participants, the editor-in-chief of a prime alternative media conveyed:

“The media should serve society, not just the political opposition. Being an opposition media outlet contradicts the fundamental principle of journalism, which requires plurality. True journalism incorporates all perspectives, including those of the government. The role of journalism is to scrutinize public management, but currently, the ruling party perceives such scrutiny as an act of political opposition.” – J10

This idea was seconded by a journalist with experience in several alternative media outlets:

“There cannot be an alliance between journalists and politicians, that would be suspicious. One of the values that guide us all is the rescue of democracy, but the tasks are different, we are, and we should not be militants. Journalists are there for something else, to inform, to reveal abuses of power, corruption, violation of human rights, in favour of democratizing information so that everything is known.” – J7

The new media landscape has significantly impacted the Venezuelan population. These outlets have emerged to focus on previously undisclosed societal issues and counteract disinformation policies. Reporters emphasize the diversity of their sources, presenting both sides of Venezuela's complex reality.

The *fourth usage* has been the *encouragement of citizen journalism* which grants societal responsibility, whereas alternative media outlets support these practices by fact-checking and verifying evidence that is produced by citizens, tackling misinformation.

The discussions I held on this dimension touched on the measures that the Venezuelan citizens are taking to fight the blockages of alternative media in the pre-electoral stage, demonstrating the power that these platforms have in the dissemination of information today, and that will ultimately have an impact on the election's participation ratio.

Citizen journalism took off once the blockages started to increase, as a proactive reaction to keep informed and keep giving information. There have been different initiatives to educate the population¹⁰ on how to use a VPN, given that the websites have been restricted

¹⁰ Escuela Cocuyo 2024, an educative initiative that teaches journalists how to fight disinformation in pre-electoral times.

and one of the few ways to access is by installing a VPN on your phone, which for some is an everyday practice, documented by one of the respondents:

“When I wake up in the morning and open the phone, the first thing I do is install the VPN to be able to access these platforms.”. – P2

These blockages have made citizens react and mobilize to be more involved with what is happening in the country and become what many of our participants call “citizen journalists,” spreading day-to-day updates through social networks such as WhatsApp, Signal, Instagram, and Twitter.

These social networks function as enablers to both citizen journalism and a multiplier of alternative media news articles being shared. Since these websites are blocked, people tend to paste the headlines of a press release from *La Patilla* or *Efecto Cocuyo* for example and share it through these messenger apps to create higher accessibility and redistribute information.

Venezuelan society has been now trained to document everything such as abuses, rationalization of basic needs, street demonstrations, and mobilizations from both the government and the opposition directly from their devices. Hence, this has created an interconnected ecosystem through the messenger channels, where the community is actively seeking and providing information through powerful and straightforward headlines and mirroring sites to tackle censorship. One of the opposition political leaders certified the good job:

“They have a lot of reach, research indicates that out of every 10 Venezuelans, 7 interact through social networks.” – OP5

Finally, this has formed a limitless amount of unverified information shared from different geolocations in the country. Hence, journalists employ their professional tools

within the alternative press rooms to *tackle disinformation* as a *fifth usage*, selecting the facts given by the people and corroborating them. A Chief Editor of a media outlet, with more than 40 years of experience described it as:

"Despite the risks involved, these portals play a crucial role in keeping the public informed. Nowadays, people no longer need to actively seek out the news; instead, they turn to online portals to verify the accuracy of the information, especially considering the overwhelming volume of content on social media platforms." – J10

D5: Usage of alternative media by opposition politicians

Nowadays, in Venezuela, government officials do not accept to give press releases, they just communicate through official tabloids made and distributed by them, given that they do not want other people to interpret what they have to say. On the other hand, access is heavily restricted, blocked, and punished for personalities from other parties to be present on private and public channels. As a former political prisoner and incredibly important opposition politician shared:

"Maria Corina Machado¹¹ is currently the most popular leader in Venezuela, yet she has the least access to television media. She is not invited to appear on Globovision or any radio stations, not because the owners are unwilling, but because station managers are threatened with repercussions. They are warned that if they feature Maria, they will immediately face inspections from CONATEL" – OP5

¹¹ Presidential candidate from the political opposition who was denied to run for 2024 presidential elections

Likewise, it was expressed by the owner of one of the most important newspapers in the history of the country:

“Maria Corina, as opposition leader, is blocked in all the official and self-censored media. She does not give or is allowed to have an interview on *Venevision*, *Televen*, *Globovisión*¹² it is as if she did not exist.” – J1

This has created a silent pre-electoral stage, in which the regime aims to avoid any democratic race between contestants, enforcing their ideologies on the population and suppressing them from having a more diverse outlook of the sociopolitical sphere.

A clear example of this polarized view is the presidential primary elections¹³ in Venezuela, which was completely silenced by the public space. As a more than 30 years experienced investigative journalist shared:

“A very recent case is the primary elections in October 2023. They did not have any publicity about the candidates. Everyone, the national electoral council, and the media outlets turned their backs on those elections, all were censored or self-censored and decided to not give space for the dissemination of the elections. It was an electoral process that did not exist, according to official media.” – J7

Given this level of censorship, the *first usage* of alternative newsrooms that politicians described was to *fight a silent election*. For a long time, there was the misbelief that the opposition was not present in Venezuela, and there was an informative gap, where international outlets ceased communicating what was happening in the country from 2014 when Leopoldo Lopez, the opposition leader was unjustly imprisoned, to 2017, when Juan

¹² TV channels that are owned by government allies.

¹³ The primary presidential election in 2023 was organized by the opposition coalition. Maria Corina Machado won with a significant majority.

Guaido was declared new interim President. This is ratified by a politician, a member of Voluntad Popular, who said:

“Let's recall that some time ago, the communication channels about the opposition's activities were lost. In Venezuela, many people believed that the opposition was inactive because there was no connection with the media, and they received no information about what the opposition was doing.” – OP4

This quote has led me to the *second usage* of this new media, which is to bring *awareness of the country's political opposition*, carrying out these interviews has helped me understand the complexity and the difficulty that political leaders from other parties present when expressing their views on the current agenda.

These websites have offered an opportunity for the leaders of the “Plataforma Unitaria Democrática” (PUD)¹⁴ to be heard and seen. A senior political leader, and activist in this union, voiced:

"Alternative media has become the primary platform for expression for the Venezuelan opposition. I believe that in the upcoming electoral campaign, the battle will be significantly supported by alternative media. Most people surveyed in Venezuela report that they rely on alternative media to stay informed about events in the country, particularly those related to political issues." – OP2

Going one step further, this media is allowing free space to campaign in a pre-electoral stage, as the respondent also mentioned:

“I do believe that the use of networks and alternative media is going to be key in the electoral campaign.” – OP2

¹⁴ A Venezuelan political opposition alliance which is formed by civil society, trade unions and political parties.

These digital websites have allowed candidates of the dissenting party to reinforce the campaign's key objectives in different sectors such as national security, economy, environment, and migration, among others. As well as to share the strategies to address the current scenario, to increase citizens' living standards.

Finally, the *third usage* by politicians is the practice of these outlets for sharing voting information, *mobilising people amid elections*, and giving details such as registration periods, procedure deadlines, election day, how to vote, and the requirements for it. The interviews conducted have demonstrated that the independent press has positively influenced the participation ratio of the 2024 presidential elections. A Venezuelan activist and director of an NGO reported:

“How can they organize themselves without using the media? This indicates that a communicative network is functioning. For instance, the participation of people in last year's primaries can only be understood if alternative mechanisms are at play. What are these mechanisms? They are based on messaging networks and other means of communication, where information is circulating. Although the reach and depth are less than before, it still exists.” – OP3.

Discussion

After an extensive and rigorous analysis of the interviews, participants reveal that both Venezuelan political opposition leaders and journalists use alternative media outlets as the only reliable source to keep citizens well knowledgeable on what is happening in the country, fulfilling the right of freedom of information and expression, as well as fostering mobilization in the presidential elections of 2024. The repressive ecosystem in which these alternative platforms have been shaped has had a direct influence on this year's level of

participation in the elections. The plurality of opinion that the digital and independent space gives to the population, makes them conscious of their rights as citizens and aware of their socioeconomic situation, being able to compare themselves in a globalized world.

The findings of the *D1* of this study align with Levitsky and Way's (2010) definition of an authoritarian regime. First, Venezuelans need alternative channels to contest the government rule. Second, elections remain uncertain, with a new candidate that was known only 90 days before, after the surprising decision by Venezuela's Supreme Justice Tribunal to ban Maria Corina Machado from being a candidate. Third, people face high-risk violations and threats, making them stay undercover or in exile.

At the same time, the results discovered in *D2* associated with Akhrarkhodjaeva's (2017) descriptive factors of media in authoritarian regimes, where there is an administration that appropriates the public and private broadcast channels, that enforces regulations to disappear the printed press through monopolizing the distribution channels¹⁵, that creates new laws to instil fear in the population, and that oversees blockages to coopt opposition channels.

This background set the pace for a “communicational hegemony” that directly affected the conventional outlets in the country, where journalists decided to migrate to independent newsrooms in “explicit opposition” (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007) to the information that the traditional media provides. As constructed in '*D4: Usages of alternative media by journalists*', interviewees declared themselves as non-militant and decided to fight against repression and self-censorship, creating a safe space where they could (1) denunciate human violations, (2) create media alliances to increase audience reach, (3) fulfil their

¹⁵ El Complejo Editorial Alfredo Maneiro centralize the supply of imported newsprint to media outlets and publishers.

watchdog role, (4) encourage citizen journalism, and (5) tackle disinformation present by government's stations.

The above findings align with Mellado et al. (2017) '*watchdog*' and '*civic*' journalistic roles, therefore I add to the author's study by stating that Venezuela has the presence of both roles in the alternative media ecosystem, since reporters monitor and draw attention to wrongdoings by the rulers, and keep the public well aware about controversial and complex issues, empowering them.

Additionally, this paper agrees with Atton (2002), and Atkinson and Kenix (2019) in their idea that alternative media emerged to combat the hegemonic power structure, with news that allows freedom of expression and liberties to combat government repression. This aligns with '*D5: Usages of alternative media by political opposition leaders*', where participants declared that they employ these platforms to (1) share their democratic commitment to Venezuelan society by fighting a silent election (2) bring awareness to the country's political opposition, as well as their electoral offer, and (3) ultimately influence the mobilization ratio in the presidential ballot.

Even though both groups fulfil different roles, the result has been the same by default; making people aware of the precarious reality surrounding them, awakens feelings of mobilization. As one of the journalists sincerely expressed:

"I can understand that there is some interest in joining the elections, but the truth is that this is not the purpose of a media outlet. The media are there to show the reality and if that view of reality makes the citizen feel a compromise in their body and they mobilize, organize, and vote, that is just one of the consequences of doing journalism."

This study shed light on the theoretical foundations behind the emergence and use of alternative media in authoritarian regimes. The findings can be tested in other autocratic

countries in the continent such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and Haiti, or elsewhere such as Russia, China, Iran or North Korea, where civil liberties are restricted. While the study defines the various ways independent media is used by journalists and opposition politicians, who demonstrated to stand on the same boat of freedom, questions remain unanswered about how citizens themselves perceive these alternative media and which journalistic roles they recognize. A comparative analysis across different regions could further explore whether similar outlets exist elsewhere and understand the role of social media in this context.

To conclude, despite limitations such as the sample size due to a short time frame, the inability to incorporate official quantitative data because of its unavailability in the country, and potential translation errors¹⁶ that might affect the interpretation phase, I encourage scholars to further explore modern political communication in the Global South, pioneering new insights in this field.

Note

The Thesis Supervisor has granted an extension of 500 words in the final word count (i.e. 8.000), given the qualitative nature of the research.

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¹⁶ From Spanish to English.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview questionnaire

Introduction and goal: Reporters Without Borders has ranked Venezuela in 156th place out of 180 countries in their World Press Freedom Index of 2024, which signifies a restrictive and censored environment for media. In this interview, I would like to ask about the main features that led to the emergence of alternative media outlets in the country, as well as to understand which are the usages that both political opposition leaders and journalists give to them. Finally, understanding which role these platforms play in providing greater and wider knowledge to all the nationals in the year of elections.

Recording of the interview: This interview is done for the academic purpose of a master's thesis at the University of Amsterdam, it is qualitative research that aims to disclose the emergence of the modern communication ecosystem in Venezuela and how political/media actors are using these digital platforms to mobilize people in the of 2024 presidential elections. It is a predetermined-question interview that will address our topic of study, there are no right or wrong answers and there might appear new follow-up questions during the process.

The meeting will be recorded so we can fulfil reliability and validity in our knowledge gathering not have any misleading arguments and to quote correctly if we decide to in our paper.

Informed consent

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Kindly note that you will remain anonymous in this research, and none of the responses will be traceable to you, so you remain without any risks. At the same time, I will make sure to delete the recording after three months from the official publication of the thesis.

Do you agree to participate in this study? Do you have any further inquiries? If not, may I start?

<p>Topic 1: Censorship of information in traditional media.</p> <p>Goal: Grasp the main challenges of participants when using traditional media outlets.</p>	<p>Introduction: For over a decade, Venezuela's authoritarian regime has had full control of public information.</p> <p>Initial question: Can you provide a specific instance where you have been repressed on your objective to disseminate information?</p> <p>Follow-up question: What channels does the Venezuelan opposition use to communicate its message to citizens?</p> <p>Final question: Do you believe that the emerging media in Venezuela follow a specific political ideology?</p>
<p>Topic 2: Features of alternative media.</p> <p>Goal: Define the different usages that are given to the alternative outlets. Measure the audience reach in times of electoral campaign.</p>	<p>Introduction: In the face of traditional media shutdowns, describe the features that these independent outlets have that positively influence freedom of speech.</p> <p>Initial question: How would you describe these alternative platforms that are present in Venezuela? (i.e El Pitazo, Efecto Cocuyo, Armando Info).</p> <p>Follow-up question: What led you to utilize independent media platforms for influencing public opinion and mobilising support for the upcoming elections?</p> <p>Follow-up questions: do you believe these platforms have a high audience reach?</p> <p>Final question: In which specific ways do you, as a political activist/journalist utilize these platforms?</p>

<p>Topic 3: Government's Censorship of alternative platforms</p> <p>Goal: To see the government 's measures when trying to block digital sites, and how the actors have overcome this oppression in the context of presidential elections.</p>	<p>Initial question: What challenges have you encountered in using these platforms?</p> <p>Follow-up question: Do you think the government has put a plan of action to block access and censor these sites? Has this increased during the election period?</p> <p>Follow-up question: Do you think they are a crucial tool for the opposition to win the 2024 elections?</p>
<p>Rounding up interview</p> <p>Thank you for dedicating the time to participate in this research and for providing your insights into such a complex situation. Do you have anything you would like to add before I stop the recording?</p>	

Appendix B. Coding scheme and description of interviewees

Codes	Description	Date	Location	Recording length
Opposition politicians				
OP1	Venezuelan economist & politician; leader Electoral Council; 2023 presidential precandidate.	May 1 st	Venezuela	41:27:00
OP2	Venezuelan politician; major & national congressman.	April 25 th	Venezuela	25:07:00
OP3	Human rights defender & political activist with +40 years' experience.	May 10 th	Venezuela	22:41:00
OP4	Venezuelan political leader & activist (Voluntad Popular)	April 26 th	Ecuador	36:00:00
OP5	12 years in office as mayor of main cities in Venezuela. Former political prisoner.	May 15 th	Spain	31:51:00
OP6	Presidential candidate in the 1998 elections. +60 years of experience in politics.	May 10 th	United States	55:04:00
Journalists				
J1	President & director of the main newspaper in Venezuela. +50 years' experience.	May 3 rd	Spain	21:38:00
J2	+40 years' experience as a journalist in both traditional & alternative media.	April 26 th	Venezuela	31:27:00
J3	+40 years' experience as a journalist in both traditional & alternative media. Radio mainly.	April 29 th	Venezuela	28:35:00
J4	+50 years' experience as a journalist in both traditional & alternative media.	May 3 rd	Venezuela	48:56:00
J5	Founder of an alternative media, +30 years' experience.	May 13 th	Venezuela	30:47:00

J6	Founder of an alternative media, +40 years' experience.	May 8 th	Venezuela	37:41:00
J7	Investigative journalist with +40 years' experience in traditional and alternative outlets.	April 29 th	Venezuela	35:27:00
J8	Political analyst and journalist. +40 years' experience, founder of alternative outlet.	May 4 th	Venezuela	42:39:00
J9	Producer of main TV channel at the national level (closed now). Imprisoned by the regime.	May 7 th	Venezuela	42:39:00
J10	Chief editor of main newspaper in Venezuela. +40 years' experience.	May 5 th	Venezuela	46:14:00

Appendix C. Concept Indicator Model

