The Role and Impact of Social Media in Protesting Oppression in Venezuela

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THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROTESTING OPPRESSION IN VENEZUELA

By

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A THESIS

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THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROTESTING OPPRESSION IN VENEZUELA

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Venezuelans are living in the middle of a sociopolitical crisis that likely began in 1999 when Hugo Chavez began his first term as president of the country; however, Venezuela has experienced a significant downturn over the past few years, under leader Nicolas Maduro. Censorship and oppression have magnified, as have economic struggles, both of which have led to a massive exodus, in which more than 300 million people have left the country. The opposition, journalists and human rights activists have been contesting the Maduro regime and one of their tools to do so has been turning to social media platforms. Social media has allowed all groups of people to denounce the injustices they see and experience. It has permitted opposition leaders to organize massive anti-government protests. It has helped Venezuelans share information and garner international attention and it has given a voice to those previously silenced, but social media is also a mechanism available to the Maduro regime. Will it ultimately be an effective tool to combat oppression or will social media be censored just as traditional media have been? I hope this thesis can serve as a contribution to the study of social media and its multiple uses as well as its setbacks.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Venezuela was once one of the richest countries in all of South America. Its oil revenue, discovered in the 1920s, led the country through an economic high, but poor governance has nearly destroyed it. This, in addition to the censorship and oppression practiced by the current regime, under Nicolas Maduro, has caused an unprecedented movement led by opposition leaders and human rights activists. Venezuelans demand a change, and not just because they’re being repressed or silenced, or because their children have died in the streets protesting government policies, but because of the hyper-inflation that has destroyed the country’s economic stability, the child mortality rate, the breakdown of public services, the scarcity of food, medicine and basic necessities, and the censorship that has unraveled against any and all who oppose the regime. With all other options limited, Venezuelans turned to social media to fight back against the Nicolas Maduro regime, and through social media channels, they were able to speak up, mobilize and gain international attention.

January 23, 2019 marked a momentous change in Venezuela. Amidst thousands of protestors who called for Maduro’s resignation, Juan Guaidó, President of the National Assembly, made up of opposition leaders, proclaimed himself Interim President of the country. This occurred after fraudulent elections reassigned Maduro as leader of Venezuela. The United States recognized Guaidó as Interim President, and soon after, multiple world leaders did as well. Within 24 hours, Guaidó offered his first interview as interim president to Univision Anchor Patricia Janiot and the interview aired on Instagram TV (IGTV), Facebook, Periscope and YouTube. Social media is a resource for people around the world to speak up and share stories and opinions, but for Venezuelans,
it became the only channel to retaliate against censorship and oppression and the only way they could share and receive credible information. This is not to say that social media has become a solution in the country, as there still seems to be a very long journey to recovering the nation. This also does not mean that social media can always be trusted. The freedom it provides also poses challenges – lies can be told and the information posted can be misleading, but it has ultimately provided a silenced group of people with a weapon to speak and be heard. Throughout this thesis, censorship will be defined as “adjusting or banning any or all media resulting from the presumption that its content is perceived to be objectionable, incendiary, illicit or immoral by the applicable legislative authority or government.”¹ Oppression is defined as “a situation in which people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom.” Repression is considered to be very similar to oppression but focuses more on subduing a group of people who have decided to revolt against, in this case, their government. It is defined as “the use of force or violence to control a group of people.”²

Venezuela’s Constitution protects freedom of the press and freedom of expression, but within the last decade, the governments in power have attempted to eradicate it. Through this thesis, I argue that they may have succeeded, had the birth and spike of social media not occurred at the same time.

Social media has become a powerful tool for organizing and mobilizing. It is used to put together protests, to show the world the often-horrid videos depicting violent acts, through political leaders and activists’ Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook

publications and also through their reliance on WhatsApp and similar application to communicate messages.

Social media channels also have the unique quality of allowing people to engage with others they otherwise would have never interacted with. It lets a person living in one part of the world see the atrocities occurring across the globe and therefore identify with the situation. It creates a sense of belonging and community. It helps create collective action.

“One of the unique aspects of Twitter is the ability to engage with other users, celebrities, and mass media personalities. This enables users to target messages at individuals deemed influential, who can disperse information or provide additional resources.”

In Venezuela, once the traditional forms of media began to be censored by the Maduro regime, journalists themselves had to take up these communication technologies to share the real news. Not only this, it started to become the only reliable source of news for those living outside of the country. Throughout this thesis, traditional media is used to refer to television stations, newspapers and radios stations.

My thesis will center around this question. What has been the role and impact of social media in protesting oppression in Venezuela?

I will also be looking at what the possible implications of social media in authoritarian countries could be, primarily focusing on Venezuela. I will study the question of whether social media is an effective tool to fight back against authoritarian governments. If I find this to be true, could social media potentially be limited by

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authoritarian governments to prevent this from happening? If so, should there be
particular policies put into place to protect social media? Are there such policies? But
before we get there, let’s dive into the existing correlations between social media, social
movements, protests and mobilization.
Chapter 2: History of Social Media and Mobilizations

Social media is used almost worldwide, although it is more prominent in certain parts of the globe. In 2018, there were 4.021 billion internet users and out of these, 3.196 were social media users. 5.135 billion people are mobile phone users.4

Figure 1-1

By the end of 2018, there were more than 2.32 billion people who use Facebook monthly and 1.15 billion daily active users. By the end of 2018, there were 262.7 million monthly active users on Twitter, 1 billion on Instagram and 1.58 billion on YouTube. 5

Social media has become a primary tool for collective action and for “the creation, organization and implementation of social movements around the world.” This includes short messaging services (SMS), social networking websites and even blogs. Researchers suggest these advancements in technology have given activists a new way to organize boycotts, public protests and demonstrations. Some even suggest that social media promotes a sense of communal identity, primarily between marginalized groups of people. It offers a way to publicize an issue or concern and gain global attention for it.

5 “Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide.” Statista. 2019.
This has come to be known as cyberactivism and can include a wide array of movements – antiwar, anti-globalization, advocating for equality, denouncing injustices, as is the case for many Venezuelans. These communication technologies also offer “resource poor” actors who are part of a social movement a tool to have their voices heard.6

The Arab Spring

Perhaps the first notable correlation we’ve seen of social media as a resource for mobilization and organization was in 2011 with the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings that unraveled throughout multiple Muslim majority countries including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. The demonstrations were aimed at increasing democracy and freedom and social media played a large role in mobilizing people and in gaining international attention and national cooperation.

The protests began in Tunisia, in December 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor set himself on fire after his vegetable stand was seized by the police and after he was repeatedly mistreated by them. His story was told time and time again on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and the images of his social protest gave a face to the consequences of political oppression. The beginning of the so-called Jasmine Revolution in the country was followed by massive protests in Tunis, the capital, and then across the rest of the country.

Shamseddine Abidi, a 29-year-old, took to Facebook to post updates of what had happened to Bouazizi. His posts contributed heavily towards Al Jazeera coverage, which in turn showed the rest of the world the images of the hospitalized man, with heavy

burns, fighting for his life after being the victim of political oppression. Soon after, an internet campaign began calling for Tunisian citizens to set up committees to support a protest in Sidi Bouzid. The young sector of the population was the first to mobilize and they did so in an organized manner, planning through social media channels. The government tried to ban Facebook, YouTube and Twitter but was unable to deter the movement that had initiated. Even though less than a quarter of the population used social media regularly, most of the citizens had cell phones and that allowed them to partake in the massive demonstrations. At the same time, hacker communities were operating from outside of Tunisia to prevent state firewalls from limiting the people’s connectivity.\textsuperscript{7} \textbf{It was a joint effort.}

In terms of social media, more than 13,000 tweets with the hashtag #SidiBouzid were published between mid January and mid March, 18% of tweets related to the uprising came from within Tunisia, 8% from nearby regions and 32% from outside the neighboring areas. There is no location information on the remaining 42%\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Figure 1-2}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{tweets_bar_chart.png}
\caption{Tweets related to Tunisian Uprising}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{7} Howard, Philip, Duffy, Aiden, et al. “What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring.” Project on Information Technology and Political Islam. 2011.

\textsuperscript{8} Howard and Duffy. “The Role of Social Media”. 2011.
The uprisings in Tunisia ultimately resulted in the resignation of authoritarian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. That day, on January 14, 2011, more than 2,200 tweets from neighboring countries mentioned the uprising in Tunisia, the majority sharing personal stories of strife, sharing links to YouTube and referencing Facebook groups in which the movement was being discussed in. Nearly a year after, Tunisia held democratic parliamentary elections. The protests and results seen in Tunisia inspired other countries in the region to protest against their authoritarian governments in the hopes of facing a similar fate, but in many cases, the result was political turmoil, violence and a constant state of civil war.  

In Egypt, the protests began on January 25 of 2011 and also ended with the abdication of president Hosni Mubarak; however, shortly after, there were controversial elections in the country and then a coup in 2013 installed defense minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president. Regardless, social media played an instrumental role in the initial mobilization of people and the organization of the protests that ultimately led to the Egyptian Revolution. In Egypt, in particular, access to social media was on the rise because the government was attempting to expand its information technology capabilities in an effort to enhance its socioeconomic growth. Since 1999, government initiatives included access to free internet, computers at relatively low prices and a growth of places where one could access online platforms. Egypt had the second largest internet-using population in the region, the first being Iran.

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By the beginning of 2011, activists who were well-acquainted with new technology communications had begun tackling political concerns using the internet to spread their message and discontent. It began with blogs but soon social media sites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp entered the sphere at full force.

Once again, an emotional story about the death of a young blogger, beaten to death by police, inspired hundreds to mobilize.Wall Ghonim, a regional executive at Google, began the Facebook group ‘We are All Khaled Said’, which told the story of the young activist and shared images of what he’d suffered. Eventually, however, the Facebook group became a logistical tool to organize people fighting for democracy. Ghonim went beyond this page and became one of the most prominent Twitter users during the Arab Spring. He communicated what was occurring within these borders to the world abroad. In Egypt, the government also tried to censor this spread of communication, but was unable to do significant damage. The week before Egypt’s Mubarak finally resigned, the number of tweets in Egypt and around the globe related to political change in that country skyrocketed from an average 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. 11

Social media reinvented the channels for social mobilization, introducing faster, innovative and effective mobilization techniques. Before social media, protests were organized largely by word of mouth, posters and perhaps even faxes. But social media provided both domestic and international activists with a channel in which they could follow events in the country, join Facebook groups, personal blogs and engage and carry

out continuous conversations on Twitter with people inside and outside of Egypt. It was an online platform that simplified offline demonstrations.

**Social Media and Tunisia and Egypt**

Tunisia and Egypt both had an overwhelming population of young, tech-savvy people at the time of the Arab Spring. The median age in Tunisia, a country of about 10 million citizens, is 30. In Egypt, which has about 83 million people within its borders, the median age is 24. In both countries, cell phone use is prevalent. 93 of every 100 people have a cell phone in Tunisia and 67 of every 100 have one in Egypt. At the time of the Arab Spring, both countries were dealing with heavy forms of censorship of the media, which turned a lot of activists to the internet. The most critical coverage of the governments in these countries was done by bloggers, not necessarily journalists and reporters.12

According to a study from Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, evidence shows that social media played a critical role in the Arab Spring. They delineate three findings. The first is that social media was significantly used to carry out political conversations, namely by young, urban and well-educated people, many of whom were women. The individuals shared human stories and pressured the regime by sharing content that directly criticized and ridiculed them onto online platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The second was that, during the months of the Arab Spring, political conversation tended to precede mass protests and the third was that social media helped spread a message – a democratic message – across borders.13

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Occupy Wallstreet

The social revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt marked the beginning phase of social media as a tool for mobilization. While they were not the only countries in that region to use these newfound communications technologies to mobilize and protest against oppressive regimes, it was perhaps the Occupy Wallstreet movement in the US that garnered the most attention after them. The Occupy Wall Street movement began in September 2011 in New York City’s Zuccotti Park. Here, the idea was not to overthrow an authoritarian government or to fight oppression and censorship, the reason was social and economic inequality, corruption and to shed light on the influence and power corporations held over the government. More than 170,000 people turned to more than 400 Facebook Occupy Wall Street pages which were created across the entire United States.

The protests began with about 1,000 people in New York City, but immediately multiplied across the country under the slogan “We are the 99%”. Soon, critics and supporters of the movement joined in on online conversation using the hashtag #Occupy. Anonymous, a group of online hackers also backed the protests.

“While the focus of Occupy Wall Street is on mobilizing individuals offline, online activities greatly facilitate these efforts. Facebook has become a recruiting tool for bringing in new supporters and getting people to events,” said Neal Caren, an assistant professor of sociology in UNC’s College of Arts and Sciences. According to his research in 2011, following the protests, the highest concentration of social media activism during the Occupy Wall Street movement was in college towns and state capitals, and the lowest in the southern parts of the United States.
According to a content analyses study that looked at the role of Twitter in the Occupy Wall Street movement, this social media channel is a tool that helps create a “unified community and mobilize individuals to participate in a physical space of protest”.

**Social Media in Latin America**

While these movements have probably been the largest in terms of social media and mobilization, the idea of using these technologies to retaliate against oppression and to organize protests has spread across the globe, and particularly to Latin America. As I argue across this thesis, Venezuelans learned how to use social media to their advantage and it soon became their only means of safely communicating information and of planning protests and demonstrations, but they’re not alone. Other parts of Latin America are turning to social media as well.

Freedom of the press has been in decline for years across the globe, marking its lowest point in 13 years in 2016. The reason has been, in large part, due to crackdowns by authoritarian regimes. Countries like Turkey, Ethiopia and Venezuela have seen significant moves against journalists who oppose their government. Just as Venezuela has seen a dramatic turn in its traditional forms of media, so have multiple other countries in Latin America.\textsuperscript{14} According to Freedom House’s Survey of Press Freedom, only four of 19 countries in Latin America were considered fully free in 2002.\textsuperscript{15} According to this same outlet, Latin America has shown a pattern of continued violence against journalists through 2016. The report concludes that Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico were


among the world’s most dangerous places for journalists to live. According to the organization’s research, one country in particular has been in decline in terms of freedom. After authorities brutally repressed public demonstrations in 2018, Nicaragua’s status changed from “partly free to not free.” 16 Throughout this thesis I argue that the pattern of violence against traditional media has led to a rise in the use of social media as a means to protesting oppression.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua has been led by Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo for decades. In April of 2018, Nicaragua saw a drastic change. After the government announced a social security reform that would force workers to pay more money yet receive less benefits, thousands of people took to the street in protests. The protests soon turned violent when security forces cracked down on civilians, and people immediately turned to social media to show the world what was happening. They did so under the #SOSNicaragua; they rallied and organized demonstrations in hopes of reaching a change in the country. Four days after, the government revoked the social security reforms but already 40 people had been left dead.17

At this point, the demonstrators wanted Daniel Ortega to resign. One student’s message to him was heard internationally. Lester Aleman demanded Ortega leave office during a meeting between the government and students to put an end to the violence. "We cannot dialogue with a murderer, because what has been committed in this country is a genocide, and that's what it will go down as." The video of Aleman was posted on social media and immediately went viral, alerting Nicaraguans and the international community.

17 Roberts, Tifani. “Profile in courage: Nicaragua's student leader Lester Aleman.” Univision. 2018
Soon after his speech, Aleman and other students were forced to go into hiding. Aleman, himself, stopped using his social media channels.

Over the coming months, more than 300 Nicaraguans were killed. Among these was journalist Angel Gahona, who was shot while holding his camera and streaming live on Facebook during coverage of the ongoing protests. According to Gahona’s wife, he decided to stream his coverage live because regular tv stations were facing censorship from the government. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), owned by Ortega, controls much of the media in Nicaragua. With the majority of news stations not showing the violence taking place and with those who would show it being censored, social media, primarily Facebook, took center stage, helping to mobilize, inform and also fight back against the false or misleading information spread by the government.

While social media has continued to be a tool for the public, the Ortega regime continued to repress demonstrators, opposition members and the media. In January of 2018, one of the country’s most well-known journalists, Carlos Chamorro, was forced to flee Nicaragua. This, after police raided his workplace just a month earlier.

The crisis in Nicaragua is partly associated with the economic downfall in Venezuela. For years, Nicaragua, an ALBA country, benefitted from Venezuela’s oil subsidies. This made it possible for the government to fund social programs that were proved to be unsustainable without the aid of Venezuela.

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18 “Journalist killed while covering protests in eastern Nicaragua.” *Committee to Protect Journalists*. 2018.

Mexico

Over the past few years, Mexico has become one of the most dangerous places to live in and to practice journalism. 48 journalists have been killed between 1992 and 2019. Reporters also face the possibility of imprisonment for defamation, according to Freedom House, and one of the greatest risks they run is when they report on drug trafficking.

Many journalists often deal with political and economic risks as they cover the news.

The security problem for journalists in Mexico magnified after the former president launched a “war on drugs” in 2016. According to qualitative studies, this led to changes in journalists’ news coverage as well as to some self-censorship. In addition to assassinations, attacks to the press include threats, intimidation, detentions and even abduction of journalists. While much of the violence against journalists is related to the high levels of organized crime in the country, another factor is the lack of action and protection from governmental bodies who at times have used their power in order to censor or pressure reporters. In fact, in 2015, 41 percent of attacks have come from public officials. According to a survey in the publication “How Unsafe Contexts and Overlapping Risks Influence Journalism Practice” by Sallie Hughes and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez, journalists are taking more precautions in Mexico to ensure their security. From those surveyed, a great number of journalists are giving greater focus to the accuracy of an article when it is considered particularly sensitive, more than half

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20 Committee to Protect Journalists. 2019.
admitted to self-censorship and even more had decided to leave behind “street reporting.”

Carmen Aristegui is a Mexican journalist who currently works for CNNE, but in 2015 she was illegally fired from her morning radio show on MVS Noticias after her and her team uncovered a possible conflict of interest with the purchase of a multi-million dollar home involving the president at the time, Enrique Peña Nieto, his wife at the time, Angelica Rivera, and a government contractor. Social media flared with outrage after her dismissal.

Another instance of censorship and the use of social media in Mexico can be seen through the movement #YoSoy132. It began after Peña Nieto paid a visit to the Ibero-American University back when he was running for president. He was asked about a situation that arose in 2006. Peña Nieto, as governor, had called in the police to stop a local protest, but the events culminated in the death of some and the rape of others. Peña Nieto responded that he acted according to the law and his response sparked outrage among the students who began protesting him from within the school. Peña Nieto even tried to hide and escape from the crowd of people repudiating him. Soon, the students began setting up hashtags and slogans against his campaign. During the incident, the students took out their phones and recorded what was happening and while these videos were instantly shared on social media, most of the major television channels didn’t mention it and some who did, insinuated that the students who protested had actually

been paid to do so. Ultimately, 131 students in the Ibero-American University created a video in which they appeared with their school ID cards in hand confirming that they were part of the protest. They posted the video on YouTube and views on it instantly multiplied reaching the thousands. Soon, the public began responding with the hashtag #YoSoy132 or I am 132 in support. Following this, multiple protests took place and the key tools to organize them were Facebook and Twitter. Social media is a tool that continues to spread across hemispheres and more often we are seeing it as one that retaliates against oppression and subsequently repression.

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Chapter 3: Case Study of Venezuela

These previous case studies share many factors in common with Venezuela. This thesis is aimed at understanding the role that social media is playing in the political and humanitarian crisis the South American country finds itself in. This thesis will follow a qualitative analysis. This will not be a representative sample, but rather a report based on knowledgeable informants; that is, a panel of experts that will help us understand the critical moment Venezuela is undergoing and the role that social media has played up to this point. The panel of knowledgeable informants, a group of 10, is made up of journalists, academics, policy makers, non-governmental actors, and business experts. There will be open-ended questions as well as a closed questionnaire, and anecdotal evidence will be relied upon heavily. A group of diverse actors who have fled Venezuela will also be interviewed to gain perspective on how the average citizen viewed the role of social media in the crisis. The timeframe for this project will be from 2013 -2019; that is, beginning the moment Nicolas Maduro took office in Venezuela all the way until present time – March of 2019.

Venezuela: Historical Context

Let’s go back to the beginning.

In 1999, Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela. He was in power until his death in 2013. During his presidency, political freedom began to take a downturn and censorship began its reign. During his 14 years as president, Chavez used propaganda to spread his anti-capitalist and pro-socialist ideology and also began to transform the Venezuelan economy.
In the early 2000s, Venezuela, alongside Cuba, led the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples’ of Our America (ALBA). The agreement was signed in 2004 in response to the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a US led negotiation that included 34 countries, exempting Cuba. ALBA’s main purpose was to create an anti-imperialist platform, one that depicted the opposition to neoliberalism in the region. It was based on a vision of social welfare and revolutionary ideology, as well as one of mutual economic aid. It did not follow the principle of a free market or free competition, and it ultimately resulted in a codependency among member nations. It is a major factor explaining the situation in Venezuela and other Latin American countries struggling economically, as is the case in Nicaragua. It’s also relevant to point out that Venezuela is a petrostate, meaning it’s a country whose income largely depends on the export of oil and natural gas, one in which economic and political power are centralized in the hands of a few and in which political institutions are weak, while corruption is strong and widespread. This has been a large factor leading the country to the detrimental state it finds itself in.

Chavez came into power during one of Venezuela’s toughest economic times. In the 1980s, the oil prices, on which the country was significantly dependent, had plummeted. Inflation soared and so did the massive foreign debt the government was in. In 1989, Carlos Andres Perez, then President, launched an austerity package as part of a financial bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Massive riots developed in response to attempted cuts in subsidies on domestic petroleum. The events occurred in 1989 which came to be remembered as the Caracazo. These demonstrations were a sign that the punto fijo system, as it was called, was in a state of crisis.

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Now what exactly was the Punto Fijo system and why is it important? The Punto Fijo era began in the 1950s with the Punto Fijo Pact, signed by representatives of Venezuela’s main political parties of the time. Its credited by many to have helped launch Venezuela into democracy and also to have helped the expansion of commercial media in the country; that is, privately-owned media, rather than state-sponsored media. According to a study by Moses Shumow, polarization has been a character of the media in Venezuela since the 19th century, but was heavily strengthened during this time. While the political system was led by two ruling parties, the media came to be dominated by two giants – the Cisneros group and the Bottome and Granier group. The media worked alongside the government and in exchange for broadcast licenses, they would generally remain supportive of the ruling political parties, which were primarily wealthy members of society.25

This is a common trend we see throughout Latin America with broadcast networks largely being controlled in part by elites who use their power and reach to their benefit. This ultimately creating social inequality through the media. According to a chapter on media diversity in The Great Gap, media has helped maintain social inequality by influencing political processes and by “helping structure societal norms of cultural appropriateness”. 26

The power of the media and its friendship with the political elite all changed with the emergence of Chavez. In 1992, Hugo Chavez, military officer at the time, who was working with left-wing groups, launched a failed coup and began rising to fame. He spent the following four years in prison. Meanwhile, the country continued in an economic

downward spiral due to its low oil prices. This led to a severe drop in support for its two main political parties. Chavez used this to his benefit as he constantly spoke up against the system and their so-called corruption.\textsuperscript{27}

He was elected president of Venezuela in 1998 and promised a transformation of the country and an end to corruption. What he did was begin to change the country’s path toward an authoritarian one. He ended term limits, took over the Supreme Court, nationalized dozens of private businesses and foreign-owned assets, and attacked the press and anyone who criticized or stood against him.\textsuperscript{28}

During the beginning of his term, Chavez attempted to get backing for constitutional reforms and used his growing popularity among the public to do so. These changes helped him begin to strengthen his hold over Venezuela, centralize his government’s power and weaken the legislature’s control over it. It’s important to mention a failed coup to overthrow him in 2002. The events actually ended up strengthening his hold over Venezuela as he was able to determine and seek out those who stood against him.\textsuperscript{29}

In 2004, Chavez increased the size of the Supreme Court from 20 to 34 judges in order to continue to expand his control. He was also able to secure 21 out of 23 governors who were pro his government. Rather quickly he was able to garner leadership of the judiciary, the central electoral council and the armed forces.

Chavez expanded social services and reduced poverty by 20%, but his choices also led to the future downturn of the country. He fired many workers from the

Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company (PDVSA) after a strike in 2002, and then in 2005, he began providing subsidized oil to Cuba and other regional countries. Ultimately, oil reserves took a hit and the debt doubled. All this can be traced back to the ALBA alliance. Through a program called Petrocaribe, Venezuela extended its oil relationship to multiple countries in the Caribbean and Central America. 30

The government also began appropriating agricultural land and would soon move on to ensuring his control over the media. 31

**Chavez and the Media**

In 2002, during the time of the coup, the media had considerable power in Venezuela. Many believe the coup attempt and short-lived victory – if it can be called that as it lasted 36 hours – would not have been possible without the media’s support. At one point, Chavez called the main four networks the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Once he returned to power, he began a campaign against them, taking down independent platforms and strengthening state media. In 2004, he passed the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, which was presumably to “promote social justice and further the development of the citizenry, democracy, peace, human rights and education.”32 What it did was allow the government to censor media. In 2011, the law expanded to internet and social media, added a section which argued that it was illegal to “foment anxiety to the public” and gave CONATEL, a government-controlled communications agency, more control in terms of the media. The law allowed for the

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arrest of journalists under very vague terms, basically under circumstances in which they were criticizing the government and according to activists, the government’s actions led journalists, radios and TV stations and newspapers to self-censor their work for fear of reprisals. In 2007, Chavez went against RCTV, which was a large broadcasting company who did not fear speaking against the government. Chavez soon revoked their license causing other outlets to tone down their anti-government protests. Here, again, we see self-censorship at work. RCTV was soon replaced by a government-led station. By 2009, Hugo Chavez had shut down dozens of radio and TV stations. 33

While decreasing the voice of any independent media who reported on news affecting the image of the regime, the government ensured to expand the power of the state-owned outlets. The so-called cadenas are important to note here. They were speeches delivered by pro-government officials that were required to be aired by all broadcasters. These speeches were random and unannounced and used to rally the public and denounce or even threaten those in opposition. For years now this has given the government ample air time and the ability to do and say as they please without fact-checking or any sort of decision-making from media outlets. 34

Chavez was in power until his death in 2013 but his actions paved the way for Nicolas Maduro’s very similar anti-freedom of the press policies. 35

Nicolas Maduro

By 2018, El Nacional was one of the only traditional independent news outlets left in Venezuela. After 75 years of uninterrupted news reporting, it was forced to stop its

35 Guevara, Cristina, “Censorship in Venezuela Fuels Social Media Growth.” International Policy Digest. 2018
print publication due to the harassment and pressure it was receiving from the government. In its last printed edition, the newspaper said the Maduro regime had affected at least 99 radio and TV stations, 33 newspapers and prosecuted more than 40 journalists.\(^{36}\)

One of the main issues the media has faced in Venezuela and another means of censorship imposed by the government is the fact that newspapers were not able to get access to printing paper. By withholding the foreign currency needed to buy paper, the Maduro regime diminished international outlets’ ability to inform. Multiple newspapers like El Impulso said they had trouble acquiring paper due to a shortage. This inability to print was one of the reasons leading to the widespread role of social media. For more than 10 years, Globovision, a 24-hour news station in Venezuela, was a critical voice against the Maduro regime. Globovision was one of the few well-known independent media outlets that defied the regime. It was accused by the government of conspiring against them and received heavy fines for supposedly inciting civil unrest; this ultimately made it impossible to maintain it economically. It was soon bought by businessmen with close ties to the government. Immediately after, changes began to take place with certain content being taken off air. Journalist Leopoldo Castillo, the host of the program Aló Presidente, was one of the strongest critics of the government but soon after these changes began to take place, he decided to leave the media outlet. It’s not clear what motivated his decision and whether it was fully his choice. He was soon followed by others from the station.\(^{37}\)

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International media outlets have also been affected. While they are able to publish and report freely, without fear of retaliation, some have been accused by the Maduro regime of “psychological warfare and terrorism.” Maduro has even denied foreign journalists the ability to enter the country and deported some of them.38 Silencing international media outlets also affects the state of a country as it continues to limit the information received by the people.

Maduro’s name is also part of a list dubbed Predators of the Press, which names “35 presidents, politicians, religious leaders, militias, and criminal organizations that censor, imprison, torture, or murder journalists.”39

Starting with Chavez and continuing with Maduro, traditional media outlets have been censored in multiple ways. The first way in which they censored media was by literally preventing the newspapers from printing; they did this by limiting their access and ability to buy printing paper. The second has been by using the law against it. Chavez transformed the Venezuela government from within; he secured backing through the Supreme Court and managed to pass laws expanding his reach and control of private businesses and the media itself. This allowed him to restrict licenses, sanction outlets with heavy fines and arrest journalists who reported anti-government news. This ties in with the third way in which the government attacked the media. It was through self-censorship; that is, the government stroke enough fear into news outlets and journalists that they avoided publishing certain content for fear of retaliation – being arrested, fined

or closed down. Freedom House gives Venezuela a score of 19 out of 100 in terms of freedom. ⁴⁰

The total censorship of traditional media channels led Venezuelans to heavily resort to and rely on social media. When printing paper stopped being available, some newspapers turned to these communication technologies; for example, El Impulso turned to Twitter to share news. According to Venezuelan journalist Jorge Lander, social media channels are “basically the only windows Venezuelans have to know what’s going on in the country.” According to a Pew Research Center study, Venezuelans now rely mostly on social media for political news, to mobilize protests and to denounce corruption and human rights violations.⁴¹ GA, a Venezuelan journalist who was forced to abandon her country after receiving threats aimed at her and her family, argues that social media is “the only” way in which Venezuelans in the country and outside of it can be truly aware of what is happening, fight back and be able to mobilize against the dictatorship they live under.

Many of the things that occurred in Venezuela happened after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 when Fidel Castro came into power. There are several differences between these two cases. One is the time frame, another is the possibility that the Cuban experience caused awareness in the Venezuelan population and ultimately showed them what could happen. A third difference is the fact that, back then, social media didn’t exist. There was no additional channel available to denounce and reject government enforcement, to spread news amidst censorship or to mobilize the masses without need of a television, radio or traditional online or print platform.

Oppression and Social Media

Social media has been a pronounced tool in protesting oppression, not just in Venezuela, but around the world. Opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez was detained for allegedly inciting violence in a protest in Caracas, the country’s capital, in which 43 people died. He was sentenced to 13 years in prison, despite there being no credible and concrete proof against him. During the first 3 years he was behind bars, his wife Lilian Tintori repeatedly denounced that he was being tortured. The United Nations, human rights groups and multiple international leaders, including US President Donald Trump made a call for his release after declaring him a political prisoner.

In 2017, he was put on house arrest, but then seized from his home in the middle of the night by military agents. His wife filmed the incident and posted it on Twitter immediately. At three million followers, the tweet has been retweeted more than fifty thousand times. With nowhere to get credible information or provide accountability for the government’s actions, Venezuelans have made sure their voices are heard through other channels. According to the Penal Forum, a Venezuelan network of pro-bono criminal defense lawyers, there are more than 340 political prisoners in Venezuela.

A similar case occurred with Caracas mayor Antonio Ledezma. He was also on house arrest when government police barged into his home in the middle of the night to imprison him. Once again, his family knew the only response was to record and post what had happened on social media so that the world could see.

In January 2018, Oscar Perez, a renegade helicopter pilot was killed by the Venezuelan government. Perez had been labeled a “terrorist” by the Maduro regime after
throwing grenades at government buildings from a helicopter he stole. He was on the run for months and just before he was killed, as he was surrounded by government authorities, he released a series of videos on social media.

"They're shooting at us with RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]," he said. "There are civilians inside here. We said we'd turn ourselves in, but they don't want to let us turn ourselves in. They want to kill us," he said in one of them.

They video went viral shortly after and was being covered by numerous major news outlets outside of Venezuela.

Hundreds of people have taken up to the streets of Venezuela over the past four years in protest; many have died. The Maduro regime has responded with brutality and repression to the peaceful manifestations against him. At times, demonstrators have been shot with riot-control munitions, run over by armored vehicles and beaten by Venezuelan security forces.

According to the Attorney General’s office, 124 people were killed between January to July of 2017. More than half of these were caused by security agents, also known as colectivos, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.42

**So Where Are We Now?**

Venezuela was an elitist democracy that overtime started to shift and become authoritarian. The opposition and large groups of the public resisted and that is what we are currently seeing in the country. It’s likely that the reason many journalists and activists are jailed is that the country is still resisting to fall under this type of governance.

Venezuela has become one of the most violent countries to live in. According to Citizen’s Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, Caracas is the most dangerous city out of the entire world. According to the World Bank, infant mortality rates in Venezuela reached 25.7 deaths per 1,000 births. More than 3 million Venezuelans have fled the country, home to an estimated 32 million. About one-third of these are in Colombia, primarily in border cities like Cúcuta. Others have made it to Brazil, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. They arrive, sometimes, with nothing but a suitcase, in the hopes of starting a new life, or at least, getting medicine, food and shelter, things that have become scarce in their home country. The massive exodus started in 2015. One common factor that we have seen over the past years as opposition leaders and activists counterattack the government’s oppression and later repression, is the use of social media.

In order to gain a better understanding of the crisis and the role that social communications and platforms have played, I spoke to experts in the field as well as with Venezuelans who have experienced the hardships of a dictatorship, persecution, violence and censorship. All the names used below are pseudonyms. The real names were redacted from this thesis.

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43 “Mortality Rate, Infant (per 1,000 Live Births).” The World Bank. 2019
Chapter 4: Testimonies

**Journalist and Author**

“Clearly Venezuela right now is a dictatorship and after spending a few days in Caracas, it is clear that the regime controls the streets. You can sense the fear everywhere,” said a well-known journalist who I was able to interview after visiting Venezuela to interview Nicolas Maduro. The interview never aired because RG and his team, a group of international journalists were detained and their cell phones and their equipment confiscated by the regime.

According to Reporters Without Borders, an organization that works to understand the levels countries have in terms of freedom of the press, “arbitrary arrests and violence against reporters by the police and intelligence services reached a record level in 2017” and journalists who live outside the country’s borders are more often than not deported or expelled from Venezuela. A 2010 law allows for sanctions to be put into place whenever there is any content that calls the “legitimately constituted authority into question.” This has led to arbitrary arrests and defamation prosecutions and the law itself can be said to limit freedom of the press.45

“Without social media, I think I would be in jail right now,” the journalist told me. Right before being detained, he and his team managed to reach out to someone in their home country. The content of that call was immediately shared with news organizations, embassies and on social media. He believes it was the pressure imposed by social media that ensured his prompt release. Within minutes, countless news outlets and

45 “Venezuela”. Reporters Without Borders for Freedom of Information. 2019
even politicians were talking about the detainment online and calling for the journalists’ release.

In an interview with author and academic FB, he pointed out that social media is a tool leveraged by both sides in Venezuela; that is, the regime and the opposition. However, he explained that it is not only they who rely on it but also invested third parties who want to relay a message. FB spoke about Senator Marco Rubio and argued that he often posts both in Spanish and English because he is not only trying to send a message to the Venezuelan opposition or to the Maduro regime, he is also trying “to affect constituencies he has in the United States.” He is often speaking to people in the US because ultimately gaining that international attention makes the Venezuelan crisis one of importance to the world, not just to Venezuelans.

RG is convinced that without the pressure social media helped generate, he would have been detained in Venezuela for many days. “It made the difference,” he said. “Maduro’s regime controls all the media and even those who say they’re independent, they feel the pressure from the dictatorship. There’s not a single tv station, radio station or newspaper that is out of the control of the government.” Reporters Without Borders states that during his time as leader of Venezuela, Maduro has attempted to “silence independent media outlets and keep news coverage under constant control,” and the situation has worsened since 2016 when the political and economic crisis magnified. RG believes that social media could potentially be censored by using fear to prevent people from speaking out, but otherwise, he finds these social technologies to be a path towards generating change. In Venezuela, it’s not only the media that is run by the

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46 “Venezuela”. Reporters Without Borders for Freedom of Information. 2019
regime, it is also the military, the economy, the entire country, and that is what RG believes to be the root problem in Venezuela – the concentration of power under one person. But how did we get here? RG believes it started many years ago – in 1998 when Hugo Chavez became president of the country.

*Journalist and Human Rights Activist*

Another prominent international reporter Cody Weddle, an American journalist, was also detained by the Maduro regime. He and his videographer were deprived of their freedom for about 12 hours, until they were finally released and deported. The greatest consequences are for those journalists living in Venezuela. CL, a Venezuelan journalist and activist living the country was detained for days and his arrest, like many others before and after him, generated outrage across the country and internationally. Venezuelans took to the streets to demand his release as did many outside the country. The fight was also taken on social media. His real name became a hashtag. The regime accused him of “inciting violence” and although he was released, they prohibited him from leaving the country or talking about his case and his very irregular detainment.

Like RG, CL explained that the situation in Venezuela and the crisis the country found itself in dated back to Chavez, as both he and Maduro have continuously attempted to censor the media. According to CL, who is well acquainted with social media usage, these platforms allow Venezuelans to communicate and even survive; however, it is not the solution to the Venezuelan crisis nor does it offer the answers to the ongoing political struggle. CL has been detained and censored and his life has been put at risk, just as the lives of dozens of reporters in Venezuela and similar authoritarian regimes. CL finds
social media to be a path to something, but not a solution itself. Without a doubt, however, it is a tool he would rather have at his disposal.

**Venezuelan Journalist**

As of March 2019, at least 36 journalists had been detained by the Venezuelan regime, including both nationals and foreigners. The violence against journalists; however, has been going on for years. A few years back, Venezuelan correspondent GA was physically attacked by Venezuelan military while reporting for an independent station. 10 members of the Bolivarian National Guard threw her on the ground and tried to take away her cellphone. She fought back and tried to stand her ground. “I wound up being the victim of threats and persecution,” GA told me in an interview. Even her children were threatened. That is when she realized she would have to choose between their lives and her passion for doing journalism in her country. She’s now working as a reporter outside Venezuela.

For Venezuelans living in their country and for any who have been forced to leave it, social media has been the primary tool for communication of news and for the mobilization of people. Multiple experts interviewed have confirmed that without social media, the ability to mobilize with the speed in which Venezuelans do would be much more difficult, especially considering the lack of traditional channels to exchange plans, thoughts and information. People can no longer trust the news they see and read in traditional media outlets in Venezuela because that news is censured by the government and at times, even manipulated.

GA explained exactly how social media is used to organize protests and mobilize people in Venezuela. The information regarding a protest or demonstration usually comes
from opposition officials. They pass the information along to different groups, including journalists who do not conform to the censorship imposed by the government. Even when their channels are closed – newspapers, tv, radio or print – or their lives threatened, many continue looking for a way to help and to cause change. **They simply do not go through traditional media outlets; instead, they rely on WhatsApp, on text messaging and on social media.** Once this information from opposition leaders is dispersed to independent journalists like GA, they spread the word. How? They post it online. GA assured me she verifies everything before sharing the information onto social media platforms because her tweets and posts, like many others’, have been digital sources of news which people can rely on to get accurate information. GA expresses that social media allows people to mobilize and organize large groups of people in protests against the governments. “If people do not know a demonstration is taking place, they simply will not go.” She also argues it increases safety. If people are not aware of a protest taking place that has turned violent, they could find themselves caught in danger and even lose their lives. “It’s happened”, she assured me.

GA believes social media is the solution in Venezuela in terms of informing and disseminating information; however, she also notes that “social media is used to generate fear”. According to her, departments are created to strategize on ways to counterattack what is published online by the opposition and by independent journalists. The government’s idea is to make it look like the opposition, these independent journalists and even activists, are lying. Much like RG notes, she explains this has been happening in different ways for 20 years, since Chavez was president of Venezuela, but that now the regime does this through social media. They create “bot” or “troll” accounts – non-
verified accounts – that can generate rumors, disseminate false information and ultimately cause fear and doubt in the public. This was noted in upcoming interviews with multiple experts.

Reporters Without Borders corroborates this claim arguing that new forms of censorship are being employed by authoritarian regimes using “an army of trolls.”

According to a report by the Computational Propaganda Research Project from the University of Oxford, cyber troops,” which they call any “government, military or political party teams committed to manipulating publicly opinion over social media,” have become a global phenomenon, as countries around the world are using large sums of people and resources to manipulate public opinion online. The study looked at 28 countries and in each authoritarian regime, they found that the government had social media campaigns aimed at their own populations. In contrast, democracies tended to have social media campaigns aimed at forcing populations.

According to the report’s findings, cyber troops work by creating official government applications, websites or platforms to showcase content that could be true or false and to “interact with users on social media.” The cyber troops also create fake accounts that allow them to hide their motives and political interests. These are many times referred to as “bots,” which stems from “bits of code.” The idea is for them to look, act and comment like the average human on social media, all while spreading fake news and spam through social channels like Facebook and Twitter, to name a few. According to the report, these bots can also inflate their following to appear more popular.

Multiple experts I spoke to mention these fake accounts as the government’s way of counterattacking the opposition via social media. From what they’ve learned, there is a way to repress and censor even these new communication technologies – by creating countless accounts that spread false and misleading information, by slowing down the ability of people to reach each other; that is, by slowing down the internet, and finally, by instilling fear of consequences to those who use social media to denounce the government. This brings me back to a comment CL made during our interview which referenced to the amount of people who are victim to retaliations because of social media usage. We will dive more deeply into these ways in which the government is attempting to use social media to repress during upcoming testimonies.

Reporters Without Borders, which creates annual reports analyzing the levels different countries have in terms of freedom of the press, found that out of the 180 countries evaluated, Venezuela placed at number 143. This means 142 countries across the world are considered to be “freer” than Venezuela, a country which was once considered the wealthiest of all Latin America. This has a lot to do with the privatization of media imposed by the Venezuelan government and the subsequent detention and persecution of independent journalists who continue doing their jobs regardless of the government’s threats. Between 2017 and 2018, 49 media outlets were closed down, 46 radio stations and three TV stations. The one thing they all had in common was that they criticized Nicolas Maduro. The censorship goes far beyond these numbers and continues to grow.

So, how exactly does the government threaten the media and journalists? More often than not, they insight fear in them and threaten them as was the case for both GA
and CL. The same attempt was made on RG and his team. However, the regime does have other methods. For example, the government in Venezuela is the exclusive importer of newspaper. El Impulso and El Nacional, two renowned newspapers in the country, are two of many outlets that were denied printing paper. Another method is silencing independent journalists by banning them from working in the country.

**Venezuelan Writer**

PL is a renowned Venezuelan writer and avid speaker against the Maduro and Chavez governments, who has been forced to remain away from his country for multiple years now. During our interview, he pointed out how governments are able to limit traditional media – buying newspapers and expropriating radio and television stations, blackmailing, and as previously mentioned, not allowing them printing paper. As the government continues to do this, “the voice that’s left is that of the regime.” However, he, an educated user of social media, believes these communication channels are making the difference in Venezuela and that they are something like the last hope for the survival of democracy.

While on a work trip in the US a few years ago, PL received a call from Venezuela in which he was told that El Sebin, the Bolivarian Intelligence Service, was making repeated calls to find out exactly when and where he would be returning. In the call he was told not to go back home. As he told me about this, he noted that, had he gone back to his home, one of the repercussions he would have faced would have been for his passport and his wife’s passport to be taken away. “That is how the process works,” PL followed up. “They hurt you and they hurt your people.”
With more than 2 million followers on Twitter, he is also an educated social media user. “A good part of the fuel between the dictatorship and the resistance is planted through social media,” PL told me. He believes people, particularly speaking about Venezuelans, turn to social media first for information, arguing it’s the “new habit,” but noting that this has led to talks of implemented measures to combat it, as with the “Ley Constitucional contra el Odio, por la Convivencia Pacífica y la Tolerancia.” This so-called Law Against Hate was unanimously passed by the National Constituent Assembly in Venezuela in November 2017. The law presumably promotes diversity, tolerance and respect and aims to limit violence, hate and political intolerance. It’s important to note here that the Constituent Assembly, who passed it, was put in place by the Maduro regime after taking over the powers given to the democratically elected National Assembly in December 2015. According to New York Times Journalist Marianela Balbi: “The so-called "law against hate" was only the most finished form of the media war waged by the Chavez government against the media and citizens.” PL himself argues this law is used for the regime, against those who oppose it, saying it is another means they can use to censor whomever they deem dangerous.

When asked if social media could also be censored, PL said yes and made an analogy to the Turkish government, whom he called a dictatorship that has learned how to block social media in an effective manner. They do so at the “right times” in order to prevent public protests and to limit conversation and information regarding controversial political topics. He explains that the main problem this generates is that if you slow down

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49 Redacción Internacional. "¿De Qué Se Trata "la Ley Del Odio" En Venezuela Y Por Qué Es Tan Peligrosa?" El Espectador. 2017.
internet enough, people could turn away from it, think the signal is bad or simply not be aware something is happening, something pointed out by multiple interviewees, namely Journalists GA and MP, who we will read up on later in the thesis. This same thing is ultimately occurring in Venezuela, though possibly, for right now, to a lesser degree than in Turkey.

Under 70% of people in Turkey have access to internet and in terms of freedom of the press, Turkey ranks 155 out of 180; let us remember Venezuela ranks 143, so not too much of a difference. Reporters Without Borders placed Turkey as a “country under surveillance,” as it’s often blocked the use of certain words online and on social media. In 2011, more than 130 internet keywords were banned in the country, including the word “free.” Not only this, multiple websites that denounce or speak against former Turkish president Mustafa Kemal Ataturk are also blocked. On November 2016, the Turkish government blocked access to social media channels – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp – after the assassination of the ambassador and detainment of politicians backed by the Kurds. While the blockage lasted for a short time, users have reported an often times slow internet connection.

Much like Venezuelan journalist CL noted about Venezuela, in Turkey, instances of detainments in response to social media usage have occurred. Human Rights Watch has examined multiple cases that point towards police raids and criminal investigations being carried out as a form of punishment rather than as a consequence of actual negative behavior. “The criminalization of peaceful speech on the internet has a chilling effect on social media use and has led to increased self-censorship”, stated Human Rights Watch. According to a 2017 report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, many
in Turkey fear government surveillance, which could explain lower usage of social media. According to Human Rights Watch, there are a number of journalists and activists who have been prosecuted for social media posts. An example is Nurcan Baysal, a journalist who was charged with “inciting hatred and enmity among the population” after criticizing the military for their management in Afrin through a series of tweets.51

Throughout this thesis we have spoken about censorship of non-traditional media – news outlets like television, radio and print – but entertainment outlets took part of the hit as well. More so than the entertainment industry, it was the minds behind it – writers, poets and creators, who opposed the Chavez and later the Maduro regime. PL was one of them. A well-known writer from Venezuela, his work stopped being shown on the mainstream television channel a few years before Chavez passed away. “They [television networks] would order them, I would make them, they would pay for them, but they wouldn’t air”, PL told me as he explained his confusion at the time. His works normally generated high ratings. He decided to look into what was happening and what he found was that the government did not want to publish his work; they did not want to give air time – prime time – to a dissident. “What they silence are voices”, he explained while naming multiple others who have been censored as well, namely television commentator Nelson Bocaranda.

PL’s twitter, which he uses almost daily to denounce the injustices he sees, was also hacked twice. He said he was not able to access it and pro-government and anti-opposition posts were tweeted through it. He compared what he felt to being locked out of your own home knowing someone else was in it. The main concern with social media

is that, it too, can be censored when it is the state that literally owns every aspect of a country.

Professor of Political Science

According to professor CJ, who also believes the origins of the Venezuelan crisis go back 20 years ago, Chavez envisioned a model in which the state would become an “unaccountable actor in society” and in which the private sector was excessively regulated. This has highly affected the current socioeconomic crisis the country is experiencing, where all power is concentrated in one actor. A similar occurrence was seen in the case of Cuba following Fidel Castro’s Revolution in 1959. Within years after the beginning of his revolution, Castro was able to consolidate power on the island. He was also able to keep things under wraps for decades. It was a “degree of isolation that nation had never seen,” CJ stated. Cuba, according to CJ, had a strong and “sophisticated press,” but once Castro confined all the media under his rule, the people had no way to denounce what was happening. The independent media was lost. While Venezuelans have non-traditional means of generating information, sharing knowledge and denouncing injustices, Cubans did not. This could have played a significant role in how the Cuban Revolution turned out; however, CJ does argue that the lack of non-traditional media channels isn’t the only reason Cuba didn’t see the impact Venezuela is feeling today from the people and the international community. They also lacked strong political parties and organizations that could help mobilize those Cubans who opposed the regime. CJ argues Venezuela had all three of these factors – social media, strong political parties [opposition] and organizations able and willing to mobilize. Venezuelans resisted and
“Maduro got cornered.” The same did not happen in Cuba. The Venezuelan opposition engaged people in politics, rather than simply boycott it.

In terms of the international community, the Venezuelan opposition was also able to sustain a systematic foreign policy approach. It’s important to note here the veracity with which leaders opposed to Maduro have worked to ensure they are heard internationally, something concluded by Venezuelan journalists PM and PL.

We are not just talking about politicians; in fact, one of the loudest voices of the Venezuelan opposition became Lilian Tintori, the wife of opposition leader, Leopoldo Lopez, a political prisoner who was sentenced to 13 years behind bars. Tintori’s name made international headlines as she advocated for the release of her husband and other political prisoners of the Maduro regime. She often took to social media to help mobilize protests, denounce her husband’s treatment in jail and the illegality of his imprisonment. She gave countless international interviews in which she accused the Maduro regime of psychologically torturing Lopez in the Ramo Verde prison in the country. She spoke before the United Nations and even met with US President Donald Trump in February 2017. It was then that we began seeing the United States taking a critical stance against the Maduro regime.
Returning to the comparison of Venezuela and Cuba, journalist RG noted that after the Castro-led revolution, the news was mostly controlled by the regime. While in Venezuela, the news coming from traditional spheres is also dominated by the government, the actual news coming out of the country is stemming from social media. These new communication technologies gave Venezuelans a path Cubans never had.

“Social media made the Venezuelan crisis an international crisis. Without social media no one would be talking about Venezuela,” said RG, noting that the United States, Mexico and Europe all care about the situation in the South American country as if it was a local one affecting them directly.
The internet was not an option for Cubans or anyone in the early 1960s, but even when the world started becoming acquainted with it, Cuba was not. The World Wide Web was invented in 1990 by computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, yet for years, access to communication technologies was largely barred in Cuba. Even now when the internet is somewhat available, it is substantially limited. Four gigabytes of data to browse the web cost an estimated 30 dollars a month. According to Trading Economics, the average salary in Cuba is 767 Cuban Pesos (CUP) yearly. That is equals a little more than 29 US dollars.

CJ believes it is doubtful that the world will ever see a totalitarian takeover of a country the way we saw in Cuba and this is largely due to the influence of social media. He believes we’ll continue to see “slight versions” of totalitarian rule, but nothing like what we saw over 50 years ago after the Revolution that changed the country’s future.

Investigative Journalist

Investigative Journalist REG agrees that Venezuela had the advantage of social media, something Cuba did not. Venezuela also had the advantage of geography. He explains that while Cuba is an island, Venezuela is just an estimated two-thousand miles away from the borders with Colombia and Brazil and very close to the Caribbean. When talking about Cuba amid the Venezuelan crisis, we cannot simply compare the two’s authoritarian regimes and the reactions of the opposition and of the people, we also have to take into account the role that both countries have played in each other’s affairs. Their close ties began with Hugo Chavez. Cuba would send security and military specialists to

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52 “Internet Hall of Fame.” Tim Berners-Lee. Internet Hall of Fame.
Venezuela as well as doctors and teachers, while benefitting from Venezuela’s oil. It can be said that Fidel and Chavez formed an economic and political alliance that has lasted to present-day, even after the death of both leaders.

REG argues that “Cubans are experts in what Venezuela is experiencing today – a commercial blockage, which they find to be subversive and repressive.” He notes that the Cuban government is a player in Venezuelan politics today, and he is not the only who thinks this way. Shortly after the brief attempt of detainment of Juan Guaidó by intelligence agents in January 2019, before he became Interim President of the country, Senator Marco Rubio sent out a tweet calling out Cuban presence in the South American country. “This agency is controlled & directed by experienced oppressors sent by #Cuba & these kinds of tactics are textbook methods used by the Cuban regime,” Rubio wrote.

Cuba’s government has shown full support for Maduro arguing that there is an “attempt to impose a coup d’état, a puppet government at the service of the United States.” REG explains that the regimens of both countries have formed a strong and dangerous alliance. The alliance has been present for years and is just as prominent now as it was when Chavez first formed the ALBA countries. Why? According to REG, one country is afraid of losing power and ending up in the hands of the US – Venezuela. And the other fears losing its easy access to receiving and reselling petroleum – Cuba.

Opposition leaders have often argued against the continued Cuban presence in Venezuelan politics, arguing that they are present in the military, part of the government’s counterintelligence teams and are acting as spies and political advisers. While some place a heavy responsibility on Cuban influence in Venezuela, other argue that the political turmoil undergoing the petroleum-producing country cannot be blamed
on Cuba. David Smilde, a professor of sociology and expert on Venezuela, said that Cubans “are key consultants and advisors, but I don’t think they’re calling the shots or telling them [the Venezuelan regime] what to do.” Many experts say that the Cuban involvement in Venezuelan security and intelligence forces remains, in large part, a mystery; however, it is important to note that in recent times, this mystery has begun to clear up.54

In March 2019, it was revealed that the Venezuelan government has used medical staff from Cuba as part of an extortion scheme to ensure their power. Cuban doctors are sent to multiple developing countries around the world to aid in healthcare, but recently a group of 16 practitioners revealed they had blackmailed patients in Venezuela to support Maduro. Basically, patients were threatened and told that they would not receive their medicine if they didn’t support the regime. The group of Cuban doctors, who fled Venezuela, said they were shown different tactics that included subtle reminders to vote for the regime as well as the flat out denial of treatment for those who did not submit, and we are talking about people with chronic and deadly diseases.55 I spoke to a Cuban doctor and business owner who spent many years in Venezuela. AMA was not among this group; in fact, she moved to Venezuela before Chavez rose to power and when he became president, she became an outspoken voice against him and his regime. While in an anti-Chavez protest in the early 2000s, she mentioned that most Cubans who were in Venezuela praising or spreading support for the government were likely sent from the Fidel Castro security forces.

Returning to REG, the impact of social media in the country has been that it has played a significant role in the mobilization of people and in their ability to generate impact. “People telling their dramatic stories, talking of deaths, persecution – all this has an impact, but social media also has an impact for Maduro’s followers.” He calls social media “a double-edged sword.” REG notes that Maduro’s forces also use these communication technologies “to organize, encourage each other, attack and repress.” REG has called the regime “an alleyway without an exit in which the corrupt government is clinching onto power through the use of force.” Because social media can be used on both ends of the spectrum, REG believes them to be “the cruelest manifestation of democracy;” that is, where one can find the person who lies, offers the so-called fake news and manipulates, as well as the person who tells the honest truth. Even amid this, REG is convinced social media is playing a notable role in Venezuela in present day. The crisis the public lives in daily has caused them to become experts in all that is social media. “They have developed a system of immediacy for getting forces together and attracting worldwide attention that cannot be compared to any other country in Latin America, except perhaps Nicaragua.”

Author and Professor

Professor FB believes social media plays a crucial role in the Venezuelan crisis, but much like REG, that it’s a tool used effectively by any side and both positively and negatively. FB explains that social media has played a vital role in the mobilization of protests led by the opposition, inspiring hundreds of people to take to the streets. “They have leveraged it.” He explains that the opposition has used social media as a means of
bypassing more traditional regulated platforms – they build a case, attack the government for their actions, compel the international community and mobilize the people. The issue is that just as the opposition has leveraged social media, so has the government. FB doesn’t question that censorship of traditional media led to the rise of these newer social technology communications, but he can’t say that social media itself will be beyond censorship. In fact, FB explains that censorship of social media is already occurring as the government uses it to disrupt people’s ability to mobilize and discredit the opposition. He depicts three fundamental ways in which social media is used negatively: misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.

Misinformation is inaccurate information intended to deliberately lie and deceive. Disinformation is primarily false information that can be misleading, which often times causes confusion. Finally, propaganda is biased content that is directly intended to promote a certain cause or point of view; it is usually an issue of a political nature.

Both Twitter and Facebook have received pressure to deal with disinformation campaigns; in fact, they recently admitted attempts designed just for that. In January 2019, Twitter said that multiple countries including Venezuela had used social media to create and share the government’s agenda. Facebook and Twitter also revealed an Iranian disinformation campaign whose focus seemed to be to lead public conversation in a certain direction. According to Facebook, almost 800 pages, groups and accounts with ties to Iran were deleted and the same occurred with about 2,600 in Twitter. Another pattern appeared around the 2016 US presidential elections that showed heavy Russian disinformation efforts aimed at creating division in the American public. These issues all bring to light of course the recent privacy and security issues with Facebook, due to
which, creator Mark Zuckerberg had to testify in front of Congress to explain. And Facebook is not alone in terms of criticism. Twitter and Google have received their fair share for not doing more to limit disinformation among its users. The question is what can be done? The social media platforms are monitoring their users to be able to call out suspicious accounts; for example, Twitter has said it challenges millions of these suspicious accounts weekly. But is that enough? What more could be done, if anything?

As much as content on social media can be used as an “emotional trigger,” as FB delineates, to generate action, conversation and change, it can also be used by an authoritarian regime to tell lies, to shape the views of its citizens and to counter-protest. FB brings up an event also mentioned by writer PL in our interview – the concert for freedom that took place in February 2019 in Cucuta, Colombia. The concert took place the day before the opposition attempted to bring in humanitarian aid to Venezuela. Numerous artists joined forces in the event organized by businessman Richard Branson in an effort to raise funds for Venezuelans. As soon as the Maduro regime found out, they organized a counter-event, a pro-government concert through which they attempted to overshadow the original. While the event was streamed by multiple outlets, it was, not shockingly, unable to be viewed in Venezuela. PL added that the day of the concert – February 22, 2019 – was synonymous with internet complications in Venezuela, namely social media. FB concludes that another attempt at censoring social media is plausible, as multiple other experts have stated, by simply slowing down the internet. Prolonging the time it takes to upload videos and cutting communications online is a form of censorship.

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He also highlighted fear, which could potentially be the biggest form of censorship present in Venezuela and countries with similar authoritarian regimes. Like PL and RG, he points out “self-censorship”, creating enough fear in a person that they will not go online and post what they’re seeing, living and experiencing because they fear repression or any form of retaliation. Ultimately, “it comes down to control”, he explains, who can more effectively leverage the use of social media – the public or the government?

One of the main aspects seen through Venezuelan’s use of social communication is appealing and generating the attention of the international community. “There are far more observers of the crisis in Venezuela outside than inside, FB assures. “It has become international news. We can recall here the “emotional trigger,” which FB mentioned while remembering the case of the vendor in Tunisia who set himself on fire and started the massive protests that would become the Arab Spring. This brings us to the repeating topic of Cuba. In the early 1960s, the government of Cuba had the ability “to monopolize the flow of information and as an island, it still does,” he reasons. “You didn’t have the platforms of mobilizations you have today.” Mobilization then was by word of mouth, by print and radio. The information flow was much slower and also much less visual. That “emotional trigger” of seeing a man in such desperation so as to set himself on fire in protest, of seeing a pilot like Oscar Perez, who opposed the government, in a series of self-released videos on social media, bleeding and telling the world he is willing to turn himself in to government police but that they won’t accept it, and then finding out he has been killed – that “emotional trigger” was not present during the Cuban Revolution and the years following it. I argue it is a crucial part of how the Venezuelan crisis is being
carried out and the amount of international attention it is receiving. Of course, there are always two sides to every coin, and while social media has given the opposition a voice in the international community, social media has also given the regime a voice, not only within its borders to silence or retaliate against its own people, but in the international community. As we stand, more than 50 countries, including the United States, back National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó as Interim President of Venezuela; however, Maduro’s regime has support as well, even if it is not as widespread as Guaidó’s. The Russian, Cuban and Chinese governments “are painting a different picture” of the situation in Venezuela, FB details, “one far less adversarial to Maduro.”

Ultimately, it seems as if the United States and Russia are stuck in a new fight – this time, a fight for influence over Venezuela. While the US has placed a series of sanctions on the Venezuelan government in hopes of weakening the regime and diplomatically forcing them out of the country, the Russian government has strengthened ties with them. Over the years, Venezuela has borrowed billions of dollars from Russia, which has heavily invested in the South American country’s oil and military. This support continues today with Russia being one of the strongest economies backing Venezuela. Russia assures the world that the United States is trying to put together a coup to overthrow Maduro, whom they consider to be the president of the country. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergei Lavrov, “Washington’s attempts to stage a coup in Venezuela and threats against its legitimate government were a violation of the UN Charter and blatant interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.” It really comes down to who one believes to be the legitimate president. The United States and over 50 countries worldwide say Maduro is
an illegitimate president and the US says that Russia is worsening the political crisis in the country with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying their behavior is “unconstructive,” and the US “will not stand idly by as Russia exacerbates tensions in Venezuela.” In March, Russia placed two military planes in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, further fueling the situation.57

Now in terms of social media, the question it comes down to is: “Can the government leverage social media in a way in which it can control the views and values of its constituents for their survival and to oppress potential uprisings?” It is a question he asks himself but cannot answer. “If governments gain advantage in controlling information flows, censuring information, then they have an advantage over social mobilization, or vice versa, which one prevails? That’s the challenge,” he said while mentioning the cases of China and Russia which have great firewalls and strong control of information flows. He argues that information still gets through, but it is limited.

*Academic and Venezuela Expert*

The role of Russia and China in the Venezuelan government should be taken into consideration when analyzing the socioeconomic crisis. They, along with Cuba, are the strongest allies Maduro has, with whom without, he might not be able to sustain power for long. VG has studied the crisis in Venezuela and has become an expert in this field. He explains that both Russia and China have their own interests in Venezuela – they have oil fields and money invested, which they are trying to protect. Without their aid and

57 Meredith, Sam. “US vs Russia: Everything you need to know about the battle for influence in Venezuela.” *CNBC*, 2019.
political support, the Maduro regime finds itself without money and almost no international support.

VG, like most, believes the downturn in Venezuela started 20 years ago when Hugo Chavez rose to power and began “trying to take away from people with private properties and industries. Chavez has a 21st century socialism plan, that ultimately failed and has led to the hardships Venezuelans are facing in present-day. He began financing social programs through Venezuela’s richest company PDVSA and by doing so he created an image of himself in the eyes of the poorest groups mirroring that of a savior. Through his actions, money that should have gone into the oil production industry was used for other purposes, thus began the downward spiral of the country’s oil production.

VG speaks from the research he has carried out, but also, through personal experience. He was born in Venezuela and grew up in its borders but 10 years ago, in 2009, he was forced to leave with his family. It was not a decision, he insists, “it was the only option.” He says regimes like those in Venezuela over the past 20 years find a way to use the law against you, and here we can recall the so-called Law Against Hate which has been argued to be used to censor people rather than protect them from violence and hate, as it advocates. Although he left Venezuela, he is constantly in tune with what happens there, namely through social media, which he argues is a way of getting around state-controlled media and a tool which “has no boundaries.” It is the only trustworthy way in which information gets into the country and out of the country; however, it’s also one in which fake news is exceedingly present and put into use by the government who creates false stories to confuse people about what is real and what is not. Regardless, GV says he uses these channels “more than ever” and makes a correlation between their use
and President of the United States Donald Trump. “He can post his opinions directly on matters and people get that information immediately”, he emphasized. The world no longer has to wait for the traditional news media outlets, even in countries where it is not censored. VG and other Venezuelans take to social media to get news from the opposition and also from Maduro’s regime. And for those Venezuelans who live in the country, a primary use is mobilization. Both VG and Venezuelan Journalist GA narrated the way in which social media is used to mobilize and both agreed on key factors – one is that social media is crucial in order to organize people to join demonstrations and the other is that social media is vital to keep people safe amidst political turmoil. They note that it is not just a tool that allows people to get groups together to protest, but that it is also helpful to let people know not to attend certain areas with high levels of violence.

_Cuban Doctor and Business Owner_

AMA left Cuba fleeing oppression and, in search of a better life, ended up in Venezuela. She was a doctor, but also a business-women and decided to open up a private consultation in Valencia. She never imagined she would come to experience here what she so vehemently tried to leave behind. “I was attacked by criminals and significantly harassed by “chavistas” [Hugo Chavez supporters], once he won [the election],” she told me. “They tried to convince me to ally myself to the Cuban doctors that had been sent by Fidel Castro.” She said that these doctors who promoted the “chavismo” message and who were attempting to bring her – a Cuban doctor – to their side, were part of the Fidel Castro security forces. When she realized how her daily life
was turning out to be like – the constant harassment – she decided to emigrate to the United States.

For her, social media has played a crucial role in Venezuela, from the very beginning. She notes that many Cubans who lived outside of the island and had internet access were able to relay their experience to the Venezuelans via social media; however, she notes, it was up to each individual to listen. “Every gunshot, every event, every massacre in Venezuela – if it wasn’t for social media, we wouldn’t know about them.” She agrees with others interviewed that social media could have helped the crisis in Cuba as it is helping Venezuelans. In Cuba, she explains, you couldn’t possibly know what was real and the international community did not have a clear channel to see exactly what was happening. She argues that even tourists who spent time in Cuba did not know the extent of the crisis, mainly because Cubans feared retaliation if they spoke up. This is a situation much like what we see in Venezuela – social media allows millions to document their experiences and denounce the injustices they see but, much like in Cuba, many Venezuelans fear to speak up because, just like the people and the opposition use it, the government does too. AMA explains that the government has been able to effectively use social media to lie to the public and believes that is the good and the bad of these communication technologies – there is no judge to approve or limit a post. Everything can be shared – real news and fake news, an argument that multiple experts have expressed throughout this thesis.

Journalist focused in Latin America

Venezuelan journalist PM left her country in 2002 after years of covering Hugo Chavez and has been working as a journalist in the United States ever since. While she
finds social media necessary in order to spread information, she is not so sure it is part of the solution to the sociopolitical crisis. PM explains that, while censorship turned hundreds to social media, these relatively new communication routes are already being censored by the Venezuelan government. She notes that the Maduro regime has “a monopoly on the access of internet” because it is managed by the Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos de Venezuela (CANTV), which can slow down or turn off the internet for hours during key moments. CANTV, which has been the receiver of endless criticism particularly during the past few months amid the crisis caused by the repeated and long-lasting blackouts in the country, is the Venezuela state-run telephone and internet service provider. It became active in 1930 but was privatized in 1991 and re-nationalized by Chavez in 2007. It is consistently accused of shutting down the internet, websites and online channels, like Efecto Cocuyo, Armando.Info, El Pitazo and Caraota Digital. The director of El Pitazo, César Batiz, has had to change his website’s domain name multiple times due to constant government prompted blocks of their online content. In order to still be able to share informative content and spread their independent journalism, these news outlets have turned to Twitter to let their readers know they are undergoing censorship and to lead them to their new domains. They are also using WhatsApp groups as an alternative way to show their content.

PM recalled the 2013 election between Nicolas Maduro and Henrique Capriles, a Venezuelan politician and lawyer who became one of the leaders of the opposition, after Chavez’ death, in which the internet was taken down for about an hour. Why was this such a problem? All the data from the elections was being transmitted by online channels – channels which the public, journalists and opposition members could not enter.
According to the National Electoral Council, Maduro won that election with a victory margin of 1.6 percentage points; however, his opponent argued the results could have been manipulated and requested a vote-by-vote audit. No recount took place, which caused wide-spread criticism from opposition supporters. Those who backed Maduro and the legacy of Hugo Chavez argued the call for a recount was a US-led plot to undermine the legitimate victory, words similar to those we are hearing today from the Venezuelan regime and its Cuban and Russian supporters.

Internet experts and activists argue that while censorship and government interference with online publications has been common practice since 2007 – the same year as CANTV became state-owned – the level of censorship has seen a dramatic increase since January 2017 when Juan Guaidó was declared Interim President and backed by the United States along with dozens of other countries. Following this proclamation and subsequent anti-government protest, there was a concert held at the Colombian border in an effort to raise money for Venezuelans – the Venezuelan Aid Concert. The Institute for Press and Society (IPYS) said an estimated 53 websites were blocked in 2018 by internet providers.  

The following day, humanitarian trucks would attempt to enter Venezuela, but protests would ensue, and the aid would not get in. Websites were also shut down during this process. It was during these days that Guaidó left Venezuela, crossed over to Colombia and then proceeded to make a few international stops along the way to multiple different countries. Before exiting Venezuela, Maduro had said he was not allowed to leave the country, and many feared his return would spark violent protests and even an

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58 Rueda, Manuel. "Venezuelan Opposition Targeted by Internet Censors." AP News. 2019
arrest. Guaidó returned to Venezuela, as he had promised, on March 4, 2019. He was not arrested. Instead, he was greeted by hundreds of supporters. The moment was captured on cellphones, streamed and seen almost all around the world; however, those Venezuelans living in the country, who were not present for his return, did not see it. TV and radio stations, which, again, are controlled by the Maduro regime, did not show Guaidó’s return. And according to Netblocks, a digital rights group from London, the internet service provider in Venezuela blocked Twitter, YouTube and multiple other websites that are known for their independent news reporting. Andres Azpurua, which is the director of Venezuelan Intelligence, a local group that monitors online censorship said the blackout was extremely precise. “You would see Guaidó starting to speak and the websites would be blocked almost immediately.”

So how does that shut down of online sources happen? According to research revealed by IPYS, the state telecommunications regulator known as Conatel orders for certain websites to be blocked. For the most part, CANTV will then do the blocking, but other ISPs like Moviestar, Digitel and Inter also have the ability to block websites. Those who chose not to follow Conatel’s requests are fined or run the risk of losing their license to operate.

Amid common blackouts, slow internet and economic hardships, censorship of social media channels is getting more and more difficult to combat in Venezuela. According to Azpurua, the minimum wage in Venezuela by month is on average $6. This can make it very difficult for poor families to get connected, something that strengthens the government.

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So why has the Maduro regime not fully blocked WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and other social media channels? According to some activists, it’s because these tools are useful to their own followers.

Social media has been used since Chavez was in power; in fact, according to PM, Chavez was among the first presidents to use Twitter to communicate directly with the public and beginning in 2011 when he began to get sick, his reliance on it become more frequent. Chavez enjoyed the press that being president gave him. He sometimes gave speeches for hours without end and social media became the means with which he could still be present, even if he was tucked away in a hospital bed in Havana. PM, who spent years covering the Chavez administration, doesn’t see a direct correlation between the Venezuelan crisis and social media and the Cuban Revolution and subsequent crisis and the lack of social media. She finds the two situations to be incomparable. While the downturn in Cuba began with Fidel Castro’s Revolution, in Venezuela, Chavez was able to break down democracy from within the government itself. He was elected multiple times, she explains, even though she notes that he used his “popularity” and the fact that he was a “renown figure” in politics to “tweak democracy.” PM delineates how he would win elections but would use state-owned money during his electoral campaign or to buy votes. Ultimately, he used his influence in order to tweak things in his favor. He even managed to write a new constitution, not to mention he nationalized the company in charge of the internet, as previously noted.

While PM does place a heavy weight on social media for its power of dissemination, she argues that before these social communications, Venezuela had prominent media channels and well-informed independent journalists who have been able
to push out vital information. From what she has gathered over the years, the simple fact of information being readily available doesn’t guarantee “that users will have the tools nor the criteria to know what the truth is and what is false.” PM explains that what she finds to have garnered certain international attention is “the way in which the opposition has conducted its strategy.” Venezuelan journalist CL also made a mention of this – it is, at the end of the day, the people who are causing a change by using social media as one of the tools available to them to denounce the injustices they see. Author PL and Professor CJ agreed noting the opposition has led an effective strategy against the government in Venezuela.

In terms of mobilization, however, PM agrees with Venezuelan Journalist GA who called them crucial in organizing anti-government protests. PM recalls multiple applications used during these demonstrations that facilitated the ability of people to plan, strategize, communicate and organize. Students often used an app that simulated a radio frequency to alert each other of where to go and what places to avoid. Another app was Telegram, which allowed for the sharing of encrypted messages. Another application, developed by Jigsaw, a company owned by Google, was Intra, which was used in an effort to prevent governments from censoring and manipulating online publications. Journalists, their sources and groups of interest would use these methods, which PM calls ‘other forms of social media’ in order to carry messages across without interruption from the government.
Chapter 5: Panel of Experts – Closed Questionnaire

The panel of experts interviewed throughout for this thesis also participated in a closed questionnaire. The purpose was to gain an understanding of their overall view of social media and whether it was being used as an effective tool or not.

Figure 2-1

![Pie chart showing responses to the question: Has social media played an important role in opposition protests in Venezuela and in Nicaragua?]

All interviewees agreed that social media has played a crucial role in the organization of opposition protests in Venezuela. It has allowed easier communication access, which then grants mobilization and organization abilities. It also helps to protect people. Protests tend to start out peacefully but have sometimes turned violent and since the traditional media often does not speak about these manifestations, many rely on social media – Facebook groups, Twitter posts, WhatsApp messages and other phone applications – to know where to go and where not to go.
Was it censorship that led to the rise of social media usage to disseminate information in Venezuela? Most of the expert panel believes it was, but not everyone. FB was not able to provide a yes or no answer. He told me “not entirely.” According to FB, censorship of traditional media channels “may have pushed people to other platforms” like social media; however, he argues that censorship is also currently being used to “disrupt social media and the ability to mobilize.” While multiple panelists agreed this is occurring, most still voted “yes” when asked if it was censorship that led people to turn to social media to communicate and share information. While attempts to censor social media are occurring, it seems it is still the most effective route to share content and denounce injustices.
This question was tricky and mostly received undefined responses. The question was originally: Will social media outpower oppression by authoritarian regimes? However, many of the responses varied and could not be measured in precise numbers. Journalist CL said it would be the people who could outpower the oppression of a regime. The question was reformulated to read as follows: Will social media help to outpower/combat oppression from authoritarian regimes. The above graph shows the responses of those people who answered that question.
The grand majority of those polled believe that social media channels have helped, in a crucial manner to send a message of what is happening in Venezuela to the international community. One of the panelists argued that social media has helped in some ways but could not say it has done so fully. Another voted yes although they had some reservations about exactly who the international community regarded.
100% of the expert panel said that social media can be used against those who use it to denounce injustices. In Venezuela’s case, this means that the Maduro regime can and is using social media against the public who rejects it.
Chapter 6: Reflections of Venezuelans Who Have Fled

Throughout my research, I spoke to experts but in order to fully understand the crisis, it was important to also talk to the average Venezuelan. In addition to GA, PL and VG, whom are all Venezuelans who were forced to live outside of their home country because they feared for their life, security or stability, I spoke to a number of other people from Venezuela who decided to leave the country and asked them how they viewed the role of social media personally. I asked them how social media is used, how the government reacts and what are the results of social media. Below is a brief summary of what a few of them told me.

One left Venezuela five years ago, in 2014, with a young baby because of the scarcity of food, water and basic necessities. Her husband was persecuted and kidnapped although he was able to survive, her brother was killed, and soon she herself was the victim of threats and persecution. For her, social media is the only way to stay in tune with what is happening. “I don’t watch news, I go to social media.” She does admit that the government has learned to leverage the communications and that is the disadvantage. They use them to deliver fake news, mislead and to take advantage of people, but she believes the power of social media cannot be silenced by anyone.

Another woman I spoke to fled Venezuela three years ago after an experience that marked, not only her life, but that of her children. Armed government agents entered her home while her kids slept, and after that, they could hardly consider sleeping calmly. She did not go into details of exactly what happened or why. She did mention how she uses social media and how she’s seen these communication technologies being used. While she prefers not to share personal details nor denounce via social media, she notes
that it is of high value when looking for medicine, food, milk and even diapers. In terms of the government’s reaction to social media, she said they probably laugh at everything. Ultimately, she find it very difficult for social media to make a significant change that could lead the current government to step out.

Finally, I spoke to another woman, a clinical phycologist who left Venezuela in 2009, a time she remembers as her prime in terms of her career. She is among the few Venezuelans that was able to leave the country before it took a dramatic downturn and became the international crisis it is today. She has been living in the United States for 10 years and finds social media to be “fundamental to disseminating information,” of great help to garnering international attention. Like many, though, she wonders about the consequences of social media for users who denounce the government through them while living in Venezuela’s borders. When asked how the government has reacted to social media usage, she simply stated that she wouldn’t call them a government. She used the word “usurper” instead. And what will be the result of this significant use of social media in Venezuela and worldwide to talk about the crisis? She said she cannot be sure but that it is likely “a light along the path.”

I’ve spoken to a number of others who have similar stories, concerns and comments regarding the government. There are journalists who were threatened and censored, parents hoping their kids would live a safer life and people who just wanted an opportunity to live in peace and without fear of retaliation from the government. Ultimately, I think many of the more than 3 million people have chosen to leave because, in addition to repression and violence, the scarcity of basic needs is beyond what they could have imagined. As in the cases seen, having a child to feed but no food is
unbearable for a mother. Currently the country is experiencing a series of blackouts that are affecting hospitals, transport and even water. The outages made it impossible for some pumps to deliver water to certain areas and this led people to get plastic bottles, fill them with hosepipes and then collect water from a mountain in Caracas. Levels in the Guri hydroelectric dam, which offers 65% of the country’s power, have fallen dramatically. Maduro’s regime has blamed them on the opposition and the United States, but the opposition affirms that the reason is years of poor investment and corruption.61

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61 “Venezuelans collect mountain run-off as water shortages persist.” BBC. 2019
Chapter 7: Social Media and Protest in Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Ever since the Arab Spring in 2011, we have seen the growing role of social media in combating oppression. Shortly after, we saw it used as part of the Occupy Wallstreet movement and we’ve seen it across multiple countries in Latin America who either have authoritarian regimes or are moving in that direction. In fact, we also see it simply as a form of protest against injustice. Across my research, I realized just how prominent the topic of social media is when talking of censorship and oppression. As an article in NPR detailing the experiences of a Venezuelan notes, social media has become for some a matter of life and death. According to the Colombia Journalism Review, social media is a leader in informing the world in present day, as at least 60% of Americans get their news through these platforms. Traditional news outlets are, themselves, relying more on social media to disseminate the information published. Other outlets like ABC News and CNN have also written about the role of social technologies in protesting and mobilizing; however, most outlets also express that social media is also being censored. In a report on Turkey and human rights violations, Human Rights Watch has written about the consequences social media could be facing, arguing that there is a social media crackdown affecting journalists and activists. The New York Times has also written about how social media could be used to disseminate false information, focusing on the example of Russia.

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62 “Censorship in the Social Media Age.” Colombia Journalism Review. 2016.
Chapter 8: Conclusion and Findings

Empirical Findings

So what does this tell us? Let’s narrow things down by looking at the following three sub-questions. How was social media been used by the public and opposition in Venezuela? How has the government reacted and what is the result of this social media use?

Social Media and Mobilization

Social media has been used to mobilize, to protest oppression, to denounce the government and garner international attention, as a tool to speak up and inform the public in a time when traditional media has been censored. According to the responses from the expert panelists I spoke to, social media has allowed the Venezuelan opposition the ability to mobilize, journalists the ability to educate amidst censorship of traditional media outlets and the public the chance to make decisions based on more information than what the government would have them know. It has also been a useful tool to denounce oppression and a valuable asset amidst the traditional media censorship imposed by the Chavez and later Maduro regimes. The majority of the experts conclude that censorship was indeed a primary reason so many Venezuelans turned to social media. They’re answers also conclude that social media has had a momentous impact on how involved the international community is in the Venezuelan crisis. And here we are talking about international actors that are for and against the current regime. We see this vividly today as more than 50 countries back Juan Guaidó as Interim President of Venezuela. On the other end, we see the power Nicolas Maduro still has due to his ties with Cuba, China and most notably, Russia. One more conclusion gathered from my
interviews and research is that social media would not be the power tool it is for
Venezuelans were it not for the actors behind it and their effective use of it. The US
decided to back Juan Guádú as Interim President after Nicolas Maduro supposedly won
a reelection that has been deemed fraudulent, but had the opposition not ensured the
international community knew of the political and socioeconomic crisis the country was
experiencing, much less attention would have been given to it. This was stressed by
multiple panelists.

**How the Government has Reaction to Social Media**

The downside is that social media can also be a tool to disseminate false,
misleading and manipulative information. So how exactly has the government reacted?
Primarily, they have taken advantage of social media just as well as the opposition has to
spread their own message, which at times, according to my interviews, has been to
disseminate false and misleading information. They often do this through bots and troll
accounts. The government has also reacted by censoring social communications, much
like they did with traditional forms of media. They incite fear which leads to self-
censorship and they slow down the internet or shut it down completely.

**The Result of Social Media**

This leads us to the question: what is the result of social media? In one word, I
would say it’s uncertain. Somehow, even amid the attempts to prevent the flow of
information through these social technologies, information has gotten out, been shared
and reposted. The world has seen the extent of the Maduro regime’s repression towards
its own people after they have refused to submit to his authoritarian rule, because even
though the government is trying to slow down the opposition’s use of social media, the
information is still getting through, one way or another. A big part of the reason is potentially the fact that the Maduro regime uses social media extensively as well. Venezuela is a border country, which could potentially make it more difficult to withhold information fully.

Ultimately, however, it is possible for social media to be censored, just as traditional media has been. It is happening already in Venezuela and in other countries like Turkey, Russia, China and North Korea. In China, Google and Twitter are mostly blocked from users. This has led people to create alternatives like Baidu for Google and Weibo for Twitter, but often times these sites are not used for political purposes, likely due to fear of retaliation from the governments. I believe fear is the greatest censorship that social media faces. An in addition, those twin websites in China are themselves scrutinized and critically looked at by the regime in an attempt to control them. The government in China has even been able to block WhatsApp and while people are constantly finding ways around the blockage, like accessing them through VPNs, at times they are still shutdown.63

In addition to slowing down internet or blocking it, there is the government’s ability to create “bots” to mislead the general public. Also, traditional news media have editors, producers – people trained to ensure and verify the information being shared. For the most part, social media does not have this. It is up to each individual to determine what is true and what is false, and this can pose a series of problems.

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63 “Social Media and Censorship in China: How it is Different to the West.” BBC. 2017.
Analytical Findings

There are two important questions to look into. One is how will the Venezuelan crisis turn out and the second is what will happen with social media in Venezuela. The latter is largely dependent on the first.

Venezuela has been in a state of crisis for years and could potentially remain this way for days, months or more. While 53 countries have supported Juan Guaidó and the opposition, other countries like Russia and China have continued to back Nicolas Maduro. The US has imposed substantial sanctions on the Chavista regime, but the flow of money continues through those he is allied with. Both China and Russia have strong economic ties with the South American country as they have heavily invested in its oil production. In 2015, Russia paid more than $6 billion to PDVSA. Venezuela is heavily indebted to both countries – Venezuela owes Beijing about $20 billion $2.3 billion to Rosneft, a Russian state-backed oil company – and this has allowed both China and Russia to benefit from cheap oil prices and also from having a fort near the US.64 The question remains regarding what happens to that debt if Maduro leaves office.

Ultimately, the fate of Maduro is quite possibly in the hands of the military. More than 550 members of the military have defected but a grand majority remain loyal to Maduro.

There are just a few scenarios in which this crisis can play out. One is that Maduro resigns. Another is that the US intervenes militarily, which is unlikely. The US has been vocal on their support for Guaidó and dismissal of Maduro and while President

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64 Sigalos, Mackenzie. “China and Russia loaned billions to Venezuela — and then the presidency went up for grabs.” CNBC. 2019.
Donald Trump has said no cards are off the table – in terms of a US military intervention – most experts and government officials say that is not in the works and that they will continue cornering Maduro with heavy sanctions. A third is that Maduro stays in power indefinitely. It’s impossible to say what will happen, but without a doubt, I argue that social media will continue to play a role in the journey. Even if the government continues finding ways to censor it, there are ways for the information to live, namely aided by Venezuela’s borders and the constant passage of people and by tech-savvy activists.

Before beginning this thesis, I believed social media to be an effective tool that would ultimately help the Venezuelan opposition and public defeat their oppressive regime. After numerous interviews and significant research, I conclude that social media is an effective tool but it’s also one to worry about. It can be as useful as it can be detrimental, and it can be censored. Policies should be put in place to protect social media because as we stand, they are still the strongest ally the general public has but it’s difficult to say whether they will always be available. An authoritative regime like Maduro’s does not play fair and the fear of full censorship of social media is a valid one.

In Venezuela’s case, there are multiple scenarios that could play out in terms of social media. Despite the government’s attempts to censor it, social media could continue to be the primary source of information for Venezuelans in and out of the country. Another possibility is that the Maduro regime finds a way to get full control of social platforms thus rendering them ineffective in protesting oppression and repression. The last option is, as noted earlier, that Maduro steps down and that social media is no longer censored. Now, an important detail here is that if Maduro were to resign, leave voluntarily or be forced out of power, Venezuela would be left in a state of rebuilding.
Another finding is that there, without a doubt, needs to be something done to educate people on the use of social media, and that platforms like Facebook, Twitter and, in recent years, Instagram, need to find ways to battle bots, the so-called cyber troops – all that information created in an almost machine-like way to generate lies, confusion and misinformation. Finding ways to combat this could be key to improving social media usage.

Overall, amid my findings, I do believe that social media is the only tool that currently exists for Venezuelans to retaliate against the oppression of their government and that it has played a pivotal role in the opposition and public’s response to the oppression and repression of the regime. Without it, the country would have likely not been able to generate the attention or spark the mobilization and conversation it has been able to in present-day. I believe that, while the government continues to seek ways to repress social media, people keep finding alternatives. At the same time, the conversation of what could happen if social media censorship rises needs to be had.

I hope this thesis contributes to the conversation surrounding social media. It’s a relevant tool playing a pivotal role in countries dealing with authoritarian regimes worldwide and while it can be used positively, it also has the potential to mislead and misinform populations and this could have detrimental consequences. Social media is a double-edged sword. It’s a tool that promotes or rather opens a route to freedom of expression, but it can also be censored. In a way, it is also autonomous, as there is no judge or editor constantly verifying what one can post.
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