

Venezuela: Between Censorship and Humor as a Means of Expression

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The Venezuelan state has been characterized by progressively restricting freedoms within civic space, limiting its citizens' civil and political rights.

In this context, the right to freedom of expression has been one of the most severely affected, preventing Venezuelans from having full guarantees to seek, disseminate, receive, and produce information.

Organizations that defend freedom of expression and information in the country, as well as reports from the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have documented the systematic policies that have led to the loss of freedom of expression in the country. These policies have led to the mass closure of media outlets, starting with the non-renewal of Radio Caracas Televisión's license in 2007, a measure that has since been applied to radio stations nationwide. Additionally, obstacles and restrictions on acquiring paper have affected print media, informational web portals and digital media have been blocked by the state-owned communications company, and judicial processes and asset

confiscation against long-standing media outlets such as *El Nacional* have also been imposed.

The Venezuelan state has crafted a legal framework, prominently featuring the Law against Hate, Intolerance, and for Peaceful Coexistence. Its purpose is to increasingly control and restrict the possibility of providing access to public information. It categorizes actions associated with complaints, criticism, and citizen expressions that question public management or demand accountability from government actors as crimes. This is done under the pretext and narrative that such actions could constitute acts against national interest and promote hatred.

Since the government periods of President Hugo Chávez, laws were promoted that allowed for the establishment of the so-called Communication Hegemony, a system of state-controlled media serving government propaganda. Additionally, the National Assembly elected in 2020 has developed bills aiming to judicialize and punish expressions categorized as “fascist.” These bills are characterized by their ambiguity, restrictiveness, opposition to the national constitution, and human rights standards. This would represent many more violations and threats to the full exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

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International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights¹, Based on the above, it can be affirmed that legislation in Venezuela lacks the precision and consistency of legal frameworks adhering to international standards, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The United Nations' "Rabat" Plan² also sets out a series of indicators and considerations for incitement to hatred to be considered illegal, requiring the study and determination of the context, the speaker, the intention, the specific content, the scope of the speech and the likelihood of causing harm. This allows for the protection of the right to freedom of expression and prevents leaving to free interpretation the possibility of attributing or not attributing citizens for their way of thinking and expressing.

This leads to an abundance of information deserts in the country, stemming from little to no coverage of local news, fewer sources of information, and a hostile climate that promotes self-censorship among citizens, media outlets, and affiliated actors. Undoubtedly, this negatively impacts exercising the right to citizen participation, the right to association, peaceful demonstrations, and of course, the right to vote.

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- 1 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." April 30th, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/es/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>
 - 2 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Freedom of Expression," April 30th, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/es/freedom-of-expression>

Limitations or restrictions on freedom of expression affect society's life in a cross-cutting manner, limiting individuals when they seek to participate in public discussions that concern them as citizens. This frustration hinders the possibility of a fully democratic system.

Now, the Venezuelan communication spectrum is not only plagued by limitations, restrictive laws, and impoverished infrastructure, but it also must deal with phenomena associated with the contamination of the limited information accessible. This is expressed through misinformation or the dissemination of false information to confuse, the unintentional dissemination of erroneous information, and the dissemination of malicious information based on the decontextualization of true information. These practices can violate the privacy of their authors or involved parties to cause harm. Such threats to the flow of public information undermine democratic discourse and, in the digital age, they are more, reaching broader audiences, spreading faster, and becoming more plausible, significantly complicating the landscape.

Based on the characterization of the Venezuelan context, all of the above could generate a state of disillusionment and resignation in the face of the difficulties of reporting in Venezuela. However, that is not the purpose of these lines. Once the environment under which citizenship, journalists, activists, political leaders, and media in general operate has been detailed, it is pertinent to note that, even in closed contexts, information and communication technologies, combined with creativity, offer alternatives that can break the media blockade and consolidate a social fabric capable of

creating spaces for reliable and straightforward information. They are based on alternative formats to conventional ones, which have mostly borne the weight of regulations that coerce and stifle freedom of expression. We are talking about using humor on social media to inform.

Talking about humor on social media in 2024 involves addressing a stage beyond transmitting politically based humor content through traditional media. It is important to highlight this because humor did not originate with the emergence of social media, the internet, and cyberspace in general. However, what needs to be emphasized is that social media offers humor the possibility of connecting with a larger audience due to its playful nature, its capacity for dissemination, the ability to adapt its language to various population segments, and the diversity of topics it addresses. These factors foster the emergence of communities of interest around various subjects.

Now, understanding humor as a form of counter-power, we can see its great benefits for denouncing, warning, sanctioning, and even revealing what the political power does or fails to do, as it serves as an element of information, identification, and integration through entertainment. This makes it an ideal communication code to overcome the limitations imposed by the Venezuelan context, allowing for the transmission of ideas that stimulate reflection, promote values, and build social cohesion in favor of civic and democratic causes as it can be expressed in ways that make virality on the web possible.

Similarly, in the essence of humor, we find its distance from the intent to cause harm, as, in the terms proposed for its use, it is aimed at being seen by citizens as a tool to tell their stories, inform about their surrounding realities, and creatively raise their voices to exercise their civil and political rights. Historically, in the criminal realm, there has been the principle of "*animus iocandi*", under which the person who clearly expresses that their message is intended as a joke is exempt from any responsibility, even if it reveals the reality of a situation or prompts reflection in the audience about a particular issue or political phenomenon.

In this way, it is clearly demonstrated that humor can never be conceived as an expression of hatred and is potentially inoffensive when contrasted with the threshold established by the UN's Rabat Plan. During Venezuela's civil and democratic period, this was exemplified by humorous television programs like "*Radio Rochela*" and "*Cheverísimo*" which achieved significant media penetration through incredible performances based on art, imitation, and parody, concealing at the same time a profound political critique.

Once the conception of humor as an ideal communication code in restrictive contexts has been addressed, it is crucial to revisit the idea that our communication spectrum is depressed, and we no longer have the large media corporations we had in the past century. However, we do have social media and the citizen as an active participant in communication, who becomes the protagonist in generating alternative content to receive, disseminate, and send information.

In this context, it is essential to address one of the communication formats that, when combined with humor, will enjoy greater effectiveness on the digital highway: the image. Its strength lies —amid a collapsed telecommunications infrastructure— in its lightweight size, which allows for easy downloading and forwarding to others. The image, when combined with humor, becomes a meme.

In “The Selfish Gene”³ (1976) by Richard Dawkins, the term “meme” is coined for the first time, independent of the Internet, social media, and information and communication technologies as we know them today. A meme is understood as an idea, style, or behavior transmitted from person to person within the same culture. It’s worth asking, then, what memes Dawkins was referring to.

Beyond the image containing a brief comment that we share with our contacts on social media, we can conceive that the meme is a creation simple to generate and easy to replicate and imitate. It’s an expression, behavior, thought, or phrase that, under the complicity resulting from interacting within the same culture, sparks a desire in the recipient to share it with another to the point of making it go viral. We were probably dealing with a meme when instead of discussing with others that a local or national personality or a showbiz figure said something uncomfortable, catchy, or funny, we simply started using it in similar situations that happen to us. Who hasn’t said,

3 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 40th Anniversary Edition. Oxford University Press, 2016. <https://archive.org/details/richard-dawkins-the-selfish-gene/page/384/mode/1up>

“¡sígueme los buenos!” like *El Chapulín Colorado*⁴ to a friend in an adventure? Or even better, when someone jumped over a puddle in Venezuela, who didn’t shout “*Ese hombre sí camina*”? alluding to former President Carlos Andrés Pérez’s presidential campaign jingle.

The meme serves as a channel of expression for thoughts or ideas that can range from everyday occurrences to generalized thoughts about entertainment, leisure, events positioned in public opinion, and, of course, politics. Its effectiveness depends on its simplicity and its ability to resonate with collective identity. This is why its digital aesthetic is not so elaborate, as it must be accessible at all stages of its creation: conception, development, and dissemination.

In turn, when combining memes and politics, we enter the field of polientertainment, which, according to Jörg-Uwe Nieland⁵, is “the intersection of actors, topics, and political processes with the culture of entertainment.” This is not new, as it has been preceded by formats such as talk shows, parodies, and cinematic and television fiction. However, memes give humor a democratizing character because it is accessible to everyone, not only in terms of consumption but also in content production. This allows citizens to express themselves and communicate easier political messages for others to digest.

4 El Chapulín Colorado, translated as The Red Grasshopper, was a popular Mexican television show that parodied superhero movies that aired in the 70s.

5 Jörg-Uwe Nieland, “Politainment.” In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, editado por Wolfgang Donsbach, 973. Blackwell, Londres, Reino Unido, 2008.

This format is capable of mobilizing reflections on public matters, using its humor to communicate situations related to these issues. It sparks interest in these topics in a context of mass communications, where generating distinctive resources to capture the audience's attention and navigate misinformation, erroneous information, malicious information, and censorship is vital. Similarly, in restrictive contexts like Venezuela, memes cloaks dissenting opinions in layers of humor, sarcasm, and irony, thus invoking the previously mentioned principle of *Animus Iocandi*, which allows for expressions without them being interpreted as offensive or defamatory.

This leads us to the conclusion that humor, combined with simplicity, citizen participation in the active process of content creation, and the empowerment of Venezuelans on social media, is a viable option for continuing to communicate, express ideas, and nurture public discourse in favor of democracy and civil and political rights.