

Democratización



Year 3, Issue 12

Humor and politics

Laureano Márquez P.

Education in the Venezuela of 21st century socialism. From equal opportunities to rhetorical egalitarianism

Tulio Ramírez

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant. Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

Luis Carlos Díaz

Thoughts on the anthropological damage in Venezuela

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Mariela Ramírez: "It is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all"

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant¹. Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

Luis Carlos Díaz

The adoption of social networks in Venezuela enjoyed moments of freedom and development that were later frustrated until the further on disconnection, censorship and contraction of telecommunications. What remains today are spaces with certain innovative margins of autonomy and capacity for social pressure, but which live under the constant threat of hegemony and its arbitrariness. Social networks changed us, but, on their own, they do not solve the absence of a democracy in which they would operate better.

In 2021, Venezuela goes through its second year in a global pandemic, confined, economically bankrupt, and squeezing out the maximum capacities of its Internet connections. The world is urgently adapting to telecommuting, tele-education and the

¹ This title references the popular nursery rhyme “*Un elefante se balanceaba*”, which sings the story of an elephant swinging on a spider web and progressively inviting more elephants to join until it gives in.

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

consumption of streaming entertainment. Venezuela, on the other hand, tries to do the same, but with an average bandwidth lower than that of Haiti, Palestine, Rwanda or Somalia². At the same time, we are living a complex humanitarian crisis. With each post on social media we risk our freedom or our lives, but we also follow the latest TikTok trends, we access the world through Netflix, we talk on Twitter and we experience the presidential elections of other countries that actually do have real election processes as if they were our own. And all of this we do unevenly.

Let's explain better how the spider web of Venezuelan networking has gotten to this point and how we keep fighting on. First: the world. Venezuela has experienced a process of digital transformation and technological adoption very similar to that of Latin America; at times it was even at the forefront of the region in terms of connectivity. Until the first decade of the 21st century, there were innovations in the area, competitiveness, large investments, and even some global companies had offices in Venezuela or presented their products for the region here. Then, oil prices rocketed and dollars were subsidized by exchange controls between 2006 and 2012, thus favoring investments in the telecom sector. Those were years in which, in parallel to the massive purchase of telephones –does anyone remember the ostentatious Blackberry?–, Venezuelans also increased their presence on social networks, which were used for organizing protests, electoral coverage, graduate meetings and new waves of digital marketing. Part of that web, of that net, still resists today.

2 Ookla's global index revised in April 2021 places Venezuela in positions 142 and 138 in both bandwidth and mobile speed. <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>. Both appear "improved" due to the new fiber optic installation of private companies. However, CANTV's connections, which the majority of the population depends on, are still the slowest on the continent with 2mbps on average.

Venezuelan darkness

Everything was quite similar to the rest of the social phenomena associated with citizen power that were experienced in social media in other countries. Technologies became widespread and the use of social networks became part of the daily routine of millions of people, because the companies that owned these platforms simplified the way in which users could claim their part of the Internet to create content, build communities, surf a wave of interactions, and be fascinated by the proposals of each digital neighborhood.

The Venezuelan particularities while this was happening marked the following decade³:

1. In 2010, the parliament reformed the Organic Telecommunications Law to give the Internet a “public interest” character, which later implied the interference of the State in connectivity fees, investments in the sector, difficulties in importing equipment. These controls had the same consequences as the rest of the national economy: scarcity, lagging and contraction. Much of the failures of private Internet companies are explained by this political decision: controlling their rates made them operate at a loss and deteriorate. To recover is now more expensive and there is no financing for companies or users.
2. That same parliament amended the “Resorte Law”, which regulated social responsibility in radio and television, in order to also include “digital media” among its

3 The best report on this issue was written by researchers Marianne Díaz Hernández and Raisa Urribarri (2018): *Public policies for Internet access in Venezuela*, https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/CPI_venezuela.pdf

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

competencies for content surveillance. This amendment was nonsense because that law was made to administer a scarce asset, such as the radioelectric spectrum from which frequencies are assigned to radio stations and television channels. The Internet is neither scarce nor meets those criteria, but legislators with malicious intent, ignorant by choice, placed it in that same category. In fact, in 2021 they want to replicate the formula for content on social media to be penalized.

3. Since 2009, Decree 6,649 signed by Chávez established that the Internet was a luxury expense that should be cut. With this, they were undermining connectivity and technological advancements in the main universities in the country.
4. The nationalization of CANTV, later destroyed at the hands of corrupt and ineffective managers, accumulated millions of faults and disconnections in communities of the country that were already connected. These new exclusions are monstrous and have plunged a fair part of the country into darkness, void of information, right after having been in touch with modernity.
5. Between 2010 and 2020, Venezuela became the country in America with the most blocked web pages. It started with pages that discussed the electrical corruption of Derwick, electoral polls and the price of the parallel dollar, and then Conatel (the censoring body) lengthened this process by blocking social networks such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, platforms such as YouTube and even pornographic pages in an absolutely discretionary manner. Even for just minutes, when the National Assembly elected

in 2015 was streaming a broadcast on social media, which are the only channels they have left⁴.

6. To this magnitude of repression we can add the most horrifying part of Chavismo, which is the criminalization of dozens of citizens for content published on social media. Venezuela holds all the continental records in this matter, and it not only includes open trials against citizens, activists and journalists, but also disappearances, beatings, executions, torture, false incriminations, dismissals, exiles, and other practices of State terrorism that constitute crimes against humanity. Some of them have been included in the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission⁵, such as the case of Pedro Jaimes and a dozen Twitter commentators who were imprisoned.

All these elements support the assertion of the report about freedom on the net by Freedom House⁶ that categorizes Venezuela as “Not free”, with a score of 28 points out of 100, right below dictatorships such as Sudan, Iran, Egypt and even Congo. The data are impressive when we review them under international standards, because the Caribbean laxity and the amount of years submersed in this crisis, gradually losing freedoms and public spaces, often make us believe that things are better than they really are. It is a falsehood often repeated that “in Venezuela you can still say what you want”. If we take a second look, we will find that there are people who have been tortured, whose ribs

4 The Venezuelan NGO that measures digital blocks is Venezuela, unfiltered: <http://vesinfiltro.com/>

5 Detailed report, especially case 12 and details about Pedro Jaimes: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11_SP.pdf

6 Freedom of the net report, 2020: <https://freedomhouse.org/es/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2020>

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

have been broken, who have disappeared and who have been threatened to death and persecuted for not saying anything or for stating the obvious. It doesn't matter if it was a tweet⁷, a tiktok that talks about the daughter of an *enchufado*^{8,9}, a condemning WhatsApp status¹⁰ or a post on Facebook¹¹. Power is arbitrary and tries to build silence and impunity. Despite that, the web stays strong.

Contraction disconnects

Another worrying element of connectivity in Venezuela is access capacity. We are short of recent statistics because the market is so depressed that there is neither incentive nor budget to do in-depth studies to see the shifts. What data published in 2020 by Conatel itself shows is that the country has fewer people connected to the Internet than there were a few years ago. The most egregious figure is the loss of active cell phones. Venezuela went from having more than 30 million phones to less than 14 million active phones in about 4 years. The company that lost the most users was Movilnet, another nationalized company together with CANTV. Not everything is the effect of the 5 million Venezuelans who have fled the country, but also of the poverty which the

7 Digital Rights: Jailed for tweeting <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/12273/encarcelado-por-tuitear/>

8 An *enchufado* is someone who has earned certain goods or a certain position by means of pulling strings with friends in high places and who is likely undeserving.

9 José Pérez, the tiktokar arrested for criticizing Omar Enrique's daughter. <https://eldiario.com/2021/03/14/omar-enrique-criticas-hika-tiktokar-detenido/>

10 DGCIMarrestedagynecologistinLaraforcriticizingaMaduroofficialonWhatsApp. <https://talcualdigital.com/dgcim-arresto-a-ginecologo-en-lara-por-criticar-en-whatsapp-a-un-funcionario-de-maduro/>

11 What we know about the arrest of writers Milagros Mata Gil and Juan Muñoz. <https://efectocuyo.com/la-humanidad/lo-que-se-sabe-sobre-la-detencion-de-los-escritores-milagros-mata-y-juan-munoz/>

majority of the population was forced into. Poor wages made the cost of replacing technologies, buying gadgets and keeping them up to date unaffordable for most families. Technology grew old, replacing a stolen or damaged phone became impossible to afford and the amount of equipments in middle and lower-class homes –9 out of 10 in the country– decreased.

That is why it is roughly calculated that between 14 and 15 million people have Internet, so users of social media could reach around 10 to 12 million people within the country, to which the diaspora that remains connected and active should be added for consideration.

The economic contraction generated new disconnections and today some companies are trying to bring Venezuelan society up to date, but this is only a bubble phenomenon: the Internet *bodega*¹². Since 2019, fiber optic connections, wireless internet and some satellite service providers have been obtained in Venezuela (in border states there are several from Colombia and Brazil), but their installation capacity depends on those who can pay their costs, which range from \$400 to \$1,500 US dollars to install plus a monthly rate from \$40 to \$250. Again, only a few can afford such a service.

A positive element in the chaos is that since 2019 customs have been opened, freeing imports from tax charges, so the cell phone market was nurtured again. This has allowed the supply and availability of equipment to increase, especially those of

12 During the past years, a new form of bodega (*bodegón*, in Spanish) has materialized in Venezuela as a space to sell imported goods which had not been seen in the country for years due to harsh restrictions and little purchasing power, but which only very few can afford. Today, they seem to swarm the streets, creating an illusion of well-being and economic power.

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

the lower mid-range (between \$90 and \$200) that allow users to connect to the Internet and to use various applications. Those who receive sufficient remittances or who have income in dollars that allow them to save and buy equipment have been able to take better advantage of these shipments, although the fact that there are no credit purchases makes it difficult for more families to access these services. However, even with these elephants, the web is still strong.

Infocitizenship is power

The spider web that constitutes our relationships woven by networking has experienced modernity and the closure of democratic spaces, thus adapting to our environment. On the one hand, these networks have accompanied us in the process of falling into the pit (and enlightening ourselves in it), but on the other hand, they are already incorporated into our logic, which is why we are not North Korea or Cuba, which are barely discovering the Internet and its possibilities. For Venezuelans, social networks are used for the same entertainment, education and information purposes that apply in many countries, but with two particular components: they serve as proof of life in an environment that is dangerous, agonizing and in which it is important to keep our close contacts up to date. They also serve to meet the information needs of the hyper-informed and hyper-politicized who know that they will not get much material from the null national television, the extinct press and limited radio. In this sense, the Internet is not just another element in the media ecosystem that citizens consume, but actually the only space with margins of freedom, independence and flexibility that people have at hand, which is what makes it so terrible that half of the country is disconnected.

Networks such as Twitter, Instagram and the private but viral archipelagos of WhatsApp groups allow the motorization of opinions, interpretations and campaigns that directly reject the dictatorship and its propaganda apparatus. Its deployment has allowed “infocitizens” to put their two superpowers to the test: changing the climate of public opinion and generating mobilizations, even without other media to echo it.

This phenomenon continues to be persecuted and penalized, but it finds more creative ways to outwit power. In essence, social networks depend on the levels of trust that their participants build and the attention they pay to each other. Trust and attention are the currencies of exchange on the Internet and that is why people work to strengthen their communities, generate content and nurture interactions that give spirit of body to those who share. When that happens, and when there is also an absence of other public spaces, the result is vital relationships and powerful causes.

Whether it is meant to diffuse art, social causes, complaints, indignation or hope, social networks are vehicles for modern citizen demonstrations. It is absolutely understandable that in parallel there is a critical corpus on “the addiction of social media”¹³, the “surveillance capitalism”¹⁴ and the machinery of control that can be hidden behind every network in the hands of large emporiums or governments¹⁵ as well as on the risks of digital security, organized crime and other phenomena. But in an environment of traditional media, where the silence of censorship

13 *The Social Dilemma* - Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/co/title/81254224>

14 *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, by Shoshana Zuboff. <https://nuso.org/articulo/capitalismo-de-vigilancia/>

15 *Internet, politics and the politics of the internet* debate. <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/articulos/internet-la-politica-y-la-politica-del-debate-sobre-internet/>

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

and the noise of government propaganda apparatus abound, these networks appear as non-places that convene, build and strengthen citizen ties. It is what remains for people who live in undemocratic societies and without an abundance of informational and cultural offerings.

We cannot think of a modern citizenship without incorporating this second layer of skin that is hyperconnectivity. The Internet allows subjects to be delocalized, which makes them part of groups gathered on the basis of interests, so their deliberation and decision-making processes are accelerated and improved. Also, the Internet, in its 2.0 stage, which has been in existence for more than 15 years, allows millions of people to create content and publish it without knowing having any type of computer science knowledge or having to cover the infrastructure or design costs involved in owning web pages. What's more, a new advantage is that infocitizens who feed their online profiles actually build versions of themselves in which their content remains public, generating interactions, search engine optimization, all of which fuels an asynchronous conversation between individuals. It is fascinating and at the same time evolutionary: humanity incorporates these changes and redesigns the development of the knowledge society.

All these phenomena open a new compass for human rights, such as freedom of expression, association, privacy and access to information, because it expands them. Even in countries without the rule of law and that tend towards totalitarianism, the very existence of the Internet serves as a container for some abuses of power because it makes them visible, vulnerable, challenges them, and holds repressors accountable. That is why the "Not free" countries apply different strategies against social networks, not just brutal censorship. Sometimes they use propaganda, the

fake news industry, confusion, astroturfing¹⁶ (faking spontaneous citizen movements that are actually programmed and coordinated to impose issues on the agenda), selective blockades or exemplary punishments against cyberactivists to inhibit the rest. In fact, where these regimes that make sophisticated attacks against the Internet affect the most is precisely when they pervert trust in the digital environment, when they infiltrate citizen conversations to radicalize them or when they make people feel guilty because they accuse them of “hate crimes” by manipulating what that actually means.

Given this scenario, striving for connectivity in Venezuela and a safe and free Internet for people actually requires addressing such basic problems as replacing old copper pairs with fiber optics and also increasing the quality of the information available and the links between trustworthy individuals, something that simply threatens a government that lies on a daily basis.

Despite this, there are still strategies for resisting. Each difficulty is met by thousands or millions of people looking for more creative and challenging answers to keep in touch with others, to meet their informational needs and move on. Website locks end up being useless when people learn to change their DNS¹⁷ or use a VPN¹⁸ to surf the web. Social media have served to bring important issues to the public discussion agenda, as well as to get the innocent out of jail in the face of the State’s arbitrariness. However, one of the main challenges in Venezuela so we can continue resisting and strengthening the connected society has to do with recovering the ability to massively

¹⁶ *Fake news hunters: What is astroturfing.* https://twitter.com/cazamosfake_news/status/1380924127062687748

¹⁷ *How to change DNS.* <https://vesinfiltro.com/bloqueos/dns/>

¹⁸ *Bypass internet locks.* <http://vesinfiltro.com/bloqueos/>

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant.
Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

impact citizens, something that communicational hegemony has mutilated in many ways, as well as with acting as a coordinated swarm, in which everyone respects their specificities, talents and competences, but where everyone can work towards the same goal. Social networks alone cannot do that. They are simply private platforms that support the publication of content and live by inserting advertising. The real value lies in the users, their interactions, and the way they cultivate their relationships. What demonstrates the maturity of audiences, despite all the blows they receive from power, is that the process of learning can be collective, accelerated, decentralized, and can generate cognitive capital that only pushes forward. This means that people who know how to share a file or create a group or publish content will do so on WhatsApp or Signal, if they find out that it is more secure. They will do it on networks or mailing lists if they need more privacy. They will be active on Twitter or TikTok once they learn what's new in the format. That capital that resides in people who learn more each day is the true value of social media, because people are friends and will continue to make friends, contacts, accomplices and allies in any new, public or clandestine network that arises tomorrow. This is where the true powers of the people are, because they truly connect and make the net so strong that even in the midst of a power blackout, or a democratic void, it remains and continues to work. And the rest is just having fun.

Conclusion

We dedicate our twelfth issue to reflecting on five areas of culture in Venezuela: humor, education, art, anthropology and social media. As we expressed before, it has been an approximation with which we do not pretend to reach a conclusive analysis. It is the photograph of a moment that we hope will transcend, because it describes the impetus and perseverance of those who, from different spaces, contribute to the liberation of our country.

In the five articles included in this issue, we find complex diagnoses, deep reflections and responsible hope, one that is based on two pillars: first, in the full awareness of those who understand that the goal of their efforts is worthwhile in itself and, second, sustained work that does not allow itself to be defeated by the ups and downs of the conjunctures and advances firmly overcoming the immediate culture —what José Ignacio Cabrujas called the *culture of operations* and today we could update it as a *culture of missions*— which at times has conspired against Venezuelan noblest ventures.

After editing this issue, some questions arise and open up new horizons for study and reflection. When reading the authors, we wonder how this authoritarian, complex and painful episode will affect —in Ortegian terms— the *psyche* of our country; how it will influence our "original impetus"; how our humor, our affections, our traditions will be marked; how will our goodness or eternal disposition to enjoy ourselves be transformed, or not.

Exploring the depth of our wounds and the way in which they have affected our Venezuelan soul is not a mere intellectual fact.

It is an exercise that can help to understand the difficulties of the present moment and to warn of future challenges. From now on, understanding “now” as a constant present, we can acknowledge that this reality that we are living –or surviving– will condition our culture and our political dynamics.

Recently, we have noticed signs that worry us, but we will not refer to all of them. We will only stop at one in particular. We have seen that uncertainty, fatigue and terror have led us to go from an “every man for himself” situation to a “dog-eat-dog” situation. A wave of intolerance among those of us who pursue the same goals of freedom is flooding the limited deliberative space that remains and seriously limiting encounters between people who have the right to think differently. As is characteristic of the 21st century, this trend is mainly manifested in social media, especially on Twitter, where we see forceful and irrevocable judgments of 280 characters and responses loaded with contempt for the opinion of others. Paradoxically, we also frequently see that those who subscribe to this dynamic then demand that political actors and society be willing to dialogue and conciliate. It is a contradiction that we are called to overcome.

We think –and propose– that a possible antidote to cure this tendency is personal encounter. Discovering the other, banishing stereotypes, transcending digital means, boasting good intentions, saying things by looking at each other, preparing arguments to better explain oneself, working to convince... it is an arduous and exhausting task. We believe that at this time it is necessary to rebuild the human bridges that have been blown up by the dictatorship's violence. And to do so, mere will is not enough, and can actually be reduced to dangerous voluntarism if divorced from the reality of things. It is a difficult task that requires political pedagogy and personal virtue. Perhaps going

back to what our democracy was can help us find our own paths. We are not orphans, and recognizing where we come from can shed some light on the future ahead of us.

The reality we are experiencing confirms the need to delve into the wounds that these decades of revolution have left in our soul as a people and to study how they have affected our culture and our political dynamics. This edition is a first approximation. It is up to us to find space and time to advance in that purpose.

Caracas, April 19, 2021

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Editor