

The digital battle in Venezuela: Social networks as allies against censorship

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The Venezuelan opposition is gearing up in 2024 for one of the most complex and decisive elections in recent years. Amidst an ecosystem stacked against them, the challenges they face are enormous. Besides navigating the obstacles imposed by the Supreme Court of Justice, such as the disqualification of Maria Corina Machado's candidacy and being at the mercy of decisions regarding election dates and conditions, they must also confront the regime of Maduro's disproportionate media apparatus. It's evident that they have strategized to nullify dissent and any critical voices that could influence, lead, and organize the will for change among Venezuelan citizens. Instead, Chavismo pursues, censors, and imposes its propaganda narratives and disinformation aimed at a common goal: lying to stay in power.

The communicational dominance of Chavismo has been expanding over the years, permeating all media and information spaces. It has been highly successful in imposing narratives that divert attention from the real problems Venezuelans face or distort the opposition, whether it is by silencing dissent or attacking it with misinformation.

The Opposition Primary, held on October 22, 2023, is another clear example of what the communicational apparatus of the Venezuelan regime is capable of, promoting its propaganda in traditional media under its control, massively amplified on social networks. Censorship, intimidation, and self-censorship were the main weapons to silence the media, while misinformation and the imposition of narratives attempted to infiltrate social networks in order to disrupt the conversation around the process. However, the high participation in the opposition primary and the event's positioning on social media were a demonstration of the success of the elections and a reminder for the opposition that citizens want political change and can engage in it as long as they see a clear direction from a coherent leadership aligned with a common goal.

The opposition absent in traditional media

The Opposition Primary took place in a scenario where the absence of traditional media was not only noticeable but also enforced. The Venezuelan NGO *Espacio Público* documented¹ one day before the primary elections, informal calls and communications from regional and national authorities of the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) to radio and television station executives and owners. Their messages aimed to remind these executives of their 'non-obligation' to cover the event because, according to them, it was not 'official' as it did not have the endorsement of the National Electoral Council (CNE). This practice is not new. Censorship of Venezuelan media and the broadcasting of campaigns or messages from opposition

1 "Conatel censura contenidos y cobertura en elecciones primarias de la oposición venezolana". *Espacio Público*, October 21st, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://espaciopublico.org/conatel-censura-contenidos-y-cobertura-en-elecciones-primarias-de-la-oposicion-venezolana/>

leaders has been happening for a long time, albeit with increasing intensity.

In 2015, amid the campaign for parliamentary elections, in which the opposition ultimately emerged victorious, many media outlets were already censored. The construction of a communicational hegemony by the Chavista government to silence independent media and opposition voices was underway. It had begun years earlier with the non-renewal of the concession to the television channel RCTV, with the purchase of television channels and national-level print media by businessmen aligned with Chavismo interests in 2013, and with the escalation of radio station closures across the country since 2003.

For the parliamentary elections in 2015, I remember that the Chavismo regime prohibited the country's telephone companies from sending mass text messages from opposition campaign commands, further reducing the opposition's ability to mobilize and reach a wider audience and tilting the balance more in favor of the regime. Despite this entire ecosystem, the opposition achieved an electoral victory that set a precedent and serves as an example of the power of organized citizens, who despite clear censorship, intimidation, and electoral disadvantage, can express their will for change through their vote.

What happened in 2015 can be extrapolated to what was experienced last October in the opposition primary election. Despite the event's minimal exposure in traditional media, the reported high participation in the primary process once again showed how civil society can come together at the ballot box and in political discourse, despite significant limitations on freedom of expression.

In 2023, the restriction on access to information was greater than what was experienced in 2015, primarily in traditional media. The absence of opposition spokespeople in these outlets was total after the proclamation and recognition in 2019 of Juan Guaidó as interim president following the rejection of the results of the 2018 presidential elections. Censorship was imposed, and the closure of radio stations across the country became Conatel's flagship method to suppress freedom of expression and maintain an informational blackout in much of the national territory.

The *Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela* (IPYS Venezuela) in its study "*Atlas del silencio*"², reported that by 2022 more than 7 million (21% of the population) would live in news deserts, which are areas where access to local information is insufficient.

According to the project's results, radio was mentioned as the medium that produces daily local information with the greatest presence, being registered in 308 localities, which represents 84.38% of the 365 evaluated areas. It is no coincidence, therefore, that state censorship has focused on radios, leading to the massive closure of stations in all regions of the country.

In a report about the situation of the right to freedom of expression and information in Venezuela³ published by *Espacio Público* in 2022, the closure of at least 285 radio stations nationwide since 2003 is documented, which is equivalent to 71% of the total number of media outlets closed during that period.

2 Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela. Estudio "*Atlas del silencio*". Retrieved from <https://ipysvenezuela.org/atlas-del-silencio/>

3 Espacio Público, *Informe 2022: Situación del derecho a la libertad de expresión e información en Venezuela*. (2023). Retrieved from <https://espaciopublico.org/informe-2022-situacion-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-e-informacion-en-venezuela/>

Digital media outlets are not immune to authoritarian attacks either. The new community of independent media outlets that have found refuge on the internet amidst the paper crisis and censorship, which wiped out most of the print press in Venezuela, are also affected by Conatel's decisions. The regulatory body keeps media outlet websites and organizations that provide information about the structural crisis the country is facing blocked in Venezuela in an attempt by the regime to hide this information.

The blocking of websites and digital harassment of citizens, political actors, and social leaders on social media clearly violates digital rights, which the United Nations considers to be equivalent to fundamental human rights⁴. In this way, the Chavista government adds more violations to the list of human and constitutional rights of Venezuelans.

However, in the face of an information blackout, social media is emerging as one of the communication channels through which censorship can be partially circumvented. This censorship aims to limit people's ability to freely participate in public affairs, often for political purposes divergent from the partisan interests of the Maduro regime.

Calling fraud: The strategy to sabotage the primaries

Despite social media being the space where civil society, leaders, and opposition political parties typically operate more freely, this does not imply that the Chavista government's communication apparatus does not permeate and promote or amplify disinformation campaigns within these platforms.

4 United Nations Organization, *Digital Human Rights*, (2018). Retrieved from de <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/es/content/digital-human-rights>

In the case of the opposition primaries on Sunday, October 22, 2023, both misinformation and conversation surrounding this election began long before. A monitoring conducted by the organization I lead (ProBox) recorded that the first hashtag on X (former Twitter) about the topic was *#LaPrimariaVa*, promoted by the National Primary Commission on February 15, the day of the official presentation of the process. From there, the digital troops of chavismo took on the task of generating a large amount of misinformation, hoaxes, and attacks on the process and its candidates, which intensified until days after the election.

However, since July 2023, the radical government narrative on social media about the primaries revolved around the slogan *#NoTeVistasQueNoVas*, mainly promoted by Diosdado Cabello on his show *Con el Mazo Dando*. But with the successful execution of the process, the message shifted to labeling the event as fraudulent, not only to discredit the results but also to directly attack the National Primary Commission.

With the momentum of the hashtag *#MegaFraude*, the government attempted to shape a new narrative around the digital conversation about the primaries. What started as an online smear campaign ultimately materialized on October 25th with the opening of a criminal investigation against the directors of the National Primary Commission.

The disinformation surrounding the primaries can be traced back to July 2023, with at least 10 monthly publications on the subject, and there is a clear pattern of how this narrative circulated. Its initial point originated from the television program *Con el Mazo Dando*, hosted by Diosdado Cabello and broadcasted by the state-owned *Venezolana de Televisión*. From this platform, the radical government directed the digital battle over the opposition

elections, promoting the first electoral trend against them on June 14th with the hashtag *#NiPorLasBuenasNiPorLasMalas*.

Since then, ProBox managed to register seven more trends promoted by Cabello on the subject during eight programs broadcast between June 14th and October 25th. Using the State channel, *Venezolana de Televisión*, the Vice President of *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) dedicated the daily program to talk about the country's elections, especially about the opposition primaries on October 22nd, as well as the disqualification of some candidates. In doing so, he implied that even if the opposition carried out its internal elections, if the winner were to be "disqualified," they could not participate in the presidential elections scheduled for 2024. This makes Cabello and his program one of the protagonists of the disinformation strategy surrounding the primary process.

The use of hashtags from *Con el Mazo Dando* to promote hateful and defamatory narratives against the Venezuelan opposition is a practice that goes back many years⁵. On July 28, 2021, the social network X (Twitter at the time) suspended the official account of this program⁶ for its repeated violations of the platform's policies such as posting misinformation, discriminatory messages and hateful narratives. However, a few months after

5 C-Informa. *#CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: El Mazo y las redes anónimas se unen para desinformar*. Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-el-mazo-y-las-redes-anonimas-se-unen-para-desinformar>

6 Observatorio Digital ProBox. *¿Por qué Twitter suspende la cuenta del programa Con el Mazo Dando?* (2021). Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/claves-por-que-twitter-suspende-la-cuenta-del-programa-con-el-mazo-dando>

Elon Musk bought Twitter, the @ConElMazoDando account was reinstated; just in time to act against the opposition primaries.

The insistence on attacking the candidates and the elections did not remain only on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). A study⁷ by the Coalition against Disinformation (C-Infoma) managed to identify that “*no te vistas que no vas*” (one of the most repeated phrases by Cabello) was used in posts on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

Additionally, ProBox also identified that the attacks on opposition primary candidates varied depending on their gender. Female candidates faced a greater number of false information and attacks linked to their gender compared to male candidates. At least 71.4% of online gender-based attacks and disinformation were directed towards female candidates⁸.

The citizenry made itself heard on social media

Despite the disinformation strategy by Chavismo to taint the conversation about the primaries with falsehoods and

7 ProBox conducted a search for trends promoted on Con el Mazo Dando and keywords associated with the process (#PrimariasEsFraudeYDesastre, #PrimariasNoHay, #NoVasNiQueTeVistas, #AsiChillesOPataleesNoVas, Primarias oposición fraude, inhabilitados no van, inhabilitadas moralmente, Maricori no va) using a social listening tool -to monitor social media- to study this conversation in detail between October 2 and November 3, 2023. The study yielded a sample of at least 1,175 mentions, highlighting October 19 (with 127 mentions), October 25 (120 mentions), and November 1 (108 mentions) as the days with the highest use of these words and hashtags..

8 C-Infoma, #CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: desinformación y ataques en línea con tinte de género, (2024). Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-desinformacion-y-ataques-en-linea-con-tinte-de-genero>

misinformation, independent media, citizens, and political actors managed to keep #Primarias2023 trending for three consecutive days as a hashtag used for communication among political parties, activists, journalists, political leaders, and citizens inside and outside the country.

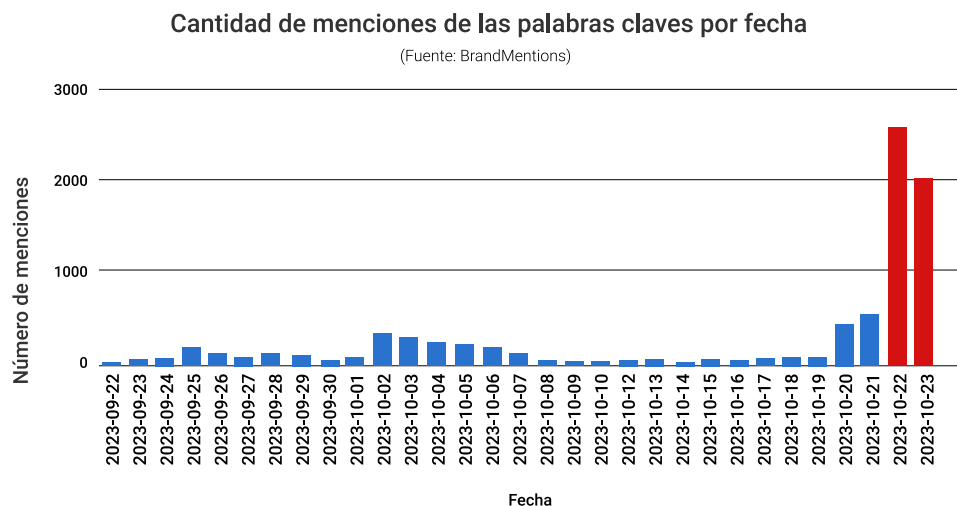
#Primarias2023 is the largest trend that ProBox has recorded since August 23, 2023, in Venezuela. This hashtag generated nearly 8 times more messages than the average recorded in trends promoted by the Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPC) between October 1 and 23 (29 thousand tweets).

Every day, trends are shared from the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIPPCI) account that government entities and Chavista troops replicate to artificially position narratives aligned with the State. This strategy has worked for the Maduro regime to maintain digital communication hegemony⁹ in spaces like X but, on the weekend of October 22, 2023, this dynamic was completely disrupted with the positioning of #Primarias2023.

The trend about the opposition primaries registered by ProBox was not only successful during the day of the elections but started emerging a day prior and remained among the top hashtags until a day after the elections. Another significant aspect regarding this trend is that out of the 230 thousand tweets recorded in this conversation, the majority (92.3%) were generated by real users¹⁰.

9 Observatorio Digital ProBox. *Informe Anual 2022*. Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/la-protesta-ciudadana-vs-la-ficcion-estatal-en-linea>

10 When exploring the conversation about the Primaries using a social listening tool using keywords such as “#Primarias2023”, “plataforma unitaria”, “elecciones primarias Venezuela”, “Comisión Nacional de Primarias”, “primarias oposición Venezuela”, “#ElecciónPrimaria”, and “#HoyVotoYDecido”, the ProBox Digital



What happened in the Opposition Primaries should be taken as an example of what can happen amidst what will be the most important elections in the country in recent years. The decision of the political leadership to carry out a democratic process for the selection of the candidate who will confront the regime in the presidential elections, the primaries being held in all states of the country and in 80 cities abroad, with the participation of more than 2.3 million Venezuelans; and the active participation of citizens in positioning the electoral conversation on social media amidst a sea of disinformation and Chavista propaganda, is a demonstration of how society and political actors can break into different spaces that authoritarian regimes seek to control but where, despite all obstacles, the democratic spirit remains alive.

Social media is a vital space for building public opinion and freedom of expression, especially in authoritarian contexts,

Observatory obtained a sample of 9,004 mentions, generating content analysis between September 22nd and October 23rd. The highest activity was recorded on October 22nd and 23rd, primarily focusing on October 22nd with 2,583 mentions.

making them a fundamental tool for reclaiming civic space. Their proper and coordinated use is essential to turn them into spaces where information and opinions flow freely, unlike in other media censored by the government's institutional apparatus. Thus, platforms such as X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok become a new tool for advocacy and activism.

It is essential for citizens and various groups to get involved by activating and strengthening digital protest as a way to raise the flag in favor of democracy and the human rights that come intrinsically with it.