



VENEZUELA

A Roadmap to Protect Independent Journalism in Closed Regimes

Introduction

This policy brief aims to outline a roadmap for safeguarding independent journalism in closed civic spaces, drawing on lessons from Venezuela's post-electoral context. In Venezuela, the regime has shut down media outlets and enforced an information blockade as part of a decades-long process of democratic erosion, now at its most repressive stage. Despite these challenges, independent journalists have adopted bold strategies to persevere, leveraging digital platforms to reach audiences and reshape the country's information ecosystem.

Independent media and journalists must tailor their strategies to the unique realities of their environment to navigate the challenges of operating in restricted civic spaces. Adapting to these conditions becomes even riskier during periods of heightened repression, demanding ongoing vigilance to monitor censorship trends and repressive patterns in each country.

The recommendations in this document address key gaps and opportunities, focusing on sustaining information flows and supporting the long-term viability of independent journalism in closed civic spaces.

These also explore strategies to counter censorship in contexts like Russia and Iran, offering insights that may apply elsewhere. These include the use of artificial intelligence tools to track propaganda dissemination, developing robust digital archives to preserve historical records, and implementing tools to bypass mechanisms to avoid highly sophisticated blockades. Additionally, the role of the diaspora and exiled journalists is examined, alongside the importance of building stronger partnerships with global tech companies.

Context in Venezuela

Venezuela is one of the most restricted countries when it comes to freedom of speech. The authoritarian regime has taken control over democratic institutions and is responsible for widespread violations of human rights.

Democratic erosion has led Venezuela to the bottom of the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index,^{®1} where it ranks it as the country with the greatest restrictions on free speech in the region and one of the most restrictive globally.² Under Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian regime, dissent is crushed through mass imprisonment. Leading opposition figures face persecution and are arbitrarily banned from running for office. Legitimate protests are violently shutdown through the instrumentalization of security forces and pro-regime civilian armed groups. Independent media and journalists face various forms of persecution and censorship, including arbitrary detention.³

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Over the past two decades, more than 400 independent media outlets have been shut down in Venezuela. Following the closure of the television channel Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV)⁴ in 2007, between 2008 and 2023, at least 405 media outlets, including newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels, ceased operations.⁵ This crackdown intensified under Nicolás Maduro, particularly after the 2024 elections.

In 2022 alone, authorities shut down at least 80 radio stations – the highest number in two decades.⁶ Major national print media have either disappeared or been taken over by the government. At the regional level, only a quarter of newspapers from 11 years ago remain.⁷ Major television networks have been taken over or co-opted by the regime, while others resort to self-censorship to avoid closure. Access to traditional independent media has vanished in much of the country. Studies show that at least 13 of the 24 states lack access to traditional media outlets that challenge the government's narrative.⁸ More than 7 million people (about 21% of the population) live in "news deserts," with no access to quality local journalism.⁹

As traditional media has faced massive closures, independent media in Venezuela moved to the digital space and so has the repressive and propaganda machinery. The expansion of digital media has reshaped the country's information landscape, becoming the main source of news for Venezuelans.¹⁰ Studies by civil society organizations reveal that most of the population, aware of censorship in traditional outlets, now rely on¹¹ social networks, news websites, and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, abandoning their previous preference for television, radio, and print media.¹²

The regime has also extended its repressive practices to the digital space. By 2023, at least 46 new websites were selectively blocked,¹³ along with periodic shutdowns of social networks and messaging apps. At the same time, the regime has also shifted its propaganda effort to the digital space,¹⁴ and has used seemingly independent or anonymous social media accounts to spread false or misleading information.¹⁵

Independent media and journalists face increasing cyberattacks, including phishing, malware, doxing –often occurring shortly after publishing politically sensitive content.¹⁶ Frequent power outages across the country,¹⁷ further limit internet access and restrict the availability of digital content.

Following the presidential elections on July 28, 2024, and widespread allegations of fraud, the Venezuelan regime has intensified censorship and escalated its repression against journalists and media outlets. In this electoral and post-electoral context, opponents and critics – including journalists and press workers –¹⁸ face heightened attacks. These include smear campaigns, acts of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detentions, illegal searches, temporary forced disappearances, and criminal prosecutions for severe charges such as terrorism.¹⁹

During post-electoral protests, digital censorship worsened.²⁰ The regime blocked access to media outlets, including international platforms like The Wall Street Journal, minutes after publishing an interview with opposition leader María Corina Machado. Social network X (formerly Twitter)²¹ and encrypted messaging services like Signal²² were temporarily blocked nationwide. These actions were unprecedented in their scope, simultaneity, and duration. The regime also introduced new repressive tactics. A government-backed app was updated to allow its users to identify and report

on dissidents,²³ while law enforcement began physically searching cell phones in the streets to target individuals supporting the opposition.²⁴

Independent media in Venezuela operates under intense pressure and severe restrictions. For years, the government has employed various tactics to stifle their operations, including imposing exorbitant administrative fines on traditional media outlets,²⁵ and restricting access to print newspaper since 2013, which forced many newspapers out of circulation.²⁶ Today independent digital media faces enormous challenges in sustaining its operations. Generating revenue is increasingly difficult due to the economic crisis

impacting the private sector and the growing fear of reprisals from the regime among local companies. This operational siege is compounded by a restrictive legal framework targeting freedom of association. The so-called “Anti-NGO Act,” published on December 3, 2024,²⁷ threatens to significantly harm civil society organizations and independent media.²⁸

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Independent Journalism in Closed Civic Spaces

Independent media and journalists have adopted different strategies to overcome the significant challenges of practicing journalism in closed spaces such as those described earlier. These efforts become especially crucial in particular moments, as demonstrated in the context of Venezuela's presidential elections on July 28, 2024. The period leading up to election day saw an intense information blockade, followed by heightened repression during the post-electoral protests.

The adaptability of independent media and journalists in closed civic spaces relies on a continuous evaluation of the context and the evolving patterns of repression in each country. This process must be ongoing and integrative, aiming to identify mechanisms employed on the ground, assess their effectiveness, and refine strategies based on lessons learned and changing circumstances.

In environments where censorship and repression dominate, citizen reporting and the decentralization of information through social networks and digital media have become vital. The development of tools to filter and direct the information generated by social media users, along with regular monitoring using clear methodologies, has helped safeguard information integrity and enhance the effectiveness of these platforms.

In closed contexts, citizen reporting and social media are indispensable.

A common trend in countries with closed spaces is the operational segregation of independent media and journalists. As the risk of raids on media headquarters and equipment confiscation grows, compartmentalizing operations have become essential. This strategy helps distribute the risk, allowing journalists to continue their work even if one location is compromised.

Coalition building is also prevalent in these contexts, allowing independent media to pool resources to counter rising censorship, enhance information flow, generate information hubs, and bolster the credibility of the content being shared.

Another common practice in similar contexts is the establishment of assistance networks to provide swift responses, especially in cases of journalists and press worker detentions. These networks have facilitated the organization of reporting campaigns and the mobilization of lawyers and civil society organizations to offer legal support and assist detainees' families. Connecting with NGOs and international human rights organizations has also helped amplify reporting and increase pressure on authorities.

A new tool that has proven effective in reducing the risks of arrest and prosecution for journalists in closed spaces is the use of artificial intelligence to disseminate information. Additionally, coordinating public campaigns helps build trust with audiences and facilitates the widespread distribution of messages.

Private dissemination channels, such as instant messaging, are valuable tools for circulating information in closed spaces. They are used by media, civil society organizations, and family or community groups to share real-time updates and facilitate direct interaction.

Other frequently used tools in closed spaces include the creation of downloadable, offline-accessible content, and the use of secure, encrypted connection technologies like virtual private networks (VPNs). As new technologies emerge and censorship mechanisms evolve, these tools must be regularly updated and adapted.

ROADMAP FOR PROTECTING INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN CLOSED REGIMES

To safeguard independent journalism in environments where civic space is shrinking, it is essential to prioritize the following measures:

1 Strengthen the decentralization of information

Empowering communities to generate, share, and disseminate quality information is crucial for documenting local realities. In restricted environments, journalists should prioritize strengthening tools to channel user-generated content on social networks. This includes implementing regular monitoring with clear methodologies to filter and organize reliable sources.

2 Develop strategies to improve the management of segregated or remote work

Operational segregation and remote work in restricted environments present complex challenges. Media outlets and journalists, including those in exile, must continuously improve real-time coordination to ensure efficient workflows and the production of high quality and timely content. Key priorities include ensuring secure internet access, safeguarding internal communications, providing essential technological tools and equipment for team members, and fostering strong group dynamics.

3 Systematize early warnings and action plans

Independent media must strengthen their ability to detect early warnings and develop action plans ahead of critical moments. This allows for more effective coverage and risk mitigation during periods of heightened repression. Key actions include tracking political narratives and rhetoric, monitoring security force activity, analyzing political and social indicators, and maintaining strong communication with trusted experts and media leaders. Given the daily demands of journalism, the focus on specific sources, and the limited geographic reach, leaders within independent outlets should take a broader view to develop context-specific early warning and action plans.

4 Strengthen media alliances and coalitions

In restricted environments, building strong media alliances is vital to ensure coordinated responses during critical moments. Long-term partnerships should be evaluated for sustainability, considering logistics and coordination challenges, shifting conditions, and the risks of unclear attribution. Creating alliances with international media and coordinating with exiled journalists are also essential for expanding reach and ensuring the dissemination of reliable information.

5 Maintain local and international support networks

In the face of repression and arrests of journalists and press workers, sustaining robust local and international assistance networks is a priority. These networks should support efforts to document and expose acts of aggression and detentions, provide legal aid to victims, and offer support to their families. Strengthening ties with international human rights organizations, regional bodies, and UN agencies is essential to amplify claims, enabling rapid protective measures, and issuing international alerts. Special emphasis should be placed on integrating and enhancing psychological support within these assistance networks, particularly for journalists and press workers who are direct victims of threats, violence, aggression, and arrests, or who cover crisis situations and human rights violations.

6 Evaluate the adoption of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools

Assess the potential benefits to adopt AI tools already used by media and civil society organizations in various countries to analyze social media content, identify trends, and detect threats to information integrity. For example, Vox Ukraine employs AI tools to identify Russian propaganda related to the war in Ukraine;²⁹ Debunk.eu³⁰ uses AI to detect fake news across Europe; and the FactStream app³¹ has been utilized for real-time fact-checking during political debates in the United States. Additionally, evaluate the impact, risks, and lessons learned from AI-created avatars that counter censorship and mitigate the risks of repression. Monitor how authoritarian regimes use AI to manipulate information and spread propaganda, in order to anticipate responses and mitigate potential effects.³²

7

Diversify and expand the use of encrypted messaging and private broadcast channels

While instant messaging apps are being successfully used to maintain information flows in closed spaces, the heavy reliance on a single application reduces the ability to respond when authorities attempt to block it. To mitigate this, it is essential to explore multiple messaging platforms and continuously develop alternative private dissemination channels that are equally effective.

8

Expand the creation of downloadable and accessible offline content

Increase the availability of content that can be quickly downloaded and consumed offline. Replicate and promote the use of apps that allow access without a VPN, review condensed content from independent media, and save information for offline reading.

9

Promote widespread training on the use of VPN technologies

Frequent blocking of digital platforms and social networks, especially during crises in restricted environments, creates uncertainty about how to bypass censorship. While VPN technology is commonly used by media, journalists, activists, and informed segments of the population, training should be broadly accessible. This will ensure that local communities and the general public acquire basic skills for downloading VPN's, understanding available options, and using them regularly—well before repressive peaks occur, where even downloading these applications might be blocked. Additionally, consider the advanced technologies developed by other repressive regimes, such as Iran and Russia,³³ to block VPN access, and explore alternatives developed to bypass censorship in those countries, which could be replicated in other contexts.³⁴

10

Generate and preserve media files

Replicate successful initiatives from other countries to safeguard and archive reports published digitally by independent media. For example, the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA) is a successful initiative that hosts over 6 million documents from 98 independent media outlets in Russia since 2000 on a website abroad, making them accessible online.³⁵ Similar efforts should be developed to preserve valuable content in other contexts.

11 Strengthen alliances with international technology providers

Some tech companies have made VPN apps available for free in certain countries to bypass censorship during widespread blockades. These efforts highlight the potential of these companies to support in closed spaces, and their reach should be leveraged through advocacy efforts with other tech companies to enable free or low-cost access to similar tools. Greater efforts should also be made with social media companies and popular messaging app providers to develop features that help circumvent blockades and incorporate the specific censorship and security challenges of these contexts into their internal policies.³⁶

12 Strengthen networks with the diaspora and journalists in exile

Active communication between the diaspora, journalists and media operating in restricted spaces is essential for promoting democracy and independent journalism. The diaspora and journalists in exile can play a key role in amplifying news from their country of origin. To support this, it is key to enhance collaboration networks abroad and foster stronger synergies with those on the ground.

13 Address operational constraints

Budgetary limitations and operational challenges faced by independent media require constant attention. To prevent staff attrition and turnover, maintain professional standards, and ensure the safety of work, review and improve mechanisms for updating equipment and technologies to carry out the work safely, as well as for sustaining personnel morale.

14 Enhance the role of democratic governments

Democratic governments should intensify efforts to keep press freedom issues in closed spaces at the forefront of the international agenda and public debate. Actions encourage tech companies to support the Russian people in bypassing censorship can be extended to other contexts.³⁷ Additionally, democratic governments must implement measures to help journalists forced into exile due to repression by providing access to mechanisms to regularize their immigration status in host countries. Support for journalists in exile should extend beyond emergency aid to ensure long-term assistance.³⁸

ENDNOTES

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