



FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Venezuela

NOT FREE

30
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	8 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	11 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	11 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

29 /100 **Not Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



Key Developments, June 1, 2023 - May 31, 2024

Internet freedom remained tightly restricted under President Nicolás Maduro during the coverage period. Worsened by the country's social, economic, and political crisis, Venezuelans often struggle to afford internet access and experience difficulties obtaining trusted information due to progovernment disinformation and blocks of independent media. People also face legal reprisals and other forms of harassment for expressing their opinions on politically sensitive topics in the digital space. The state manipulates online discussion through influence operations and online platforms for government services, which also prompt privacy concerns due to their large-scale collection of individuals' personal data.

- Infrastructural failures driven by electricity outages and heavy rationing, as well as the prohibitive cost of internet services, severely restricted access for ordinary Venezuelans. The average cost of many internet packages continued to greatly exceed the country's monthly minimum wage, exacerbating an already significant digital divide (see A1 and A2).
- The Maduro government continued to censor online content, blocking at least 51 news websites and 14 sites used for political criticism as of March 2024, with these restrictions implemented by both state-owned CANTV and private internet service providers (ISPs). In September 2023, ISPs also began blocking an online polling place locator that the opposition created ahead of its primary election in October 2023 (see B1).
- Authorities considered proposals that could be used to regulate social media, including a so-called Law against Fascism, Neofascism and Similar Expressions, also called the Law against Fascism, introduced in the National Assembly in April 2024. The bill would criminalize certain categories of "prohibited messages," introducing harsh penalties to silence dissent. The National Assembly postponed debate on the draft law in August 2024, after the coverage period (see B3 and C2).
- As part of their ongoing efforts to manipulate the online sphere, the Maduro regime and its allies undertook an online campaign to discredit the

opposition—particularly the opposition’s primary election winner, María Corina Machado, who was ultimately blocked from running in the July 2024 presidential election. Prominent proregime narratives attempted to portray Machado as an illegitimate candidate and a threat to the Venezuelan state (see B5).

- Human rights defenders, activists, independent journalists, and ordinary citizens remained under threat from arrests and extralegal forms of intimidation, including forced disappearances, in connection with their critical online activities—often on trumped-up charges of incitement to hatred or terrorism (see C3 and C7).

Political Overview

Venezuela’s democratic institutions have been deteriorating since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher government crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party’s use of thoroughly flawed elections to seize full control of state institutions. The authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent, restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process. Although the country’s economy has returned to growth after years of recession, a severe, politically driven humanitarian crisis continues to cause hardship and stimulate mass emigration.

Note: Venezuela’s presidential election was held on July 28, 2024, after the coverage period of this report. Though incumbent president Maduro claimed victory, vote tallies compiled by the opposition indicated that former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia won in a landslide. In the aftermath of the election, the Maduro regime unleashed a brutal campaign of repression against those who challenged Maduro’s claim to victory, leading to thousands of arbitrary arrests and more than 20 deaths. In August, Maduro ordered the blocking of X and Signal. These developments will be documented in detail in next year’s Freedom on the Net report.

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because fixed-line internet speeds improved during the coverage period, according to some measurement sources.

Venezuela's political and economic crisis has continued to hinder the country's electrical and telecommunications infrastructure and the quality of internet access. The country's decaying infrastructure suffers from regular failures that result in frequent blackouts and poor connection speeds. ¹ According to statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), mobile-broadband penetration stood at 52.3 percent in 2022, while fixed-line penetration remained much lower, at 9.58 percent. ²

According to official statistics from the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL), the country's regulatory body, the number of internet users increased slightly in 2022, standing at 16.28 million by the end of the year—an increase from 15.99 million at the same point in 2021. ³ A survey by consulting firm Consultores 21 estimated that only 48 percent of households had internet access in 2023. ⁴

According to Ookla's Speedtest Global Index, as of May 2024, Venezuela's median mobile broadband speeds ranked among the slowest in the world, at 138th out of 147 countries reviewed. ⁵ That month, Venezuelans saw a median mobile download speed of 12.17 megabits per second (Mbps) and median upload speed of 6.36 Mbps, along with a median fixed-line download speed of 53.90 Mbps and median upload speed of 48.44 Mbps. ⁶

Venezuela's ongoing electricity crisis continues to pose a significant threat to connectivity in the country. Power outages are regularly reported, often occurring without notice and lasting several hours at a time. ⁷ Beginning on March 9, 2024, and continuing on March 10, for example, there was a widespread blackout across several states, ⁸ particularly affecting the western part of the country. On March 10, VE Sin Filtro (VSF), a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported that the blackouts disrupted internet connectivity in at least eight states.

⁹ That month, independent media outlet El Pitazo reported that 22 of

Venezuela's 23 states undergo daily electricity rationing due to a lack of generation capacity. ¹⁰

During the first half of 2023, VSF recorded 54 incidents that disrupted normal internet connectivity in Venezuela, with 16 incidents registered in June alone. ¹¹ In addition to electricity failures, these incidents were often caused by damaged or neglected infrastructure. According to a December 2023 survey by Venezuelan NGO Cedice Libertad's Public Expenditure Observatory, 40 percent of fixed-line failures reported to state-owned provider CANTV have remained unresolved for more than two years, while 86 percent of survey respondents indicated that they have waited between 4 to 6 months for CANTV to resolve a service request after it was reported. ¹²

Though new providers have emerged to fill demand and connection speeds have increased in some cities, ¹³ most rural areas are served almost exclusively by CANTV and lack access to high-quality internet service (see A2 and A4). According to a survey conducted across 12 cities by the Venezuelan Observatory of Public Services (OVSP), the percentage of households with a fixed-line internet connection increased from 49.3 percent to 53 percent between March and November 2023, which the OVSP attributed to the entry of more privately-owned providers. Despite this, 46.9 percent of those surveyed criticized service interruptions and 32 percent criticized the browsing speed. ¹⁴ Private ISPs, such as Inter, also suffer connectivity failures due to infrastructural limitations. ¹⁵

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

0/3

The ongoing economic crisis prevents most of the population from meeting their basic needs. This has impacted Venezuelans' ability to afford internet services and devices, as many must devote their salaries to covering necessities such as food and health care. ¹⁶ The de facto dollarization of the economy has exacerbated the gap between those who have access to US dollars or receive remittances to purchase goods and services and those who do not.

While the government has increased the “bonuses” that it provides to public sector workers, **17** it has not raised the official minimum wage since March 2022, leaving many Venezuelans struggling with the cost of living. **18** During the coverage period, the minimum wage for Venezuelans remained 130 bolivars per month, but the exchange rate varied from 26 bolivars per US dollar in June 2023 to 36 bolivars per US dollar in May 2024. **19** At these rates, the minimum monthly salary ranged between \$4.97 in June 2023 and \$3.57 in May 2024.

The cost of internet service has become more expensive in response to the changing currency exchange rate, making access more unaffordable. Both CANTV and private providers increased internet service rates during the coverage period, and CANTV’s cheapest plans tend to be unavailable for new contracts. **20** According to VSF’s analysis of 115 internet plans offered by 24 ISPs, more than 70 percent of the sampled plans cost between 4.44 and 56.22 times the monthly minimum wage, with an average cost of 6.93 times the minimum wage. **21** The Public Expenditure Observatory’s December 2023 report found that ongoing rate increases have brought few improvements in services. **22** The prices of electronic devices also remain out of reach for many Venezuelans. A midrange smartphone costing \$400 would represent over 112 months’ pay at the minimum wage as of May 2024.

New companies, which often provide higher-quality services, tend to offer internet plans that are unaffordable for most workers; but for wealthier Venezuelans who can afford such services, this type of offer has somewhat alleviated connectivity failures. This has created a significant divide between those who can afford to access reliable service—often paid for in US dollars—and those who cannot. **23**

Venezuelans experience a significant geographical divide in internet access. According to official statistics from CONATEL, internet penetration exceeded 70 percent in only the Capital District and the state of Miranda at the end of 2022, while it remained below 30 percent in 7 of the country’s 23 states. **24** The lack of service in predominantly Indigenous areas has sometimes led to disastrous consequences, as in March 2022, when four members of the Yanomami community were killed by military officers in a confrontation over a shared Wi-Fi connection. **25**

The 2023 study by the OVSP also found large differences in internet access between cities such as San Cristóbal and Maracaibo, where fixed-line household penetration exceeded 63 percent, compared to others such as Porlamar and Ciudad Bolívar, where it remained below 39 percent—as well as diverging assessments over the quality of such service. **26**

Plans for further expansions of high-speed internet service and the provision of licenses for service providers favor cities and areas with high purchasing power, further exacerbating the disparity in levels of access between high-income and low-income areas. **27** In the more affluent Chacao municipality of Caracas—the smallest of the city’s five—for instance, there are about 50 ISPs. **28**

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

4/6

The state owns most of the infrastructure of the national network through CANTV. Deliberate shutdowns and throttling may seem practically unnecessary given the poor state of the country’s infrastructure and recurring power outages.

Users do not experience intentional, prolonged restrictions on fixed-line and mobile internet connectivity, though the government regularly blocks key websites and communications platforms to minimize coverage of politically sensitive news (see B1). **29**

In October 2023, amid the opposition’s primary election, connectivity disruptions were reported in certain areas of Caracas. **30** Though the government said the incident was due to electricity outages, the timing generated concerns that the disruptions were intentional, **31** though this remained difficult to confirm.

In March 2020, CONATEL launched discussions with private operators about the creation of an internet exchange point (IXP). Academics and activists have opposed such a project, as administration of the IXP would fall to the government, raising the risks of censorship and surveillance that would outweigh the technical benefits of the IXP’s creation. **32** In June 2023, it was reported that CONATEL was drafting a regulatory framework for the administration of IXPs, with a Caracas IXP reportedly set to connect 18 providers by 2024. **33**

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

1/6

Although there are private providers, the state dominates the information and communications technologies (ICT) market. Telecommunications companies have struggled to remain financially sustainable during the ongoing economic crisis.

Smaller companies have been able to enter the market since the currency exchange market was partially deregulated in 2018. **34** According to CONATEL, there were more than 250 authorized ISPs as of April 2024. **35** However, representatives of newer ISPs express frustration about not receiving timely responses to their requests or about discriminatory treatment, since companies with government-linked managers are favored. **36**

Despite a 133 percent growth in the number of private telecommunications companies between 2017 and 2023, the president of the Chamber of Telecommunications Services Companies (CASETEL) has noted that state-imposed fees for the use of “general telecommunications routes” (VGTs) owned by CANTV and state power company CORPOELEC remain a barrier to investment, **37** particularly in rural areas where such investments are less profitable. **38** In November 2021, for example, the deployment of fiber optic infrastructure in Caracas became more expensive after the cost for the right of way through VGTs increased from 10 cents per linear meter to 90 cents. **39**

According to CONATEL’s fourth-quarter 2022 report, the mobile broadband market, which far outpaces fixed-line connections by subscriptions, is distributed between three providers: Telefónica (Movistar) with 50.49 percent of the market, followed by CANTV (Movilnet) with 25.99 percent, and Digitel with 23.52 percent. Meanwhile, the “traditional internet” market is led by CANTV with 55.92 percent, followed by Digitel with 20.96 percent, Inter with 6.98 percent, Movilnet with 2.62 percent, and Telefónica with 2.58 percent. All other providers have 10.94 percent of the market. **40**

In May 2022, Maduro announced plans to sell 5 to 10 percent of shares of various state-owned companies, including CANTV and its subsidiary Movilnet, to private

investors. **41** The first round of sales of CANTV shares took place in October 2022. **42** More than 1.3 million CANTV shares had been sold by the end of that year. **43** In November and December 2023, CANTV put 500,000 additional shares on sale through the Caracas Stock Exchange, with minority shareholders, workers, and company retirees invited to purchase them first. According to CANTV, the funds generated from the sale would be used to improve telecommunications services. **44**

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0 / 4

CONATEL is responsible for regulating and licensing the telecommunications sector and is administratively dependent on the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MIPPCI). The Law on Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media (Resorte-ME) grants the regulatory body the power to make decisions on the blocking or deletion of content and to sanction service providers, an ability it has exercised without granting due process to the affected parties. **45**

While Article 35 of the Organic Law of Telecommunications provides for CONATEL's operational and administrative autonomy, Article 40 states that the president has the power to appoint and remove the agency's director and the other four members of its board, **46** highlighting CONATEL's lack of independence from the executive.

In March 2021, Maduro announced the forthcoming promulgation of a set of laws, including a reform of Resorte-ME and a new "Cyberspace Law." **47** Although the forthcoming cyberspace legislation has not yet been published, a leak of a January 2019 draft indicates that it would establish a new regulator to oversee "policies regarding Venezuelan cyberspace." Under the draft law, the regulator would consist of a director general and four directors who are appointed and can be dismissed by the executive. The regulator is tasked with determining the "correct" use of the online environment, which entails regulating service providers, critical infrastructure, and online speech. Under Article 5, the state would regulate access to the online environment, which is "of public interest... for the comprehensive

defense of the nation.” **48** Legislative proposals to regulate social media remained under consideration during the current coverage period (see B3).

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	2 / 6
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The Maduro government blocked digital media outlets and some online platforms during the coverage period. CANTV and several private ISPs—including Movistar, Digitel, Inter, NetUno, and SuperCable—continued to block several independent news websites, making it more difficult for Venezuelans to access trustworthy information online (see B7).

The director of the NGO Press and Society Institute of Venezuela (IPYS Venezuela) has said that “most” independent news portals are blocked in the country. **49** Reporting by VSF has documented widespread and persistent online censorship by the Maduro government. As of March 2024, VSF reported that at least 120 URLs were blocked in Venezuela, including at least 51 news websites and 14 sites that include political criticism. Various types of blocks have been implemented, including HTTP/HTTPS and domain name system (DNS) blocking—both frequently used by CANTV—and transmission control protocol and internet protocol (TCP/IP) blocking. **50** The blocks continued to affect both independent Venezuelan outlets such as Efecto Cocuyo, Armando.info, and El Pitazo, but also international media such as Infobae, *El Tiempo*, and NTN24. **51**

Several independent media outlets were newly blocked during the coverage period. In November 2023, major ISPs began blocking the website of El Carabobeño, a newspaper that transitioned to exclusively digital operations in 2016. **52** In March 2024, blocks were extended to the sites of Impacto Venezuela and El Político, **53** the former of which had provided detailed coverage of former Venezuelan military officer Ronald Ojeda’s February 2024 murder in Chile. **54** Likewise, La Gran Aldea reported in May 2024 that it had been blocked by CANTV and several private ISPs. **55** Just two months earlier, in March, the same outlet

had been the victim of a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) cyberattack (see C8). **56**

Authorities have also ordered ISPs to block websites other than independent media outlets. In April 2023, during the previous coverage period, ISPs began blocking the Venezuelan Trade Union Network's Salario Digno VZLA (Living Wage VZLA) domain, a website used for union mobilization (see B8). **57** The following month, in May 2023, amid public criticism over the government's refusal to raise the minimum wage, service providers also began blocking the website of the Venezuelan Finance Observatory, an organization that publishes data on inflation and other economic indicators. **58** Network measurements from the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) indicated that SoundCloud, an audio streaming platform, continued to present signs of blocking during the current coverage period. **59**

In the lead up to the opposition's independently organized primary election in October 2023, which was held to select a candidate for the 2024 presidential election, authorities ordered providers to block several websites that provided information about the election. Weeks before the election, the National Primary Commission, which administered the vote, reported that some ISPs had blocked access to the search engine that allowed voters to look up their polling place. **60** VSF reported that ISPs had begun blocking the original voting center search tool in early September, **61** and subsequently blocked alternative domains created for this resource before election day. **62** On October 22, the day of the election, the National Primary Commission said that one of its servers used to transmit results from regional electoral boards had been blocked, delaying the reporting of official results. **63**

The government escalated blocking against independent digital outlets and other online platforms even further in the weeks leading up to and in the aftermath of the country's 2024 presidential election, which was held on July 28, after the coverage period. VSF recorded 12 new blocks during the campaign period before election day, targeting the websites of media outlets, IPYS Venezuela, and VSF itself, among others. **64** After the election, authorities unleashed even greater restrictions against digital platforms amid a wave of repression. On August 8, Maduro ordered the blocking of X and authorities began blocking the encrypted messaging platform Signal (see C4). **65**

Experts have noted that the Maduro regime’s escalating censorship is becoming more sophisticated and harder to circumvent, as virtual private networks (VPNs) and anonymization services are needed to circumvent HTTP, HTTPS, and server name identification (SNI) filtering. ⁶⁶ According to VSF’s report published in December 2023, the domains of both TunnelBear and Psiphon—two popular VPNs—remained blocked in 2022; in the case of TunnelBear, CANTV and some private ISPs also blocked its application programming interface (API), though TunnelBear has since implemented circumvention measures to maintain the VPN’s functionality. ⁶⁷ VSF also reported that CANTV has attempted to block Tor, a tool used to browse the internet anonymously, but that such efforts have been technically unsuccessful and it remained accessible (see C4).

Several outlets, including Armando.info, have developed extensive outreach methods through social media, email newsletters, and WhatsApp to distribute content despite ongoing blocking. ⁶⁸

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

1 / 4

Several laws provide avenues for limiting speech by making intermediary platforms and websites responsible for content posted by third parties. This legal framework has resulted in preemptive censorship among reporters and media executives who exert pressure on their reporters’ coverage for fear of closure or reprisals. ⁶⁹ Cases continue to occur in which legal intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and even the threat of violence are used to force individuals to delete content published on social networks. ⁷⁰

In June 2023, municipal police in Falcón State demanded that social media user Ángel Villasmil delete videos that he uploaded to TikTok that contained complaints about the Miranda police department. After Villasmil refused to comply, the police arbitrarily detained two of his brothers (see C3). ⁷¹

The Spanish reputation management company Eliminalia, first detected in Venezuela in 2016, has been found to use false copyright claims and legal notices

to get online content taken down. According to investigative reports by Armando.info, Eliminalia’s work in Venezuela is aimed at laundering the reputation of corrupt individuals linked to the government. **72** As a contributor to the Story Killers project—a collaborative effort among 100 journalists to investigate the global disinformation industry—journalists at Armando.info identified at least 35 Venezuelan clients from a leak of almost 50,000 internal documents from Eliminalia. In one instance, reported by Armando.info in February 2023, María Eugenia Baptista Zacarías, the spouse of a former government minister, paid €30,000 (\$32,786) for Eliminalia to remove at least 61 links from Venezuelan news outlets Tal Cual, El Pitazo, and Armando.info, in addition to international outlets Deutsche Welle (DW), Reuters, and the Associated Press (AP), among others. Baptista and her husband have previously been implicated in a high-profile corruption scandal. **73**

Separately, anonymous actors have also been behind similar efforts to remove critical content about government-affiliated individuals, filing claims with social media platforms that allege policy violations or damage to personal integrity. **74**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

0 / 4

In the absence of rule of law and without institutions offering avenues for appeal, Venezuelan authorities have restricted digital content with no independent oversight and accountable procedures.

Blocking has been implemented by state-owned providers CANTV and Movilnet, as well as private companies (see B1). **75** For years, digital rights organizations, media outlets, journalists, and activists have denounced the lack of transparency of blocking procedures that are not made public. CONATEL has the ability to order website blocks without due process guarantees under “total opacity.” **76**

Legislation places excessive responsibility on intermediaries and leaves room for abuse. Resorte-ME establishes that intermediary websites can be held liable for content posted by third parties, and grants CONATEL discretionary capacity to impose severe penalties for violations. Its provisions notably forbid messages that promote anxiety among the population, alter public order, disregard legal

authorities, or promote violation of existing laws. Promulgated in November 2017, the Law against Hatred for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance (known as the Law against Hatred) establishes that intermediaries must remove content containing “hate speech” within six hours of being posted or face fines. The law also empowers authorities to block websites when, in their opinion, they promote hatred or intolerance. **77**

In recent years, the Venezuelan authorities have considered additional proposals to regulate social media, including the so-called Cyberspace Law (see A5). These discussions continued during the current coverage period. In April 2024, the so-called Law against Fascism, Neofascism and Similar Expressions was presented in the National Assembly, where it was quickly approved in an initial legislative discussion. The draft law would create a High Commission against Fascism, Neofascism and Similar Expressions to be appointed by the president, **78** and outlines certain categories of “prohibited messages,” including those that “reproduce the culture of hatred” and “denigrate democracy and its institutions,” among others. It would also establish penalties for disseminating such messages in print and online (see C2). **79** Analysts have warned that the proposal’s ambiguous definitions would be applied arbitrarily to silence dissent, building off the disproportionate interpretation of the Law against Hatred. **80**

No social media regulations were passed by the end of May 2024. After the coverage period, in August, Maduro again urged the National Assembly to implement such laws **81** —though discussion on the Law against Fascism was postponed that month. **82**

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?

1/4

Detentions, imprisonment, and legal and extralegal restrictions on certain forms of online speech have encouraged increased self-censorship and preemptive censorship within media outlets. Impunity for those who threaten or attack journalists in retaliation for their work have reinforced this climate. **83** According to the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), the “constant and systematic

censorship regime” in Venezuela has reinforced a climate of self-censorship among the independent press. **84**

IPYS Venezuela’s 2023 annual report, published in March 2024, shared that ongoing intimidation tactics against journalists have had an “inhibitory effect,” often preventing the press from publishing information in the public interest. For example, the authorities’ censorship tactics made it much more difficult for journalists to report openly about the opposition’s primary election in October 2023, generating concerns about the public’s access to broad and pluralistic information ahead of the July 2024 presidential election (see B7). **85**

In March 2024, the Spanish-language channel of German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) was removed from cable providers after its social media account posted on X that “Venezuela is the second most corrupt country in the world,” prompting the MIPPCI minister to accuse the outlet of “spreading hatred against Venezuela,” among other claims. **86** In response to DW’s reporting on corruption in Venezuela, Maduro labeled it a “Nazi” outlet. **87**

This situation affects not only independent journalists, activists, and opponents of the Maduro regime, but also ordinary citizens—particularly as authorities have escalated arrests of everyday internet users for comments made on WhatsApp groups or social media (see C3). **88** In recent years, Venezuelans have been detained merely for recording odd situations on the streets, **89** underscoring the potential risks of discussing politically-sensitive topics on social media. An August 2022 joint statement by special rapporteurs for freedom of expression from the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) criticized several factors that encourage self-censorship in Venezuela, including the regime’s disproportionate application of the Law against Hatred (see B3). **90** Some users report fear of discussing political or social topics online or in group messages, in case a person who cooperates with the government reports them.

91 Journalists have also reported that Venezuelans refuse to give statements to the press for fear of reprisal. **92**

A January 2024 report by the NGO Medianálisis documented evidence of online self-censorship in a consultation of 115 participants. The study found that only 8 people (7 percent of participants) used social networks to express their opinion about current affairs in Venezuela, compared to 68 people (59 percent) who felt

comfortable doing so when speaking with friends and acquaintances. The participants pointed out several potential risks for expressing themselves freely: being arrested or going to prison, losing access to government-provided benefits or pensions, or losing their jobs. **93**

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	1 / 4
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The government has sought to expand its influence online, using state-controlled media and progovernment trolls and encouraging loyal social media users to harass those with opposing views. **94** Progovernment propaganda generated by artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly pervaded the online information space in recent years. **95**

Certain actors have used content generated by AI to manipulate online information, often to discredit the opposition or spread narratives favorable to the Maduro regime. In August 2023, for example, Transparencia Venezuela’s EsPaja fact-checking initiative reported that Luis Ratti, a presidential candidate who sought to undermine the October 2023 opposition primary, **96** shared an AI-manipulated video of María Corina Machado, the eventual winner of the primary election, on X. In his post, Ratti used the manipulated video to accuse Machado of using drugs and said that she “wants to attack peace and democracy.” **97**

In February 2023, during the previous coverage period, the NGO Cazadores de Fake News and the Spanish newspaper *El País* reported on the existence of a YouTube channel that used AI-generated avatars to publish progovernment messages. **98** The channel, called House of News en Español, presented itself as a legitimate news outlet and utilized paid advertising to boost its videos on the platform. The presenters, which appeared to be generated with Synthesia software, spread false information to portray a favorable image of the Maduro government and contributed to the broader narrative that “Venezuela is fixed”—an attempt by progovernment actors to downplay or discredit the country’s ongoing economic crisis. **99** The videos, which had reportedly been viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube by late February 2023, were also shared widely on TikTok and broadcast on state television. **100**

Maduro disregarded criticism of the AI-generated propaganda by stating that it was “popular intelligence” and “revolutionary intelligence.” ¹⁰¹ YouTube suspended the House of News channel in March 2023 alongside four other channels that together had formed a wider progovernment disinformation network. At least one of the suspended channels had been active since 2020. ¹⁰²

Progovernment accounts often work to manipulate online conversations and regularly receive cues from the government through the MIPPCI and its leaders. In the lead-up to the October 2023 primary election, first vice president of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) Diosdado Cabello promoted the hashtag #NoTeVistaQueNoVas (an expression meant to convey that it is pointless to prepare for something that will not happen) on his progovernment television show “Con el Mazo Dando.” The label was used to discredit the ability of the opposition—and specifically Machado—to contest the July 2024 election against Maduro. ¹⁰³ Shortly after the election, progovernment accounts also used #MegaFraude (#MegaFraud) to falsely claim that the primary had been an illegitimate process. ¹⁰⁴ Separately, in March 2024, the MIPPCI minister used X to spread the false claim that Machado sought a government transition “the hard way,” implying that she would use antidemocratic means to secure power. ¹⁰⁵

False and misleading online narratives were also deployed against other members of the opposition, including academic Corina Yoris, who was initially chosen to replace the disqualified Machado on the July 2024 ballot. In April 2024, it was reported that Yoris’s name had been changed in the National Electoral Council’s (CNE’s) electoral registry to include the surname of her Uruguyan ex-husband. ¹⁰⁶ The change helped to substantiate false online allegations that Yoris has dual Uruguyan-Venezuelan nationality and was therefore ineligible to run for president. ¹⁰⁷ Yoris had been prevented from registering her candidacy the previous month without a clear legal justification. ¹⁰⁸ In April, inauthentic accounts were also created on X and Instagram to impersonate Edmundo González Urrutia, the candidate who would ultimately represent the opposition coalition in the presidential election, with the goal of “ridiculing him” and “confusing users.” ¹⁰⁹

In a February 2024 report, ¹¹⁰ the ProBox Digital Observatory documented several coordinated narratives against Venezuelan civil society actors that were meant to discredit them and their work. In January 2024, after civil society

organizations (CSOs) used the hashtag #SociedadInhabilitada (#DebilitatedSociety) to criticize a recent bill targeting independent NGOs (see B6), the MIPPCI responded by promoting the hashtag #VenezuelaFuerzaEconomía (#VenezuelaStrongEconomy), which was used in more than 38,500 posts on X. The following month, in February, progovernment accounts made at least 1,000 posts using the hashtag #RocíoNoEsSanta (#RocíoIsNotASaint) to spread the notion that Rocío San Miguel, an activist whose whereabouts were unknown for several days after she was arrested that month (see C7), was a “traitor to the homeland.”

The digital portal Venezuela News—which claims to be an independent media outlet—has been found to function as a vector for progovernment propaganda. A February 2024 C-Informa investigation characterized Venezuela News as a form of “proxy media” for the PSUV and the Venezuelan government. ¹¹¹ According to the investigation, the outlet uses several tactics to manipulate the online information sphere, including purchasing social media followers, promoting progovernment narratives, and using “emotional and manipulative language.” The outlet’s leadership also includes figures with reported links to *Chavista* officials and media. ¹¹² A March 2023 investigation previously documented a coordinated network of “pseudo-information portals” that shares progovernment propaganda, as well as conspiracy theories, to audiences in Venezuela—often reproduced by similar state-aligned outlets in countries like Russia and Cuba. ¹¹³

In November 2023, Cazadores de Fake News documented a coordinated network of at least four YouTube channels used to spread “covert propaganda” ahead of the December 3 referendum on Guyana’s Essequibo region. The investigation, which identified 40 videos on YouTube, found that the campaign sought to reinforce Venezuela’s claim to Essequibo as something widely supported by the population. Evidence suggested that this campaign was also amplified through state television channels such as Venezolana de Televisión (VTV). ¹¹⁴

In recent years, the government has extended its online influence through Sistema Patria—a centralized online platform that allows users to access key government benefits and services (see C5)—which prominently displays online content associated with the Maduro government. Reporting has documented the government’s strategy to coordinate users of Sistema Patria to boost its narratives daily on X: MIPPCI officials position certain trending topics on Sistema

Patria, where users are rewarded with “bonuses,” which can include both payments and gamified digital achievement symbols, for X posts about those topics. ¹¹⁵ At times, the government has failed to pay monetary bonuses owed to these so-called “Tuiteros de la Patria” (Homeland Tweeters), ¹¹⁶ who sometimes depend on such payments as a considerable source of their monthly income. ¹¹⁷

These practices continued to evolve during the current coverage period, largely in response to changes at X that made it more difficult for the MIPPCI and its network of posters to achieve the same reach on the platform. A March 2024 investigation by C-Informa detailed how educators, who typically earn low salaries, have been recruited and trained to promote narratives about the government’s supposed educational achievements through various means, including in WhatsApp groups and on X, in exchange for bonus payments. ¹¹⁸

The government’s March 2022 launch of VenApp, a Venezuelan social network and mobile app, sparked further concern about its capacity to manipulate online narratives and capture personal data (see C5). ¹¹⁹ VenApp maintains functions common to most social networking platforms, including messaging and file-sharing functions and the option to join groups or channels. The government has promoted the app as a means of consulting and connecting with the public; for instance, the app’s “Line 58” channel allows registered users to submit complaints about public services directly to the government. ¹²⁰ However, digital rights advocates expressed concerns that the app could be used as a state tool for political organizing. ¹²¹ In the weeks following the July 2024 presidential election, VenApp was deployed as an instrument of repression, used to identify individuals who spoke out against Maduro’s unsubstantiated claim of victory (see C5).

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?

1/3

Digital media face various difficulties in Venezuela, hindered by the cost of equipment, the lack of financing, the exodus of professionals seeking better living conditions abroad, and the broader humanitarian crisis.

Independent media do not receive advertising from public entities. Although it is practically impossible to obtain public statements from private companies

regarding the pressures they receive, the few companies that still exist in the country are under pressure to refrain from advertising in independent media. Some publishers have publicly said that independent Venezuelan businesses are not sustainable, and that “digital media exist thanks to Google Ads.” **122**

In June 2023, the oldest radio station in Venezuela, Radio Caracas Radio (RCR), ceased operations on digital platforms, after CONATEL had previously forced it to end traditional broadcasting in 2019. The National College of Journalists (CNP) said that it had become economically unviable for RCR to sustain operations on the internet alone. **123** According to RCR’s director, the station endured a power cut for 92 days and it could no longer continue maintaining power. **124**

Digital media have tried various business and financing models: crowdfunding campaigns, international support, payment gateways, digital advertising, and media alliances. **125** Some individual journalists have attempted to monetize their social media accounts—by posting advertisements for specific brands, for example—to make their work financially sustainable. **126**

According to the director of El Pitazo, a digital outlet blocked in Venezuela (see B1), the outlet has resorted to Facebook posts, digital flyers, and informative audio recordings, among other methods, to disseminate content. It has also faced declining advertising income due to the country’s ongoing economic crisis. The director of El Nacional, a newspaper that ceased print operations in 2018, stated that advertisers have withdrawn because blocking has severely reduced traffic to the outlet’s website. **127**

A proposal that would regulate and undermine the operation of NGOs operating in Venezuela, the draft Law on the Supervision, Regulation, Action and Financing of Non-Governmental and Related Organizations, was approved at the first reading in January 2023. **128** In a February 2023 statement, more than 400 civil society organizations expressed their opposition to the proposed law, saying that it would violate Venezuela’s constitution and international human rights treaties that the country has signed. **129** The National Assembly passed the bill in August 2024, after the coverage period. **130** Analysts have warned that the law, which can be used to arbitrarily dissolve NGOs, could also target the country’s independent media as a broadly defined “related organization.” **131**

Compared to traditional media, the digital sphere presents a relatively open space for political and social expression, though recurring blocks, the digital divide, and connectivity problems significantly hinder access to diverse and independent sources of information online. During the coverage period, the government's sustained efforts to manipulate the information space saturated the online environment with false and misleading content.

In recent years, the Maduro government has constructed a sophisticated disinformation apparatus, capable of driving progovernment narratives online (see B5). Though independent media outlets and NGOs have introduced online fact-checking initiatives, such as the C-Informa coalition, to counter these narratives, false information and the manipulation of the digital environment has hampered the efforts of such outlets to keep the public informed. ¹³²

According to Venezuelan journalist Andrés Cañizalez, “Venezuelans have seen their ability to construct what is real diminished” due to the pervasiveness of false information, ¹³³ eroding the credibility of the information landscape. In a December 2022 survey conducted by independent think tank Equilibrium CenDe, 76 percent of the 1,275 respondents were not able to provide the name of a specific media outlet that they trust. ¹³⁴ A Medianálisis questionnaire conducted between July and November 2023 found that just 29 of 115 participants (25 percent) trusted information obtained from social media, while more than 79 percent of respondents indicated that they feel either poorly informed or uninformed. ¹³⁵

A June 2023 report by IPYS Venezuela, which analyzed data collected between October and December 2022, determined that 72 percent of Venezuelan localities are covered by at least one digital media outlet. ¹³⁶ However, the report also found that 21 percent of the population lives in so-called “news deserts,” with virtually no local coverage—an increase from 16 percent in 2020. ¹³⁷

Newspapers have migrated online due to restrictions on printed content, while broadcast media have also forged an online presence. Some long-established media such as El Nacional, which had to discontinue its print edition in December

2018, **138** and Radio Caracas Radio, which had a digital broadcast until it ceased operations altogether in June 2023 (see B6), **139** have maintained an independent editorial line.

Some online news initiatives have emerged in remote areas, covering the perspectives of certain communities. The news portal Tane Tanae, for example, is directed by Indigenous Warao journalists. Based in Delta Amacuro State, it covers a range of stories relevant to Indigenous communities. **140** In May 2022, El Pitazo launched the weekly Alatakaa podcast, which is disseminated via WhatsApp groups and covers news in the Indigenous Wayuu language. **141** However, during the coverage period, an Indigenous journalist was threatened after using X to report on local healthcare deficiencies—part of a pattern of intimidation against journalists (see C7), which could limit online reporting on issues of public interest. **142** Efecto Cocuyo, meanwhile, is led by a team of women, and covers topics little explored by other outlets, such as migration, climate change, and gender and sexual diversity, while providing a voice to Venezuelan experts in various areas. **143**

The use of VPNs and other anonymization tools to access more reliable or diverse media is limited. In addition to being unknown to common users, free VPNs slow down already precarious connections, and attempts to block them continue (see B1). Digital media often use channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and electronic newsletters to spread their work. Recent offline initiatives such as El Bus TV **144** and ARI Móvil, **145** which travel around the country to deliver news in person, have also attempted to overcome the widespread blocking of independent digital media.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?	4/6
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The repressive policies of the Maduro government restrict the right of Venezuelans to peacefully protest. Amid this repressive climate, and despite limitations to internet access, ordinary citizens and opposition leaders actively used digital platforms during the coverage period to express their discontent over the country’s political and economic crisis and demand change. However, a wave of repression unleashed after the coverage period, including thousands of arrests

and the blocking of digital platforms following the July 2024 presidential election, **146** threatens to close the online civic space even further.

ProBox continues to record a significant number of X posts that are tagged with sociopolitical hashtags promoted by civil society organizations; however, these efforts are often overshadowed by the government’s disinformation strategies (see B), **147** as well as the open repression of the groups that are protesting.

Website blocks implemented by the Maduro regime have targeted platforms used for online mobilization. In April 2023, ISPs began blocking the Venezuelan Trade Union Network’s Living Wage VZLA domain (see B1). **148** The website includes an online petition and is used to register workers to advocate for higher wages in Venezuela. **149**

Though facing growing restrictions, NGOs and Venezuelan internet users have continued efforts to raise awareness online and create apps with civic uses. In recent years, NGOs and digital media have launched initiatives to convene online communities, which has allowed them to train citizens, expand their information sources, and build the loyalty of their audiences. **150**

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

1/6

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, **151** the government has passed laws and regulations that curtail this right. Several laws, such as the 2017 Law against Hatred and Resorte–ME, provide avenues for limiting speech that is deemed to incite hatred, violence, or “anxiety” among the population, including on the internet. In June 2023, NGO Espacio Público (Public Space) stated that the Law against Hatred “has justified arrests, raids, arbitrary judicial processes, physical attacks, harassment,” and other abuses since it was enacted.

152

Power has increasingly concentrated in the executive, and the PSUV-controlled National Assembly—which took office through 2020 parliamentary elections that were deemed fraudulent by the Organization of American States (OAS) ¹⁵³—largely functions as a rubber-stamp for the Maduro government. ¹⁵⁴

The judiciary is highly politicized, often issuing legal decisions that threaten free expression online. For instance, in May 2021, court authorities took possession of the headquarters of El Nacional, an independent newspaper that has published online since authorities restricted its paper supply in 2018, in a civil suit initiated by Diosdado Cabello, the PSUV's first vice president. Cabello sued El Nacional in 2015, claiming moral damages after the newspaper republished a report linking him to drug trafficking. The courts agreed to Cabello's request to index the 1-billion-bolivar fine to the current exchange rate, awarding Cabello damages of \$13.2 million (rather than damages of \$13,000 that would have been awarded if the fine was indexed to the article's publication date of 2015). ¹⁵⁵ In August 2021, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) dismissed El Nacional's appeal and subsequently, in January 2022, after a so-called "judicial auction," the headquarters of the newspaper and its land were handed over to Cabello. ¹⁵⁶

Judicial independence continued to deteriorate in the lead up to the July 2024 presidential election amid changes to the leadership of the TSJ in January 2024. Both the newly elected president of the TSJ, who also leads the Electoral Chamber, as well as the first and second vice presidents, have well-established ties with the PSUV. ¹⁵⁷

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

0 / 4

The Maduro government has tightened its grip on online speech through a series of restrictive laws establishing criminal penalties for online activities. A vaguely worded anti-hate speech law enacted in 2017 imposes hefty prison sentences of 10 to 20 years for those who incite hatred or violence through any electronic means, including social networks. It also establishes that intermediaries can be fined if they do not remove the messages subject to sanctions within six hours of

their dissemination, with amounts ranging between 50,000 and 100,000 tax units.

158

Activists and journalists also face charges of defamation under the penal code, which sets out prison sentences for defamation against public officials and the publication of false information. **159**

Resorte-ME, which was amended by the National Assembly in 2010, also includes vague prohibitions and severe sanctions that grant authorities sweeping discretion to restrict speech (see B3). Article 27, for example, forbids messages that promote anxiety among the population, alter public order, disregard legal authorities, or promote the violation of existing laws. **160**

During the coverage period, the National Assembly considered a proposed Law against Fascism, which would restrict certain “prohibited messages” (see B3). The proposal, which was not enacted by the end of the coverage period, outlines criminal penalties for certain offenses, including prison sentences of 6 to 10 years for those found to advocate for “fascism.” **161** In August 2024, after the coverage period, the National Assembly postponed debate on the bill. **162**

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	2 / 6
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Arrests and detentions for online activities—especially of journalists, political opponents, and activists—continued during the coverage period, often under spurious pretenses alleging instigation to hatred and other arbitrary charges.

In January 2024, the attorney general’s office issued arrest warrants against Infobae journalist Sebastiana Barráez and human rights defender Tamara Sujú, both of whom live in exile, along with several others, claiming that they were involved in plans to assassinate President Maduro and Táchira State governor Freddy Bernal. **163** The IAPA condemned the arrest warrant against Barráez, **164** who covers the Venezuelan military for Infobae. In May 2024, Barráez and two Armando.info journalists were accused of corruption, which the Coalition for Women in Journalism denounced as judicial harassment meant to silence Barráez’s journalistic work. **165**

In November 2023, opposition politician Nelson Piñero was arrested in Carabobo State and accused of incitement to hatred after he criticized the Maduro government on X. **166** Before the arrest, Piñero made critical comments about the Essequibo referendum and questioned Maduro's support for the Venezuelan national soccer team. **167** Piñero remained in detention through the end of the coverage period. **168**

Ordinary social media users have also been penalized for posting critical content, even when such content is not explicitly political. In March 2024, prosecutors issued an arrest warrant for Edison Arciniega, an academic and the director of the Center for Agri-Food Studies, for alleged incitement to hatred through unspecified messages on social media. **169** Arciniega, whose work is focused on documenting food insecurity in Venezuela, fled the country due to the arrest warrant and rejected the accusation that he shared hateful messages. **170**

In August 2023, transportation worker Gilber García was detained for 48 hours after he made critical comments about the Maduro government in response to customer complaints about fare increases. García's comments were recorded and shared on social media. In response, he was forced to record a video apologizing to Maduro and other officials. **171** Previously, in June 2023, after TikTok user Ángel Villasmil refused to delete videos that criticized the Miranda municipal police (see B2), police officers arbitrarily arrested and briefly detained his two brothers and searched his sister's phone. **172**

In August 2023, a Caracas court sentenced 6 human rights activists and union leaders to 16 years in prison after they were convicted of conspiracy and "association to commit crimes." **173** The individuals had been detained since July 2022 in connection with their protest activities, **174** and the only evidence presented by prosecutors included screenshots and posts on X. **175** The six individuals were released in December 2023 as part of an agreement between the US and Venezuelan governments. **176**

In June 2024, after the coverage period, the director of the Venezuelan Education-Action Program on Human Rights (PROVEA), warned that "political persecution, instrumentalized to generate terror through arbitrary arrests and disappearances," posed a threat to the electoral environment, with opposition activists and journalists frequently targeted. **177** This repression escalated in the

weeks after the July 2024 election, leading to the arrest of thousands of people.

178

In February 2022, it was publicly announced that the case against Luis Carlos Díaz, a journalist, human rights defender, and cyberactivist, was ordered to be “archived”—meaning it can be reopened if additional evidence emerges—and the precautionary measures he was subject to, including a prohibition on leaving the country, were suspended. **179** The case, over Díaz’s alleged involvement in a plot to cause a blackout, had been ongoing for nearly three years. The journalist has remained active covering the International Criminal Court’s ongoing investigations against the Venezuelan government for possible crimes against humanity. At key moments, high-ranking Venezuelan official Diosdado Cabello has mentioned Díaz in a threatening manner on his television program. **180**

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

2/4

The constitution expressly prohibits anonymity. To buy a cell phone, a SIM card, or a USB modem to access mobile broadband, Venezuelan law requires customers to register their personal identification number, address, signature, and fingerprints.

181 The government does not broadly restrict encryption technologies or other digital privacy tools, though VPNs have been blocked by several providers in recent years (see B1). In December 2023, VSF reported that CANTV has attempted to block access to Tor, a censorship circumvention tool, but that such efforts have been technically unsuccessful. **182**

In August 2024, after the coverage period, major ISPs began blocking Signal (see B1), an encrypted messaging app, further restricting Venezuelans’ access to secure communications platforms. **183**

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy?

2/6

Although the constitution recognizes principles applicable to the protection of personal data—such as safeguards for honor, privacy, public image, confidentiality, and reputation, as well as access to information—there are no laws or telecommunications regulations dedicated to data protection. There are concerns about the government’s ability to misuse personal data collected for security, welfare services, and public programs. During the coverage period, VSF continued to warn that, in the absence of personal data protection legislation, the destination, storage, and ultimate purpose of the government’s collection of information—particularly through state-managed apps—remains unclear. **184**

Government surveillance and counterintelligence activities have increased since 2013, when the government released its 2013–19 Plan de la Patria, which emphasized strengthening national defense among its priorities. **185** Given the lack of independent oversight, there are concerns about the ease with which systematic content filtering and surveillance could be implemented. Digital activists have also expressed alarm regarding the government’s growing interest in investing in intelligence systems and operations. **186**

The government also has means of collecting citizens’ personal data through the implementation of public programs. The Sistema Patria collects basic data, including users’ addresses and dates of birth, as well as other personal information, such as political party membership. **187** According to reports, the Venezuelan government worked with Chinese telecommunications company ZTE to develop and manage the Patria’s database. **188** Through this system, Venezuelans can register to receive social benefits to access a virtual wallet where they can receive payments, such as pensions. **189** The Sistema Patria is also used to collect government-issued “bonuses” for spreading MIPPCI trends on social media (see B5). This virtual wallet has also been integrated with the country’s biopayment system, a biometric point-of-sale system that is available in the state-owned Banco de Venezuela and some stores. **190** Beginning in June 2020, access to subsidized gas prices required the vehicle to be registered in Sistema Patria. **191** Fuel customers are allowed to use Sistema Patria wallets or the biopayment system. **192**

The scope of Sistema Patria has continued to expand. In October 2020, it incorporated payments for public services, such as water and electricity, and purchasing mobile phone data. **193** In May 2022, the government announced the

1x10 of Good Governance system, which allows users to register through the Sistema Patria and send messages directly to local government officials. **194** Venezuelans will also be able to connect with the 1x10 of Good Governance system through VenApp (see B5). **195** Digital rights advocates have raised serious concerns over VenApp's threats to user privacy. To download the app, users must allow access to their real-time geolocation and phone camera. Once downloaded, the app can modify users' calendars, alter or delete content on SD cards, record audio from device microphones, and send emails from users' accounts without their knowledge. **196** The Mercenarios Digitales investigative alliance has raised concerns that the VenApp, which was reportedly developed by actors with links to the PSUV, could be used to "microsegment the electorate"—that is, use data collected by the app to tap into the specific complaints of potential voters. **197**

Similarly, in June 2023, it was reported that Sistema Patria was requiring its users to update their home address and register the community where they reside. The government has ambiguously said that the updated information is meant for "social mapping," **198** raising concerns about how this data would be used ahead of the July 2024 presidential elections.

On July 31, 2024, after the coverage period, VenApp was removed from the Apple and Google app stores after the Maduro regime used it to facilitate repression against opposition supporters following the July 28 election. **199** The day prior, on July 30, Maduro had announced that VenApp would launch a page for his supporters to identify and denounce individuals who participated in protests in support of the opposition. **200**

The Venezuelan government has taken other steps to build upon its surveillance capacities. According to human rights organizations, arrests of trade unionists, health workers, journalists, and others for messages on platforms such as WhatsApp and X indicate that the government is exercising surveillance in these spaces. **201** In January 2024, VSF reported that Cabello, the PSUV's first vice president, had revealed private messages obtained through allegedly irregular means from a private WhatsApp group of political journalists, **202** though it remained unclear precisely how these communications were intercepted. **203**

In November 2020, the US Treasury Department sanctioned Chinese technology firm China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC) for

supporting the Venezuelan government's digital surveillance efforts. **204** An expert on the relationship between Beijing and Caracas affirmed that technological support for surveillance and social control is a central component. **205**

In September 2020, *Haaretz* reported that, despite US sanctions prohibiting exports to Venezuela, Israeli firm Cellebrite sold telephone hacking technology to the Maduro government, according to statements from government officials. **206** In October 2021, the General Directorate of Military Counter-Intelligence (DGCIM) broadcast via state television their use of Cellebrite's Universal Forensics Extraction Device (UFED), allegedly for crime-fighting purposes. The tool can unlock and extract data from mobile phones, including encrypted data. The broadcast raised alarm for human rights activists in the country, in part due to the DGCIM's history of human rights abuses, including the torture of detainees in their custody. **207** A September 2022 report by the fact-finding mission of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to Venezuela affirmed that the DGCIM uses a variety of means—including digital surveillance—to collect information on real or perceived opponents of the government, often without judicial authorization. **208**

In late May 2020, the Fake Antenna Detection Project reported that it had found anomalous activity in at least 33 cell antennas in Caracas, potentially indicating the use of international mobile subscriber identity (IMSI) catchers. These antennas were found near the offices of critical media outlets, human rights organizations, and areas of protest, along with multiple fake antennas on the Colombia-Venezuela border. **209** The project's study, which observed that the teams operating the equipment are in headquarters of security agencies, led researchers to believe that the antennas can be operated by security forces for intelligence purposes. **210**

Reports indicate that the Operational Strategic Command of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (CEOFANB) has a so-called cyberdefense room that monitors campaigns to discredit the military, as well as official statements made against Venezuela and information that authorities believe could lead to a national crisis. The group also reportedly perpetrates cyberattacks against Venezuelan websites, including news sites (see C8), and coordinates with CANTV to block media outlets. **211**

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?

2/6

Mandatory data retention requirements are in place for telephone companies, including those providing mobile telephone services. An administrative ruling issued by CONATEL in October 2017 established that operators must provide collected information to security services upon request, without specifying the need for a judicial order. Data to be collected includes internet protocol (IP) addresses, dates and times of connections, geographic locations, and details of calls and text messages sent or received. The regulation also states that to register for a mobile phone, customers must provide data such as email, fingerprints, and a digital photograph taken at the site of the transaction. **212**

Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera, a former Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) director and refugee living in the United States, revealed in April 2020 to independent news outlet TalCual that telecommunications companies in Venezuela facilitate the state's surveillance of opponents. One operation, for example, had companies clone phone numbers, intercept emails, and take down webpages. Figuera identified Movistar as one of the companies that have taken such action. In one instance, phone numbers belonging to soldiers who had opposed the government in April 2019 and fled Venezuela were reportedly cloned by the Maduro administration with telecommunications companies' knowledge. Figuera further claimed the government then used the cloned phone numbers to create fake social media accounts purporting to be the soldiers, which were then used to reach out to other users and persecute or detain anyone who expressed support. **213**

In a 2021 transparency report, published in August 2022, Telefónica, which owns Movistar, revealed that more than 1.5 million phone lines belonging to Movistar users had been impacted by communications interceptions that year, representing around 20 percent of all Movistar users in the country. **214** According to one analyst, this was evidence that "state surveillance has reached a massive scale" and is dependent on the cooperation of telecommunications companies. **215**

Telefónica's 2022 transparency report, published in October 2023, did not include

any data about the government's requests for the interception of communications by the Venezuelan government, severely compromising the public's insight into these practices. **216**

Other measures affect companies offering online services such as banking. In November 2020, the government agency that oversees banking operations, the Superintendency of Institutions of the Banking Sector (SUDEBAN), introduced a requirement to monitor the business and financial operations of nonprofit organizations, purportedly to demonstrate the existence of supporters linked to criminal activities; the monitoring requires the handover of bank customers' sensitive information. **217**

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

2/5

Digital journalists, activists, and other online dissidents face violence, intimidation, threats, and sometimes physical attacks from the state, security forces, and civilians, within an environment of impunity.

In its September 2022 report, the fact-finding mission of the UNHRC to Venezuela identified torture in detention and extrajudicial executions during security operations among the human rights abuses perpetrated by the government. While the report noted that incidents of torture following arrests appear to have declined from a 2019 peak, it attributed this to the fact that "political dissent has been largely crushed" in Venezuela. **218**

Critical online users have been the victim of forced disappearances by the state. In February 2024, lawyer Rocío San Miguel was arrested as part of an alleged plot to assassinate Maduro, for which authorities provided no evidence, and her whereabouts were unclear for more than three days before it became known that she was detained at El Helicoide, a documented torture center. **219** San Miguel, who was also the victim of a progovernment smear campaign (see B5), is the director of the NGO Control Ciudadano (Citizen Control), an organization that monitors the military, and she has regularly used social media to disseminate this work. **220** She was detained alongside four relatives, including her daughter, who

were released under precautionary measures after a few days. **221** San Miguel remained in prison through the end of the coverage period. **222**

The same month, Carlos Ramón Salazar Lárez, a former employee of the state-run oil company Petróleos de Venezuela SA, disappeared after he published a video on social media that criticized Alex Saab and showed the Colombian businessman—an ally of Maduro who previously faced money laundering charges, but was recently released by the United States—on Margarita Island. **223** Salazar was taken away by a group of men, and his location remained unknown for 20 days, until his family was reportedly able to contact him in the El Helicoide. It remained unclear whether formal charges proceeded against Salazar as of the end of the coverage period. **224**

Intimidation and harassment campaigns against journalists, sometimes promoted by state actors, are common. Some journalists have been forced into exile due to such threats, **225** and the Venezuela-based family members of journalists living in exile sometimes face harassment from authorities.

A report released by IPYS Venezuela in September 2023 documented 39 physical and verbal attacks and 22 cases of stigmatizing speech against journalists between May and August 2023, including cases involving journalists who report online. **226** In one case from June 2023, Regina Freites, a journalist for digital outlet Qué Pasa en Venezuela, was physically assaulted by a group of up to eight Bermúdez municipal police officers as she attempted to document a building fire. Freites reported the incident to prosecutors in Sucre State a few days later. **227**

A December 2023 report published by the NGO RedesAyuda, directed by exiled journalist Melanio Escobar, documented 48 cases in which journalistic work was restricted through various means in 2022. **228** Escobar himself was the victim of an online harassment campaign in August 2023, when an anonymous X account claimed that the journalist was a “psychological operator” and called for arbitrary criminal investigations against him. **229**

Digital media have also been forced to vacate their offices due to intimidation. In January 2024, digital outlet Palpitar Trujillano announced that it had been forced to leave its Valera offices, which the building’s owner said was “due to pressure

from above.” ²³⁰ Palpitar Trujillano was previously the victim of hacking cyberattacks on its Instagram account (see C8).

In August 2023, investigative police raided the Caracas home of community activists Zaida Mujica and Samuel Bravo, hosts of the program Noticiero Machete for digital outlet Punto de Corte and contributors to Aporrea, a left-wing digital outlet critical of Maduro. The officials did not obtain a search warrant, meaning that there was no legal basis for the raid, which Espacio Público denounced as an “act of intimidation and harassment.” ²³¹

Women journalists and activists are frequently harassed for spreading critical content on social networks. Espacio Público has documented a trend of online, gender-based violence against women users and journalists. Such violence takes the form of online harassment and threatening language, sometimes directly from state actors, as well as blackmail threatening to expose women’s personal information. ²³² A June 2023 report, published by Espacio Público and other Latin American digital rights organizations, noted that women in Venezuela often face difficulties reporting and accessing justice in a timely manner in cases of online gender-based violence. ²³³

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

0/3

Technical attacks often target digital media outlets and human rights organizations. During the coverage period, several journalists and media sites reported cyberattacks, including denial-of-service (DoS) and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, as well as hacking of social media accounts.

In its annual digital rights report, IPYS Venezuela documented six DoS/DDoS attacks and five hacking incidents targeting news portals and journalists’ social media accounts in 2023. In November 2023, La Gran Aldea was the victim of a DDoS attack that lasted approximately two days. The incident caused some content to load slowly, and two articles were made inaccessible during the attack. ²³⁴ In September 2023, Cazadores de Fake News reported that its website was temporarily inaccessible due to a DDoS attack, the second such attack that it

received in one week. The attack occurred just days after Cazadores de Fake News won an IAPA award for a 2023 C-Infoma investigation about a Venezuelan disinformation network. ²³⁵ IPYS Venezuela also reported that nine media outlets were the victims of phishing attacks in 2023, which saw attackers create inauthentic WhatsApp accounts to impersonate the outlets in an attempt to obtain personal information from trusted collaborators. ²³⁶

In November 2023, the Oriente24 news site was the victim of a cyberattack that brought it offline for more than two hours. ²³⁷ The outlet's director said that unknown attackers gained access to the site and deleted its content, though all but four articles were successfully restored. Oriente24 had recently published an article about deforestation in the city of Cumaná. ²³⁸

On June 14, 2023, journalist Luis Olavarrieta's YouTube channel, which has more than 543,000 subscribers, was hacked. Before Olavarrieta retook control of the account later that day, hackers had posted 80 videos, including harmful links. ²³⁹

In December 2022, during the previous coverage period, Palpitar Trujillano, a media outlet with more than 100,000 followers on its primary Instagram account, was the victim of a series of hacks on that platform throughout the month. At least three new accounts that Palpitar Trujillano attempted to open were subsequently suspended by Meta, making it difficult for the outlet to resume operations on Instagram. ²⁴⁰ During the current coverage period, Palpitar Trujillano was forced to vacate its physical offices in the city of Valera (see C7).

The Special Law against Computer Crimes, in force since 2001, has provisions that penalize these cyberattacks, though they have not been applied. ²⁴¹

Footnotes

- 1 "Corpoelec apaga entre 1 y 16 horas al día a 22 estados del país [Corpoelec turns off electricity for between 1 and 16 hours a day in 22 states of the country]," El Pitazo, March 16, 2024, <https://elpitazo.net/reportajes/corpoelec-apaga-a-diario-entre-1-y-16-h...>
- 2 International Telecommunication Union, "Fixed and mobile subscriptions: Venezuela," ITU DataHub, accessed September 2024,

<https://datahub.itu.int/dashboards/?id=2&e=VEN>.

- 3 “Informe de las cifras del sector: IV trimestre 2022 [Sector Figures Report: 4th Quarter 2022],” Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (CONATEL), p. 21, August 2023, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2022-Presentacion-....>
- 4 “Consultores 21: solo 48% de los venezolanos tiene acceso a Internet en sus hogares [Consultants 21: Only 48% of Venezuelans have access to the Internet at home],” Finanzas Digital, June 25, 2023, <https://finanzasdigital.com/solo-48-de-los-venezolanos-tiene-acceso-a-i....>
- 5 Ookla, “Median Country Speeds: May 2024,” Speedtest Global Index, accessed July 3, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240703012249/https://www.speedtest.net/gl....>

More footnotes



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Country Facts

Population

28,300,000

Global Freedom Score

15/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

30/100 Not Free

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

No

Social Media Blocked

Yes

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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1850 M St. NW Floor 11
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(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

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