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Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2021 - Venezuela

Not Free

28

/ 100

A [Obstacles to Access](#) 6 / 25B [Limits on Content](#) 12 / 35C [Violations of User Rights](#) 10 / 40

Last Year's Score & Status

28 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

As the country's social, economic, and political crisis has worsened, internet freedom in Venezuela has become more precarious. Infrastructure failures cause frequent interruptions in connectivity, although the entry of new service providers has improved access for the few who can afford it. Independent journalists, the majority of whom work in online media, are victims of harassment, physical attacks, and arbitrary arrests. Ordinary Venezuelans increasingly censor themselves online, fearing arrest for expressing critical comments in private messages and on social media. As the government consolidates its power, authorities appear to be considering legal reforms that further restrict freedom of expression online.

Venezuela's democratic institutions have deteriorated since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party relying on widely condemned elections to control all government branches. President Nicolas Maduro further consolidated power in tightly controlled elections in December 2020, which were boycotted by the opposition and former National Assembly head Juan Guaidó, who had been named interim president by the then opposition-controlled chamber in January 2019. The authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent, restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process. The country's severe humanitarian crisis has left millions struggling to meet basic needs, and driven mass emigration.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 – May 31, 2021

- The Maduro government blocked access to websites during politically sensitive times, including an increasing number of media websites, though internet connectivity was not restricted during the coverage period (see A3 and B1).
- The tightly controlled National Assembly elections in December 2020 saw widespread digital restrictions, including blocks that targeted websites for participation in the opposition-led popular consultation, a poll presented as an alternative to the election (see B1 and B8).
- Amid the growing number of arbitrary arrests for messages on social networks and messaging platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp, journalists and ordinary citizens increasingly engaged in self-censorship (see B4 and C3).
- Authorities continue to manipulate online content, including through false accounts and by incentivizing users to post progovernment narratives through Sistema Patria (Fatherland System) (see B5).
- The judiciary continued to issue politicized rulings that undermine freedom of expression; in May 2021, the courts authorized the seizure of the headquarters of El Nacional, an independent newspaper that now publishes online, in a civil suit initiated by former National Constituent Assembly (ANC) president Diosdado Cabello Rondón (see C1).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet 2 / connections? **6**

Venezuela’s economic crisis, marked by multiple years of recession and hyperinflation, has hindered the country’s telecommunications infrastructure and the quality of internet access. The country’s decaying infrastructure suffers from failures, theft, and vandalism, resulting in frequent blackouts and poor connection speeds.^{[1](#)}

According to official figures, internet penetration stood at 60.9 percent as of December 2019; 80 percent of the Venezuelans who connect to the internet use mobile phones, 13.6 percent use fixed-line connections, and 6.4 percent use other methods.^{[2](#)} In contrast, DataReportal’s *Digital in 2021* report indicates internet penetration of 72 percent as of January 2021.^{[3](#)}

During the coverage period, although there were no national power outages such as those that occurred in 2019, partial blackouts continue to occur.^{[4](#)} The partial blackouts, such as those that occurred in July, September, and October 2020 and in late March 2021, limited connectivity in many states.^{[5](#)} Likewise, partial blackouts and power rationing schemes persist in several cities,^{[6](#)} like Maracaibo^{[7](#)} and San Cristóbal,^{[8](#)} severely limiting connectivity.^{[9](#)} The fuel shortage has hindered the use of generators, upon which many individuals and institutions rely.^{[10](#)}

According to analysts, demand for connectivity exceeds supply, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine orders.^{[11](#)} Established mobile service providers like Movistar have asked customers to use data “rationally” as consumption had sharply increased on a network “already operating at maximum capacity.”^{[12](#)} New providers have emerged to fill the demand. Some have installed Wi-Fi points in public areas that are not served by other providers, as in rural Zulia State, broadening access to the internet;^{[13](#)} however, most rural areas lack access to high-quality internet service, with many areas served almost exclusively by state-owned CANTV (see A2).^{[14](#)}

According to Ookla’s Speedtest Global Index, Venezuelans saw an average mobile download speed of 7.80 megabits per second (Mbps) and average upload speed of 4.52 Mbps, along with an average fixed-line download speed of 18.53 Mbps and average upload speed of 14.87 Mbps, as of May 2021.^{[15](#)} According to analysts, the improvement in the download speeds seen during the previous coverage period is the result of fiber-optic connections offered in cities including Maracaibo.^{[16](#)} In a survey conducted by the Venezuelan Observatory of Public Services between October and November 2020, 62.4 percent of respondents reported negative perceptions of their mobile data services.^{[17](#)}

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 0 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? **3**

The humanitarian crisis prevents most of the population from meeting their basic needs. The economic crisis has impacted Venezuelans’ ability to afford internet services and devices, as many devote their meager salaries to cover basic needs such as food and health.^{[18](#)}

As the economy has become informally dollarized, the gap between those who have access to US dollars to purchase goods and services and those who do not has exacerbated inequality in internet access, according to a study released by consulting firm ANOVA in April 2021. According to the study’s survey data, 86 percent of households in the poorest quintile of Venezuelans lack internet access, compared to 81.2 percent of households overall.^{[19](#)}

Internet services remain unaffordable for most Venezuelans. Although state-owned CANTV’s rates are the least expensive, they are still inaccessible for most; plans range from \$1 per month for 2 Mbps service to \$14 per month for 22 Mbps service,^{[20](#)} exceeding the capacity of someone paid minimum wage, which stood at 7 million bolivars (\$2.54) a month in May 2021.^{[21](#)} CANTV’s cheapest plans tend to be unavailable for new contracts, and users complain about recurring service failures.^{[22](#)} New companies tend to offer internet plans that are unaffordable for most workers, as with one 50 Mbps plan that cost \$25 a month in February 2021.^{[23](#)}

The price of electronic devices is out of reach for many Venezuelans. A midrange smartphone, which would cost \$400, represents 157 months’ pay at minimum wage as of May 2021,^{[24](#)} compared to around 60 months’ pay in May 2019.^{[25](#)}

Venezuelans continue to experience a significant geographical divide in internet access. According to official figures from the fourth quarter of 2019, higher rates of internet use are concentrated in the Capital District and states on the more developed northern coast, such as Miranda, Aragua, and Carabobo. The state of Amazonas, which has a high Indigenous population, only reached 18.2 percent penetration.^{[26](#)} In some border cities of Táchira State, where Venezuelan internet service providers (ISPs) aren’t available, residents rely on Colombian companies.^{[27](#)} Plans for further expansions of high-speed internet service favor cities and areas with high purchasing power.^{[28](#)}

The economic crisis has also affected a variety of sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most educational institutions, including universities, have had to suspend their activities due to the lack of connectivity and devices.^{[29](#)} The Central University of Venezuela, the largest and highest-ranked university in the country, for example, has a data cap of 300 MB for all its facilities and population, which is not sufficient for regular operations.^{[30](#)} Poor families complain about fees and the inability to take classes online, since “recharging the phone is food that cannot be bought.”^{[31](#)}

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 3 / restricting connectivity? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because internet users in Venezuela continued to experience no intentional, prolonged blocking of fixed-line and mobile internet connectivity during the coverage period, though interruptions to social media platforms remain common during politically sensitive events.

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

Users do not experience intentional, prolonged restrictions on fixed-line and mobile internet connectivity. However, “tactical blocks” on communications platforms and key websites are employed to minimize coverage of politically sensitive news.³² During the coverage period, websites restricted under this tactic included a financial transactions website that former National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó—who was named interim president under the constitution in January 2019—used to distribute monetary aid to health-care workers, a website that Guaidó launched as a popular consultation tool during the December 2020 elections, and several virtual private networks (VPNs) (see B1).³³

In March 2020, the National Commission of Telecommunications of Venezuela (CONATEL), the country’s regulatory body, 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. The government’s control of this infrastructure would beget high risks of censorship and surveillance that would outweigh the technical benefits of the IXP’s creation.³⁴ CONATEL announced that it would continue with the project in April 2021.³⁵

A4 0-6 pts

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 economic crisis.

Smaller companies have been able to enter the market, with 22 new providers entering the market between January and May 2021.³⁶ However, some new operators that began providing services in 2021 were suspended for noncompliance with CONATEL regulations.³⁷ Representatives of newer ISPs complain of not receiving timely responses to their requests or of discriminatory treatment, since companies with government-linked managers are favored.³⁸

According to two telecommunications companies’ chief executives, who asked to remain anonymous, the Venezuelan ICT market is difficult and expensive for large operators that have high fixed costs. With smaller investments, in the absence of exchange-rate controls and the informal relaxation of some economic measures, new companies can provide services for consumers with high and medium purchasing power. Politically, companies must remain neutral and refrain from expressing any kind of opinions against the government.³⁹

According to CONATEL’s fourth-quarter 2019 report, the most recent available data, 66.4 percent of the fixed-line broadband market is held by CANTV, while Digitel holds 16.3 percent, and four other providers hold the remainder. The mobile data market is led by Movistar with 48.7 percent, followed by Movilnet with 38.5 percent and Digitel with 12.7 percent.⁴⁰

A May 2019 government decree created a new state-run National Corporation of Telecommunications and Postal Services of Venezuela (CSTSPV), to be headed by CONATEL’s president. According to Article 3, its aim would be to manage the state’s telecommunications companies, enabling it to “acquire all or part of the shares in all those companies and services directly or indirectly related to its corporate purpose, whether owned by national or foreign entities, or merge with them, with prior authorization of the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the Council of Ministers.”⁴¹ After the announcement, Maduro also said that Venezuela would sign agreements with Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE to promote the introduction of new technologies.⁴²

In February 2021, speculation arose about the sale of state-owned mobile service provider Movilnet; however, experts—including a former Movilnet president—argue that such a sale would need to be approved by the National Assembly.⁴³ In December 2019, during the previous coverage period, 91 percent of CANTV shares and 100 percent of Movilnet shares were transferred to the CSTSPV, spurring rumors of a sale.⁴⁴

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 0 / free, fair, and independent manner? 4

CONATEL is responsible for regulating and licensing the telecommunications sector and is administratively dependent on the Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI). 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](#)}

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 2 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

The Maduro government continued blocking digital media and social networks, particularly to limit the activities of those allied to Guaidó. A May 2021 report from the Press and Society Institute of Venezuela (IPYS Venezuela) detailed widespread and persistent online censorship.^{[49](#)}

In May 2021, VE sin Filtro (VE Unfiltered) reported that authorities had blocked Telesur Libre,^{[50](#)} a Guaidó-backed communications platform meant to counter state-owned Telesur TV. Only hours after Telesur Libre was launched, it was inaccessible via CANTV and most private networks.^{[51](#)} Also in May 2021, service providers began to block access to La Patilla, the most visited news site in the country, as well as the alternative domains of Caraota Digital and Alberto News, according to VE sin Filtro.^{[52](#)}

During legislative elections held in December 2020, numerous websites and platforms were blocked, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, 21 national information portals, and numerous media sites. The blocks were observed on CANTV, Movilnet, Digitel, and Movistar.^{[53](#)} Media sites censored on election day included streaming TV channel Vivo Play, NTN24, El Pitazo, Punto de Corte, El Nacional, La Patilla, Runrunes, Efecto Cocuyo, and Crónica Uno, along with the sites of Spanish newspaper *El País* and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Even outlets considered progovernment, such as Globovisión, Aporrea, and state-run VTV, were blocked.^{[54](#)} Authorities also enforced technical restrictions on Voatz, a US-based mobile voting platform that the opposition used to conduct its popular consultation, though it is unclear to what extent the website was affected (B8).^{[55](#)}

In October 2020, VE sin Filtro reported 30 blocks which targeted media sites—namely Vivo Play, Efecto Cocuyo, InSight Crime, Armando.info, and El Nacional—pornography sites, SoundCloud, and Livestream.^{[56](#)} In April 2021, the website of Acceso a la Justicia, a human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), was blocked by CANTV.^{[57](#)}

In August 2020, VE sin Filtro reported the blockings of digital payments platform AirTM, anonymous browsing website Anonymouse, and the Psiphon and TunnelBear VPNs. Guaidó had launched a monetary aid plan for health-care workers through AirTM.^{[58](#)} As of October 2020, the websites appeared to be unblocked.^{[59](#)}

Venezuelan news sites that report critically on the government continued to be blocked. El Pitazo is heavily restricted on most networks.^{[60](#)} Armando.info is also targeted with persistent blocks and has developed extensive outreach methods through social media and email newsletters to distribute content.^{[61](#)}

During the previous coverage period, authorities blocked a website about the COVID-19 pandemic created by the then opposition-controlled National Assembly and Guaidó, coronavirusvenezuela.info, through HTTP and domain name service (DNS) methods. The National Assembly’s site, intended to provide information about the COVID-19 virus, redirected to Guaidó’s site, presidenciaive.com, which was also blocked in March 2020.^{[62](#)} According to VE sin Filtro, both sites remained inaccessible as of October 2020.^{[63](#)}

Experts have noted that this new escalation of censorship is becoming more sophisticated and harder to circumvent, as VPNs and anonymization services are needed to circumvent HTTP, HTTPS, and server name identification (SNI) filtering.^{[64](#)} CANTV has blocked some censorship circumvention tools, such as TunnelBear and Windscribe in 2019.^{[65](#)} Commentators have linked these increasingly sophisticated tactics with the Chinese government’s influence. ZTE notably won a contract with CANTV to implement the Sistema Patria platform (see B5 and C5).^{[66](#)}

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.^{[67](#)}

In October 2020, digital outlet La Gran Aldea was taken offline for over 40 hours because of a false copyright claim that the outlet attributes to the team of former transport minister Haiman El Troudi. La Gran Aldea had published an article linking El Troudi to corruption; according to the outlet’s editor in chief, someone linked to El Troudi copied the article’s contents, dated it earlier than La Gran Aldea’s date of publication, and submitted a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedown request to the outlet’s host.⁶⁸

That same mechanism was attempted against Armando.info. An internet user impersonating journalist Roberto Deniz published a piece under his name on the website Primera Página⁶⁹ and filed a copyright takedown notice against Armando.info. The hosting company did not comply with the request.⁷⁰

El Pitazo’s YouTube channel was taken offline by the platform for over a week in March 2021. The takedown followed a series of user reports that the outlet’s videos violated YouTube’s terms of service. Most of the reported videos were several years old; César Batiz, the outlet’s director, considered the reports suspicious.⁷¹

Transparency reports produced by Twitter, Facebook, and Google did not show significant numbers of removal requests by the Venezuelan government during the past year. Between July and December 2020, Google registered one removal request for defamation, with which it did not comply.⁷² Artists have frequently complained about the removal of content by Facebook for allegedly violating its terms of service when publishing works or photographs that contain nude figures.⁷³

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, 0 / 4 or an independent appeals process?

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 and by private companies.⁷⁴ For years, digital rights organizations, media outlets, journalists, and activists have denounced the lack of transparency of blocking procedures that are not made public.

Frequently blocked online news outlets, such as El Pitazo, have disclosed emails demonstrating how CONATEL gives blocking orders to private operators. In June 2019, El Pitazo published an email from CONATEL ordering Movistar, Inter, and Digitel to block the website without citing an administrative or court order. Batiz requested explanations from both CONATEL and the ISPs but received no responses. In July 2019, Batiz and other directors filed a complaint with the Victim Care Unit of the Public Ministry that went unanswered.⁷⁵

Legislation places excessive responsibility on intermediaries and leave 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.⁷⁶

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because ordinary users increasingly censor themselves in private online communications, as authorities have escalated the arrests of Venezuelans for such content.

Detentions, imprisonment, and legal and extralegal restrictions on certain forms of online speech have encouraged increased self-censorship and preemptive censorship within media outlets.⁷⁷ In its March 2021 report on freedom of information, IPYS Venezuela highlighted the accentuation of fear and silence in the online environment due to pressure and threats from authorities.⁷⁸

Ordinary Venezuelans increasingly censor themselves online, particularly after authorities escalated arrests of everyday internet users for comments made on WhatsApp groups or social media (see C3). 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.⁷⁹ The increasingly broad application of the Law against Hatred (see B3) also limits the scope of content that people are willing to disseminate.⁸⁰ Journalists have also reported that Venezuelans refuse to give statements to the press for fear of reprisal.⁸¹

Government officials generate pressure on media outlets to censor through a variety of tactics. For instance, in February 2021, authorities launched a campaign against media outlets that receive international financing, including Efecto Cocuyo and El Pitazo, in an effort to stigmatize them within Venezuela.⁸² A resolution passed in March 2021 obliges NGOs to register with the government and provide the names of their members, associates, and sources of financing, raising concerns that authorities will use that information to pressure the organizations.⁸³

An October 2019 annual report from NGO Medianálisis, based on interviews with 365 journalists from 141 media outlets, showed evidence of journalists’ vulnerability and their progressive loss of autonomy and independence, due in part to both censorship and self-censorship. According to the report, 38 percent of journalists said they had changed or omitted information to protect their sources.⁸⁴ During the coverage period, several reports emerged of security forces compelling reporters to remove content from their electronic devices, further driving fear within the media.⁸⁵

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

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.⁸⁶ A milestone was arguably reached in 2017, when IYPS Venezuela reported that the Interior Ministry was manipulating online discourse through a “digital army.”⁸⁷ Twitter, which has a high number of politicized users, is frequently used to spread disinformation.⁸⁸

According to the fact-checking network Cazadores de Fake News, the government coordinates users of Carnet de la Patria (Fatherland Card)—an electronic identification card used to channel social aid and introduced in February 2017⁸⁹—to ensure that its narratives are boosted daily on Twitter. MCI 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 Twitter posts about those topics.⁹⁰ A March 2021 report from the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) identified a wide range of opportunities for Venezuelans to receive compensation for sharing government propaganda on social media. The investigation also identified several smaller-scale anti-Maduro and pro-Guaidó operations, as well as campaigns aimed at supporting an armed intervention in the country.⁹¹

In the months ahead of the tightly controlled National Assembly elections in December 2020, which the opposition boycotted, the government propaganda machine tried to position the hashtag #6D, referring to election day. Civil society organizations coordinated to trend topics to counter government narratives, such as messages related to the inadequacy of salaries (#SalariosDe600Dolares), teacher discontent (#DocentesConDignidad), and fuel shortages (#NoEsGasolinaEsLibertad).⁹²

In January 2021, researchers detected a network organized to position an anti-Guaidó narrative on social media, and another to promote support for Luis Parra, who the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) positioned as National Assembly president to undercut Guaidó’s legitimacy.⁹³

Numerous attempts to manipulate online opinions were made during the coverage period. An orchestrated campaign that generated half a million tweets between October 2020 and February 2021 sought to create artificial support for Alex Saab, a Maduro-aligned businessman accused of corruption who is detained in Cabo Verde pending the resolution a US extradition demand. Twitter eventually suspended more than 1,500 accounts active in the campaign, including the accounts of influencers reportedly paid to participate.⁹⁴ In March 2021, Cazadores de Fake News reported on a network of accounts used to create artificial support for the Special Action Forces (FAES), a police unit that has been accused of extrajudicial executions.⁹⁵

In August 2020, Facebook removed a network of fake accounts amplifying pro-opposition content to the Venezuelan audience. The accounts were attributed to US company CLS Strategies and also targeted internet users in Bolivia and Mexico.⁹⁶

An investigation by Medianálisis also discovered that a medical program that serves low-income urban areas with the support of Cuban physicians, Misión Barrio Adentro (Inner City Mission), was the subject of a Twitter campaign used to promote Cuban medical projects abroad, including in Venezuela.⁹⁷

According to ProBox, the Maduro government mainly seeks to disseminate Twitter messages that espouse support of the government, divert attention from events that could harm the government or benefit the opposition, and fracture opposition groups. The executive director of ProBox noted that the abundance of messages produced by Maduro-aligned accounts limits the potential for other actors to have an impact through the platform. Through its tools, ProBox demonstrated that more than 70 percent of the posts associated with civil society groups come from real users, while 60 percent of progovernment messages appeared to originate from bots.⁹⁸

Sistema Patria—a centralized online platform to access key government benefits and services (see C5)—prominently displays online content associated with the Maduro government. The platform integrates users’ social media accounts and recommends who users should follow, primarily recommending accounts belonging to Maduro. The portal also displays Maduro’s Twitter feed and, as of June 2021, directs users to register for the Bicentennial Congress of the Peoples of the World, a pro-Maduro event.⁹⁹

Reports from past coverage periods affirm the state’s widespread efforts in online manipulation. According to DFR Lab, in January 2020, during the disputed swearing-in of National Assembly member Parra to replace Guaidó as the body’s president, a coordinated campaign to elevate two anti-Guaidó hashtags, #NoQueremosAWaidó (We Don’t Want Guaidó) and #HastaNuncaWaidó (Until Never Guaidó) were deployed on Twitter. The hashtags were apparently spread through accounts that “had signs of inauthenticity.” The Twitter campaign was also accompanied by false and misleading information published by state media and posted by several foreign and Venezuelan

politicians.¹⁰⁰ Generally, disinformation targeting Venezuelan users has escalated over the past decade; while opposition groups have sometimes sought to manipulate online information, various studies have shown the government is the primary driver of such campaigns.¹⁰¹

Journalists, NGOs, and citizen networks have launched fact-checking projects, like the Medianálisis-run Venezuelan Fake News Observatory; ProBox, which monitors disinformation on Twitter; EsPaja; and Cazadores de Fake News, among others. Likewise, new digital outlets maintain their own fact-checking units or collaborate with citizen and NGO initiatives.

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content 1 / online? 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 said publicly that there is no way to be sustainable in Venezuela, and that “digital media exist thanks to Google Ads.”¹⁰²

Digital media have tried various business and financing models: crowdfunding campaigns, international support, payment gateways, digital advertising, and media alliances.¹⁰³ According to some editors, receiving philanthropic support from international organizations is problematic, as US dollar–denominated grants necessitate the payment of operating costs through a combination of methods. Employees, for example, can be paid through a mix of PayPal and cash in US dollars and in bolivars. As dollarization has not been formalized, the government can arbitrarily confiscate funding using US currency. Moreover, access to a reliable connectivity service has become extremely difficult because dollarized rates comprise a large share of the budget.¹⁰⁴ The draft of the International Cooperation Law, which was introduced in the National Assembly in April 2021, would regulate and undermine the operation of international NGOs,¹⁰⁵ potentially limiting funding sources for digital media even further.¹⁰⁶

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4

Compared to traditional media, the digital sphere presents a more vibrant space for political and social expression, though the digital divide, connectivity problems, and recurring blocks hinder access to diverse and independent sources of information online. A September 2020 report by IPYS Venezuela determined that digital portals are the most consulted media in 317 municipalities, but only 105 of them have sufficient information coverage.¹⁰⁷ The absence of coverage beyond Caracas has thus hindered the diversity of online information. El Pitazo, the only online outlet with correspondents throughout the country, is very frequently blocked (see B1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ProBox noted that organized civil society managed to gain space in the digital conversation countering misinformation, though government activity remained dominant. In April 2021, it counted 250,000 Twitter posts that had opposition tendencies, were promoted by NGOs, or were linked to social protest, especially referring to the demand for vaccines. However, the PSUV generated more than 50 million Twitter posts and positioned the largest number of trends in Venezuela.¹⁰⁸

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)¹⁰⁹ and Radio Caracas Radio (which has a digital broadcast), as well as most of the new digital media that have emerged since 2014, maintain an independent editorial line.¹¹⁰

Online news initiatives have also emerged in remote areas. The news portal Tana Tanae, for example, is directed by Indigenous Warao journalists. Based in Delta Amacuro State, it covers a range of stories relevant to Indigenous communities.¹¹¹ Efecto Cocuyo, meanwhile, is led by a team of women, and covers topics little explored by other outlets, such as gender and sexual diversity.¹¹²

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, VPNs slow down already precarious connections, and some have been blocked (see B1). In March 2020, El Pitazo updated its app on Google Play, allowing its content to be downloaded and consumed offline.¹¹³ In October 2018, Google launched Intra, an Android application that allows users to circumvent DNS blocking, after several months of testing in Venezuela with local reporters.

According to *Digital 2021*, Venezuela has 14 million active social media users, an increase from the previous year.¹¹⁴ However, misinformation and manipulation of the digital environment, which is the escape valve for Venezuelans, hinder their efforts to keep informed. For instance, in a report published in March 2021, researchers identified widespread COVID-19 misinformation on WhatsApp; 22 percent of the pandemic-related messages sent to a set of monitored WhatsApp groups were misinformation.¹¹⁵

Pandemic-related social media posts made by Maduro and other government officials promoted a series of inventions ranging from miracle cures to conspiracy theories about the coronavirus’s spread, sharply undermining the reliability of online information about the virus. For instance, in early March 2020, Twitter deleted a tweet from Maduro referring to the coronavirus as a “bioterrorist” weapon and promoting home remedies as the miracle cure for

the disease.¹¹⁶ Facebook also blocked Maduro’s account for a month after he promoted a different home remedy in March 2021.¹¹⁷ According to fact-checkers at EsPaja, the majority of statements made by government spokespeople were false.¹¹⁸

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on 4 / political and social issues? 6

The repressive policies of the Maduro government damage 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 to express their discontent on the country’s political and economic crisis and demand change.

Ahead of the December 2020 elections, some citizen initiatives emerged such as Venezuela Documenta, a platform to educate voters about the weakening of democracy and human rights in Venezuela.¹¹⁹ The opposition relied on Telegram and Voatz to reach Venezuelans for its popular consultation, which the opposition presented as an alternative to the elections, alongside more traditional outreach methods.¹²⁰ Authorities also enforced technical restrictions on Voatz, though it is unclear to what extent the website was affected.¹²¹

An April 2020 report from ProBox found a growth in opposition trends linked to social protest, with grievances stemming from the gasoline shortage, collapse of public services, and high costs for food and medicine.¹²² In April 2021, ProBox recorded the highest number of Twitter posts tagged with sociopolitical hashtags since its work began in 2019. Although the ruling party positioned the greatest number of trends, ProBox noted that most progovernment messages were posted by potential bots. Civil society activity trended less but was more organic.¹²³

Despite growing restrictions, NGOs and Venezuelan internet users have continued efforts to raise awareness online and create apps with civic uses. For example, programmers and entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to design applications to help internet users during the COVID-19 pandemic, producing online pharmacy and oxygen-rental directories, a directory that displays health-care sites using Google Maps, and a catalog of businesses that implement health measures.¹²⁴

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 1 / information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that 6 lacks independence?

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression,¹²⁵ the government has passed laws and regulations that curtail this right. Several laws, such as the 2017 anti-hate speech law and Resorte-ME, provide avenues for limiting speech that is deemed to incite hatred, violence, or “anxiety” among the population, including on the internet. Moreover, the prolonged state of exception, in place since 2016, included provisions on countering cyberthreats and authorizing regulations to prevent “destabilization campaigns.”¹²⁶ In December 2020, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice’s (TSJ) constitutional chamber declared the state of exception constitutional.¹²⁷

In November 2020, the same chamber affirmed the extension of the government’s COVID-19-related state of alarm, which was issued in March 2020—its eighth such ruling. According to Acceso a la Justicia, the content of the decree and its potential effects on the freedoms of expression and of the press were unknown, because the decree was not gazetted.¹²⁸

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.¹²⁹

Power has increasingly concentrated in the executive, and 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 Rondón, a parliamentarian and a prominent figure in the PSUV. 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 if the fine was indexed to the article’s publication date of 2015).¹³⁰

To bring more power to the executive, and acting against the provisions of the constitution, Maduro convened the ANC by presidential decree in May 2017. Installed in August that year and composed exclusively of pro-Maduro supporters, this de facto legislative body was handed sweeping powers over other state institutions. Maduro announced the ANC’s dissolution in December 2020, after elections for the National Assembly were held.¹³¹ According to the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2020, which evaluates 128 countries, Venezuela ranked last.¹³²

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that 0 / are protected under international human rights standards? 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.^{[133](#)}

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. 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.^{[134](#)} The law also establishes intermediary liability for content posted by a third party and requires online media to establish mechanisms to restrict prohibited content. Websites found in violation of these provisions may be heavily fined, and service providers who do not comply risk temporary suspension of operations.^{[135](#)}

In March 2021, the National Assembly approved a plan to amend or pass 35 laws, including Resorte-ME and the Cyberspace Law, a leaked draft of which indicates the government will further restrict freedom of expression online (see A5).^{[136](#)}

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 6

Though several digital journalists, publishers, and users were released from prison during the coverage period, many others continued to be arbitrarily detained.^{[137](#)} Users increasingly face arrest for content distributed over WhatsApp and TikTok. In its September 2020 report, a fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council identified arbitrary detentions among the human rights abuses perpetrated by the government, including arbitrary detentions in retaliation for social media posts.^{[138](#)}

Independent journalists and internet users are frequently detained for spreading critical content on social networks. For instance, in July 2020, Nicmer Evans, director of the digital outlet Punto de Corte and former *Chavista*, was arrested by security forces. Evans was accused of “inciting hatred,” most likely in relation to a tweet in which he commented on the COVID-19 infections of several prominent *Chavistas*.^{[139](#)} After 50 days in detention, he was released on September 1 after receiving a pardon from the Maduro government, along with a group of parliamentarians and activists.^{[140](#)}

In June 2020, Javier Gorriño, the security director of the El Hatillo municipality, was detained by the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) for a Twitter post in which he mentioned that Nicolás Maduro and his escorts were at a party in his jurisdiction. He was indicted for incitement to hatred, aggravated by reasons of hatred and intolerance, under the Law against Hatred. Due to his age, he received house arrest.^{[141](#)}

In August 2020, reporter Jesús Medina Ezaine, who has contributed to the website Dólar Today, was arrested in relation to his reporting, but was immediately released.^{[142](#)} Medina was previously held in arbitrary detention for 16 months, until being released in January 2020.^{[143](#)}

María Luisa Arriaga and Marco Aurelio Antonima, both former employees of private television outlet Venevisión, were arrested in June 2020 and charged with incitement to hatred under the anti-hate law. Both reporters were ultimately released but remained under house arrest ahead of their trial. The arrest came after they, along with two other journalists, were accused of running the Twitter account @VV_periodistas which published alleged censorship directives ordered by Venevisión’s management. The account was suspended by Twitter in 2012, but similar anonymous accounts had since emerged.^{[144](#)}

Journalist, human rights defender, and cyberactivist Luis Carlos Díaz remains under precautionary measures pending a trial over his alleged involvement in a plot to cause a blackout. In December 2019, the prosecutor’s office, despite lacking convincing evidence, extended the investigation period in Díaz’s case by one year.^{[145](#)} After the December 2020 deadline, prosecutors did not present signs that they had completed their investigation. The journalist’s lawyers have requested several pronouncements that went unanswered as of March 2021.^{[146](#)}

In June 2021, after the coverage period, Rafael Rattia, a columnist for El Nacional, was arrested for an article in which he criticized a former minister of education. Rattia was detained for two days before being released with precautionary measures.^{[147](#)}

Citizens are also frequently arrested for sharing videos online of protests, queues to supply fuel, or indicators of the humanitarian crisis; such arrests increasingly target people sharing content on WhatsApp and TikTok. In March 2021, Milagros Mata Gil, a 70-year-old writer, was arrested and charged with incitement to hatred for a satirical message she published on WhatsApp and Facebook. Juan Manuel Muñoz, another writer, was also detained. Mata Gil’s message gave an account of how, despite the strict quarantine decreed by the government, a double wedding was carried out in the northeastern city of El Tigre; Attorney General Tarek Saab, a native of El Tigre, was present. After 24 hours, they were released under precautionary measures.^{[148](#)}

TikTok user José Pérez was arrested in February 2021 for a critical message about the daughter of progovernment musician Omar Enrique. After spending 20 days under arrest, Pérez was charged with libel and defamation and released with precautionary measures that included the prohibition to speak publicly about the case, a ban on leaving Venezuela, and a requirement to appear in court every 15 days.^{[149](#)} In April, Luis Morales, also a TikTok user, was

interrogated by intelligence agents, and later dismissed from his job at the Ezequiel Zamora state rail system, for a satirical message about the harmful effects of a Chinese-produced COVID-19 vaccine. Acting on the recommendation of government officials, Morales deleted his TikTok account.^{[150](#)}

Intelligence agents of Aragua State detained professor Fidel Martínez in September 2020 after he called his acquaintances to a peaceful protest via WhatsApp and Facebook. Martínez was charged with public instigation and was released under precautionary measures.^{[151](#)}

Daivis Pacheco Valero, a mechanic, was arrested in the municipality of Valera in August 2020 after recording a group of Trujillo State fire department employees pushing an official vehicle due to lack of gasoline. Valero distributed the video through his social networks; several regional media outlets used the recording as evidence of the fuel shortage. Valero was released under precautionary measures after two days in detention.^{[152](#)} In June 2020, Carlos Augusto Ríos Villamizar and Karelys Betsay Arroyo Carrasquel were accused of inciting hatred, terrorism, “disqualification of police institutions,” and destructively criticizing the state-created fuel supply system for videos posted on social media.^{[153](#)}

In May 2020, during the previous coverage period, doctor Andreina Urdaneta, who worked in a hospital in Cabimas in the state of Zulia, was arrested after publishing a meme depicting an image of Maduro with a rope around his neck as her WhatsApp status. Her arrest took place without a court order, and a criminal court charged her with incitement to hatred and offending the president.^{[154](#)} After being detained for two weeks, Urdaneta was released in June 2020, and was required to appear before the authorities every 30 days.^{[155](#)}

Several raids and media closures took place during the coverage period. In September 2020, Correo del Caroní, a periodical that has published digitally since 2016, was raided. Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) agents seized documents and equipment and detained two employees, who were released shortly after.^{[156](#)} In November 2020, officials raided Venepress, an online news agency, and seized its equipment; Venepress stated it was unaware of the reasoning behind the raid, but presumed that the raid was an act of retaliation by authorities who believe the agency is linked to the opposition.^{[157](#)}

In January 2021, officials from CONATEL, the television regulator, and the national tax agency raided the offices of VPITV, an online television station that previously offered live coverage of the parliament. Officials confiscated equipment and documents and ordered a halt to operations. According to a VPITV staff member, officials argued that the shutdown was the result of VPITV's September 2020 coverage of the gasoline shortage, in apparent violation of the Law against Hatred.^{[158](#)}

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.^{[159](#)} There are no known government restrictions on encryption technologies or other digital privacy tools.

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. In the absence of personal data protection legislation, the destination, storage, and ultimate purpose of the government's collection of information remains unknown.^{[160](#)}

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.^{[161](#)} 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 appetite to invest in intelligence systems and operations.^{[162](#)}

A decree issued in October 2013 created the Strategic Center for the Security and Protection of the Fatherland (CESPPA), a special body charged with monitoring and tracking social media and other online information.^{[163](#)} Agents of the National Guard have also reportedly been trained by the MCI in the management of social networks for the “implementation of early warnings” in order to “truthfully” inform Venezuelans, and detect threats “to defend our national sovereignty.”^{[164](#)}

The government also has means of collecting citizens' personal data through the implementation of public programs. The Carnet de la Patria collects basic data such as address and date of birth, but also other kinds of personal information such as political party membership.^{[165](#)} The mobile app “VeQR-Somos Venezuela” is associated with the Carnet. To request a public benefit, citizens must scan their card's Quick Response (QR) code and activate the Global Positioning System (GPS) of their cell phone, potentially allowing the government to track not only their personal data, but their location.^{[166](#)} According to Reuters, ZTE is working within a special unit of CANTV that manages the Carnet's database.^{[167](#)}

As of 2020, the program has advanced to become the comprehensive Sistema Patria.¹⁶⁸ Through this system, Venezuelans can register to receive social benefits, regardless of whether they own the Carnet. The system is accessed through a website where census-type, sociopersonal, and family information is collected and stored. Once registered with their identity card, users have access to a virtual wallet where they can receive payments, such as pensions.¹⁶⁹ On the platform users find a set of surveys about the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) program; the surveys seek to determine the type of products consumed, among other data.¹⁷⁰

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.¹⁷¹ Beginning in June 2020, access to subsidized gas prices required the vehicle to be registered in Sistema Patria.¹⁷² Fuel customers are allowed to use Sistema Patria wallets or the biopayment system.¹⁷³

The scope of Sistema Patria continues to expand. In April 2020, a "stay at home" bonus for self-employed and independent workers was issued to those who had registered through the system.¹⁷⁴ Venezuelans were also asked to respond to a survey on the coronavirus, which had reportedly received more than 5 million responses as of mid-March 2020.¹⁷⁵ As of October 2020, it also now incorporates payments for public services, such as water and electricity, and purchasing mobile phone data.¹⁷⁶ In December 2020, the government implemented a special bonus for university professors, of an amount that is three times their salaries, but only for those enrolled in Sistema Patria.¹⁷⁷ In March 2021, the government required public universities to pay salaries through the platform.¹⁷⁸ In May 2021, the Ministry of Health announced that COVID-19 vaccinations would be allocated via a lottery among people registered in Sistema Patria, though an alternative for unregistered individuals was also announced.¹⁷⁹

In 2019, the government began implementing Seas Patria, a national system to deliver subsidized food, in conjunction with the Carnet and Sistema Patria.¹⁸⁰ In the program, the national militia, part of the armed forces, is tasked with certifying each family head, in accordance with information provided by Sistema Patria.¹⁸¹ According to the NGO Transparencia Venezuela, there is concern that the program, rather than seeking to mitigate a food shortage, aims to grant more power to the military.¹⁸²

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—including those related to the pandemic—on platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter, indicate that the government is exercising surveillance in these spaces.¹⁸³

In November 2020, the US Treasury Department sanctioned Chinese firm CEIEC for supporting Caracas's digital surveillance efforts.¹⁸⁴ An expert on the relationship between Beijing and Caracas affirmed that technological support for surveillance and social control is a central component.¹⁸⁵

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.¹⁸⁶

In late May 2020, the Fake Antenna Detection Project reported that it had found anomalous activity in at least 33 cell antennas in Caracas. 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. Although the antennas may suggest configuration problems, they could also indicate the use of cellular surveillance equipment posing as legitimate antennas, known as international mobile subscriber identity (IMSI) catchers.¹⁸⁷

According to Carlos Guerra, one of the project's main researchers, who uses these surveillance devices is impossible to know. Generally, Guerra claims they are used by security forces, sometimes legally in the framework of police investigations, but also secretly to surveil extralegally. Regulations for police and security forces in Venezuela to prevent them from conducting surveillance are almost nonexistent. The project's study, which observed that the teams operating the equipment are in headquarters of security agencies, led researchers to believe that the antenna can be operated by personnel from these same agencies for intelligence purposes.¹⁸⁸

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 could lead to a national crisis. The group also reportedly perpetrates cyberattacks against Venezuelan websites and news sites (see C8) and coordinates with CANTV to block media outlets.¹⁸⁹

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 2 / infringe on users' right to privacy? 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.¹⁹⁰

Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera, a former SEBIN director and refugee living in the United States, revealed in April 2020 to independent news outlet Tal Cual 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. He identified Movistar as one of the companies that have taken such action. Moreover, the phone numbers of soldiers who had opposed the government in April 2019 and fled Venezuela were cloned with telecommunications companies’ knowledge. The phone numbers were then used to create fake social media accounts of the soldiers, reach out to other users, and persecute or detain anyone who expressed support.^{[191](#)}

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 sensitive information of bank customers.^{[192](#)} In August 2018, SUDEBAN introduced a measure to restrict access to internet banking to customers outside of Venezuela, though the banking regulator announced that Venezuelans abroad would have such access in December 2018.^{[193](#)}

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? **1 / 5**

Journalists, including those who work online, face violence, intimidation, threats, and physical attacks from the state, security forces, and civilians, amidst an environment of impunity. Two journalists who worked with a television outlet that publishes online were killed by security forces for unclear reasons.

In its September 2020 report, the fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council to Venezuela identified torture in detention and extrajudicial executions during security operations among the human rights abuses perpetrated by the government, including arbitrary detentions in retaliation for social media posts.^{[194](#)} Physical attacks against journalists are common; for instance, the journalists’ union presented a list detailing 39 attacks in August 2020 alone.^{[195](#)}

Jamel Louka, a journalist with *Diario La Antena* and El Pitazo, was shot in the arm during a kidnapping attempt in December 2020. While Louka was unaware of an explicit motive, he had regularly reported on the country’s economic crisis, prompting concerns of retaliation.^{[196](#)}

In August 2020, Andrés Eloy Nieves Zacarías, community broadcaster member of the PSUV youth, and Victor Torres, both of the Guacamaya TV outlet in the city of Cabimas, were assassinated by the FAES. Torres’s father, who directs the station, said that the police also seized equipment after the murders.^{[197](#)} Guacamaya TV appears to publish primarily online,^{[198](#)} though it is unclear if the extrajudicial killing was retaliation for the outlet’s reporting. The perpetrators face trial, though the proceedings have been criticized for giving too much leniency to the defendants.^{[199](#)}

Also in August 2020, several journalists, including those from outlets El Pitazo and VPITV, were attacked by violent groups at the headquarters of the Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) party in Caracas while reporting on a similar attack the day before.^{[200](#)}

Espacio Público and IPYS Venezuela, NGOs that defend freedom of expression and information, detailed intimidation and harassment campaigns against journalists, as well as homophobic attacks, during 2020.^{[201](#)} For instance, Twitter users attacked Carlos Seijas Meneses, a Tal Cual reporter, with threatening and homophobic messages, after he published a series of reports on the LGBT+ community in July 2020.^{[202](#)}

Since the installation of the National Assembly after the December 2020 elections, the attacks on independent media increased, encouraged by statements by important officials like Diosdado Cabello Rondón. Cabello has accused some outlets, particularly Efecto Cocuyo, of being “mercenaries of journalism” and of receiving money from the United Kingdom to help overthrow the government.^{[203](#)} In February 2021, Cabello suggested the government investigate Efecto Cocuyo for sharing an investigation into the presence of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) officers in Venezuela.^{[204](#)} Cabello’s attack was accompanied by Twitter harassment from Venezuelan internet users, including accounts linked to the military.^{[205](#)}

Harassment and smear campaigns promoted by state actors, like progovernment platforms Lechuguinos and La Tabla, targeted various journalists and human rights defenders during the coverage period, including Roberto Deniz of Armando.info.^{[206](#)} Erika Hernández of El Nacional, Gregoria Díaz and Celina Carquez of Crónica Uno,^{[207](#)} and Marianela Balbi, executive director of IPYS Venezuela.^{[208](#)}

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, and there is strong suspicion that the state is behind them. During the coverage period, media sites—including Tal Cual, Armando.info, La Gran Aldea, and El Diario—reported cyberattacks.

Armando.info was targeted with three major distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks and numerous brute force attacks at the end of 2020, which the outlet determined to originate in Russia, Ukraine, and Latvia.²⁰⁹ El Diario reported facing a DDoS attack in July 2020, La Gran Aldea was targeted by such an attack in September 2020, and Tal Cual was targeted in January 2021.²¹⁰ Some outlets, however, have been developing measures to stop these attacks; for instance, Armando.info and El Pitazo have purchased Cloudflare services.²¹¹

In April 2021, the hacking collective Anonymous Venezuela announced that it had declared "a state of Cyber War against the government." That same day, several state services, including the Banco de Venezuela biopayment system, were inaccessible; Anonymous Venezuela claimed responsibility for the outages.²¹² The website of the National Institute of Hygiene was hacked after publishing COVID-19 death figures in September 2020.²¹³

During the previous coverage period, digital media sites including Crónica.uno, Noticiero Digital, CNVE24, and El Pitazo were victims of DDoS attacks. According to an October 2019 report, the armed forces were likely behind the attacks, through coordination between CANTV and the cyberdefense room of CEOFANB. Websites belonging to news site CNVE24 received over 1,000 attacks for more than 12 hours in September 2019, while El Pitazo was offline for several hours after a DDoS attack that July.²¹⁴

The Special Law against Computer Crimes, in force since 2001, has provisions that penalize these cyberattacks, though they have not been applied.²¹⁵

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