



FREEDOM ON THE NET 2022

Venezuela

NOT FREE

30
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	7/25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	12/35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	11/40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

28 /100 Not Free

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



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, and internet services remain unaffordable for most Venezuelans. Blocks to websites covering politically sensitive news, long implemented by the state-owned internet service provider (ISP), are increasingly put in place by private ISPs. 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 citizens' personal data. Independent journalists, the majority of whom work in online media, remain subject to arrest and harassment in retaliation for their work.

Venezuela's democratic institutions have deteriorated since 1999, but conditions have grown significantly worse in recent years due to harsh crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party's reliance on widely condemned elections to control all branches of the government. President Nicolás 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, 2021 - May 31, 2022

- The Maduro government blocked access to websites during politically sensitive times, including the November 2021 regional elections, and private ISPs were found to have blocked news websites that had previously only been blocked by state-owned internet service provider (ISP) CANTV. Unlike in past coverage periods, the government did not block social media platforms or restrict fixed-line or mobile internet connectivity (see A3 and B1).
- The government continued to manipulate the online sphere with influence operations that featured official accounts, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and disinformation campaigns against journalists. In December 2021, Twitter

reported removing a network of accounts that had been amplifying official state narratives using the “Twitter Patria” app, which granted the government access to users’ account activity (see B5).

- In March 2022, the government launched Ven App, a Venezuelan social network and mobile app. Ven App, which maintains messaging, file-sharing, and group-joining functions common to most social networking platforms, sparked concern from civil society over its potential to further empower the government to manipulate online discussions and its excessive privacy permissions (see B5 and C5).
- In 2021, Public Space (Espacio Público), a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization (NGO), recorded the fewest number of arrests in reprisal for “questioning officials and public policies through their social networks” since 2016, noting a nearly 40 percent year-to-year decrease in cases. Arrests for online activities continued, however, frequently under spurious pretenses such as inciting hatred, and ending in release under precautionary measures (see C3).
- Physical violence in reprisal for individuals’ online activities, though still a threat to users, was recorded to a lesser extent than in recent years. Nevertheless, journalists for online outlets faced violence while covering political events, and Venezuela-based family members of journalists living in exile faced raids and interrogations by authorities (see C7).

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

2 / 6

Venezuela’s economic crisis, marked by multiple years of recession and hyperinflation, has hindered the country’s electrical and 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 53.66 percent as of the end of 2020, a more than 7 percent decrease from the year prior. ² In contrast, DataReportal’s *Digital in 2022* report indicates internet penetration of 72 percent as of January 2022. According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Public Services (OVSP),

38.1 percent of people had access to fixed-line connections at home as of October 2021. Additionally, 80.4 percent of people owned smartphones with which they could access the internet at this time, though around half of respondents reported daily failures in cellular data service. **3**

Regional blackouts limited connectivity in many states during at least eight months of the coverage period. **4** According to Venezuelan NGO VE Unfiltered (VE sin Filtro), 6 out of 10 connectivity disruptions in 2021 were caused by electrical failures. **5** For instance, authorities attributed a multi-hour blackout in December to an attack on the national electric system. The blackout, which saw connectivity plummet, impacted Caracas, along with at least 15 of Venezuela's 23 states. **6** Likewise, partial blackouts and power rationing schemes persist in several cities; in Maracaibo, for instance, some residents lack service for hours each day. **7**

According to analysts, demand for connectivity exceeds supply. **8** Though new providers have emerged to fill demand and increased speeds in some cities, **9** most rural areas lack access to high-quality internet service, with many areas served almost exclusively by state-owned CANTV (see A2). **10**

As of August 2022, according to Ookla's Speedtest Global Index, median mobile speeds in Venezuela were the third slowest globally, with Venezuela ranking 138th of 140 countries reviewed. Venezuelans saw a median mobile download speed of 5.37 megabits per second (Mbps) and median upload speed of 3.24 Mbps, along with a median fixed-line download speed of 11.10 Mbps and median upload speed of 8.59 Mbps. **11** The Press and Society Institute of Venezuela (IPYS) measured the average browsing speed at 1.5 Mbps as of January 2021. **12**

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 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. **13** Strict state controls on access to foreign currency have resulted in a flourishing illegal market in which ordinary Venezuelans must pay higher

conversion rates. The gap between the official rate and the black-market rate remains significant.

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. **14**

Internet services remain unaffordable for most Venezuelans. Although state-owned CANTV's rates are the least expensive, they are still inaccessible for many; following an increase in rates October 2021—the sixth that year—plans ranged from \$3 per month for 4 Mbps service to \$15 per month for 22 Mbps service. Even the cheapest plan exceeds the capacity of someone paid minimum wage, which stood at 10 bolivars (\$2.25) in October 2021. **15** While the monthly minimum wage was raised to roughly 126 bolivars (\$28) in March 2022, **16** CANTV users often pay over half that amount for internet services. **17** CANTV's cheapest plans tend to be unavailable for new contracts, and users complain about recurring service failures. **18** In May 2022, CANTV began offering high-speed fiber optic plans of up to 300 Mbps for up to \$100 per month in East Caracas, where some of the country's highest purchasing power is concentrated. **19**

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 May 2022. **20** Rising prices further keep these services out of reach; between February 2020 and July 2021, fixed broadband rates reportedly increased by over 5,000 percent. **21**

Despite the March 2022 monthly minimum wage increase, the prices of electronic devices remain out of reach for many Venezuelans. A midrange smartphone, which would cost \$400, represents over 14 months' pay at minimum wage as of May 2022.

22

Venezuelans experience a significant geographical divide in internet access. In some border cities of Táchira and Zulia States, where Venezuelan internet service providers (ISPs) aren't available, residents rely on Colombian companies. **23** According to official figures from the end of 2020, 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 14.8 percent penetration. ²⁴ The lack of service in predominantly Indigenous areas has led to sometimes disastrous consequences, as in March 2022, when four members of the Yamomami community were killed by military officers in a confrontation over a shared Wi-Fi connection. ²⁵

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 lower levels of access in low-income areas. ²⁶ In the Chacao municipality of Caracas—the smallest of the city’s five—for instance, there are about 50 ISPs. ²⁷

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, and students from poor families have been unable to take classes online due to the cost of connectivity. ²⁸

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?	4/6
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Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because internet users in Venezuela continued to experience no intentional, prolonged blocking of fixed-line and mobile internet connectivity and experienced no blocks to social media platforms during the coverage period.

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, though the government regularly blocks communications platforms and key websites to minimize coverage of politically sensitive news (see B1).

29

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. ³⁰ CONATEL announced that it would continue with the project in April 2021, but the project had not been implemented by the end of the coverage period.

³¹

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. ³² However, some new operators that began providing services in 2021 were later suspended for noncompliance with CONATEL regulations. ³³ 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. ³⁴

According to two telecommunications companies' chief executives, 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. ³⁵

According to CONATEL's fourth-quarter 2020 report, the most recent available data, 65.68 percent of the fixed-line broadband market is held by CANTV, while Digitel, Intercable, Telefonica, and Movilnet hold 13.66, 8.04, 6.58, and 4.46 percent,

respectively; other small providers hold the remaining 1.59 percent of the market. The mobile broadband market is led by Movistar with 59.34 percent, followed by Movilnet with 22.09 percent and Digitel with 18.57 percent. **36**

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 of the decree, it aims to manage the state's telecommunications companies, including through acquisitions and mergers.

37 After the announcement, Maduro also said that Venezuela would sign agreements with Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE to promote the introduction of new technologies. **38**

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. **39** 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. **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**

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 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. **42**

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, **43** 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.” ⁴⁴ 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.” ⁴⁵ Maduro reaffirmed his intention to regulate social networks in June 2021. ⁴⁶

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

The Maduro government continued blocking digital media during the coverage period. While social media platforms were not blocked, unlike in past coverage periods, private ISPs were found to have blocked news websites that had previously only been blocked by the state-owned ISP. A number of virtual private networks (VPNs) remained blocked by CANTV and some private providers. ⁴⁷

A February 2022 report from VE Sin Filtro detailed widespread and persistent online censorship of several digital media outlets. ⁴⁸ On February 1, CANTV and private ISPs Movistar, Digitel, Inter, Net Uno, and Supercable, blocked news websites Efecto Cocuyo, Crónica Uno, and EVTU. ⁴⁹ Though CANTV has blocked these sites for years, their blocking by private ISPs is unprecedented. ⁵⁰

Later that month, most main ISPs also blocked major news outlet El Nacional. ⁵¹ The blocks began two days after the first vice president of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Diosdado Cabello, had vaguely threatened to go after the outlet after its editor in chief posted a tweet denouncing a 2021 court ruling that had

awarded Cabello control of El Nacional’s headquarters as part of a defamation case against the outlet (see C1). **52**

According to a VE sin Filtro report, during regional elections held in November 2021, at least 56 domains belonging to a total of 49 websites—the majority of which were news media categories—were blocked. The majority of domains were blocked by at least five ISPs, and more than half were blocked by all providers. CANTV and at least five private ISPs also blocked the VPNs Psiphon and Tunnel Bear. **53** According to monitoring by the European Union Electoral Observation Mission in Venezuela, while government-aligned news websites were constantly accessible in all states through any ISP during this time, independent online media websites such as El Pitazo or Armando.info were very difficult or impossible to access in 16 of the 23 states. **54**

Some of the critical news sites found to be blocked during this period had been heavily restricted previously, including El Pitazo, which had been blocked on most networks during the previous coverage period. **55** Armando.info had also previously been targeted with persistent blocks, and had developed extensive outreach methods through social media and email newsletters to distribute content. **56** Similarly, after being blocked in February 2022, Efecto Cocuyo began to distribute its contents through WhatsApp and Telegram. **57**

Another blocking of political content during the coverage period was that of the portal of the former director of the intelligence services, Hugo “El Pollo” Carvajal, in October 2021. Carvajal—who was in Spain at the time awaiting extradition to the United States on drug trafficking charges—had expressed his intention to use the portal to expose “what happens behind [closed] doors” in Spain’s National High Court and share his version of events. The portal was blocked by CANTV and five major ISPs in the country. **58**

The previous coverage period featured blocks to numerous news websites and social media platforms. During the legislative elections held in December 2020, CANTV, Movilnet, Digitel, and Movistar blocked a number of websites, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and 21 national information portals. **59** Later, in May 2021, VE sin Filtro reported that authorities had blocked Telesur Libre, **60** 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.

Experts have noted that this escalating 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. ⁶²

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). ⁶³

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. ⁶⁴

Recent reporting has illuminated the continued operations of Spanish reputation management company Eliminalia in Venezuela, where they were first detected in 2016. The company, which has been found to use false copyright claims and legal notices to get online content taken down, reportedly issued at least 16 fraudulent copyright-based takedown requests to Google on behalf of Venezuelan clients from May 2019 to March 2021. According to investigative reports by El Pitazo, Eliminalia's work in Venezuela is aimed at laundering the reputation of corrupt individuals linked to the government. ⁶⁵

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. ⁶⁶

During the previous coverage period, 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. ⁶⁷

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 and by private companies. ⁶⁸ For years, digital rights organizations, media outlets, journalists, and activists have denounced the lack of transparency of blocking procedures that are not made public.

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. ⁶⁹

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. ⁷⁰

In April 2022, IPYS Venezuela reported that nearly 54 percent of communication professionals had omitted information of public interest specifically out of fear of reprisals. ⁷¹ According to an annual report from NGO Espacio Público that tracked free expression in 2021 and the first quarter of 2022, less than 40 percent of the media report on the nation’s political and economic crisis, in part out of fear of retaliation. ⁷²

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. ⁷³ Journalists have also reported that Venezuelans refuse to give statements to the press for fear of reprisal. ⁷⁴

The increasingly broad application of the Law against Hatred (see B3) also limits the scope of content that people are willing to disseminate. ⁷⁵ Among other recommendations, a report by the EU election observation mission following the November 2021 elections noted that the Law against Hatred should be repealed to end self-censorship. ⁷⁶

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. ⁷⁷ A milestone was arguably reached in 2017, when IYPS Venezuela reported that the Interior Ministry was manipulating online discourse through a “digital army.” ⁷⁸

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. ProBox research indicates 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. ⁷⁹

Numerous attempts to manipulate online opinions were made or revealed during the coverage period. Reporting by ProBox and Caracas Chronicles from November 2021 revealed how the government worked to shape online narratives during a visit made by International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Karim Khan, who traveled to Venezuela that month to investigate crimes perpetrated by the Maduro government against Venezuelans. The Ministry of Information promoted four hashtags that aimed to portray the country's justice system as functional and the government as fully cooperative. The ministry promoted #VenezuelaGarantizaLaJusticia (Venezuela Guarantees Justice), for instance, with 75 percent of tweets using that hashtag stemming from inauthentic activity; tweets using another ministry-promoted hashtag, #VenezuelaJusticiaSoberana (Venezuela Sovereign Justice), originated from inauthentic activity in nearly 69 percent of cases. ⁸⁰

In December 2021, Twitter reported that it had removed a network of 277 accounts that had been amplifying progovernment content and official state narratives. Many of those involved in the influence operation had authorized the Twitter Patria app, which granted the government access to their account activity. ⁸¹ According to analysis by fact-checking network Cazadores de Fake News, 18 of the implicated accounts had been engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior to promote the Chávez and Maduro governments since 2012, using a set of applications that automatically tweeted and retweeted content from *Chavista* political leaders, including from Maduro's Twitter account. Cazadores de Fake News found another 56 accounts to be semi-automated. The outlet reported that between November 2020 and December 2021, Twitter had permanently suspended 2,000 accounts that had been part of the Tuiteros of the Fatherland (Tuiteros de la Patria) network, using the Twitter Patria app to manipulate online narratives. ⁸² Twitter suspended the Twitter Patria app in December 2021.

Also in December 2021, Cazadores de Fake News reported on nine different coordinated online campaigns that had been carried out in 2020 and 2021, primarily on Twitter, to discredit, harass, and spread disinformation on Venezuelan journalists and communicators (see C7). ⁸³ Armando.info journalist Roberto Deniz was a frequent target of these operations. Between April and June 2021, Arroba Percepción, a so-called digital reputation firm, was involved in creating a network of at least 22 news portals that spread disinformation about Deniz and Infodio.com journalist Alex Boyd, including accusing them of extortion. Articles from these portals were

sometimes shared by accounts exhibiting bot-like behavior. ⁸⁴ ProBox identified the #DenizExtorsionador (Deniz Extortionist) campaign in November 2021, following the extradition of Alex Saab, a Maduro-aligned businessman to the United States on charges of corruption, which Armando.info had been investigating and reporting on. Of the more than 41,600 tweets that contained the #DenizExtorsionador hashtag, over 60 percent were generated by potentially automated or fake accounts. ⁸⁵

The government has further extended its online influence via 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. The platform integrates users’ social media accounts and recommends who users should follow, primarily recommending accounts belonging to Maduro, and also displays Maduro’s Twitter feed. February 2021 reporting from Cazadores de Fake News revealed how the government coordinates users of Carnet de la Patria (Fatherland Card)—an electronic identification card used to channel social aid and introduced in February 2017 ⁸⁶ —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. ⁸⁷ 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. ⁸⁸

The government’s March 2022 launch of Ven App, a Venezuelan social network and mobile app, sparked further concern about the government’s capacity to manipulate online narratives (see C5). ⁸⁹ Ven App 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; the app’s “Line 58” channel allows registered users to submit complaints about public services directly to the government, for instance. ⁹⁰

Digital rights advocates have warned, however, against the app’s potential use as a state tool for political organizing in the future, including during 2024 presidential elections. Should the government exclusively offer access to public services through *Chavista* or progovernment Ven App channels, for instance, users will be subject to state-peddled information when attempting to access these services. Furthermore,

journalist Arnaldo Espinoza noted that an earlier version of Ven App was used by *Chavistas* to monitor the November 2021 regional elections. ⁹¹ In May 2022, researchers at Cazadores de Fake News found links between the development of the app and Panamanian companies that previously developed similar apps to promote “digital governance” in Panama and the Dominican Republic; one company describes its members as “strategists who win elections.” ⁹² As of June 2022, Ven App had been downloaded more than 100,000 times. ⁹³

In October 2021, US-based think tank Global Americans, in collaboration with a number of organizations, including Venezuelan nonprofit Medianálisis, reported on overt and direct efforts by Russia and China to spread disinformation in Venezuela in support of the Maduro government. ⁹⁴

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.” ⁹⁵

Digital media have tried various business and financing models: crowdfunding campaigns, international support, payment gateways, digital advertising, and media alliances. ⁹⁶ The draft of the International Cooperation Law, which was introduced in the National Assembly in April 2021 but had not been approved as of the end of the coverage period, would regulate and undermine the operation of international NGOs, ⁹⁷ potentially limiting funding sources for digital media even further. ⁹⁸

B7 0-4 pts

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. ⁹⁹ This absence of coverage limits the diversity of online information available beyond Caracas. El Pitazo, the only online outlet with correspondents throughout the country, is very frequently blocked (see B1).

Misinformation and manipulation of the digital environment, including in pandemic-related social media posts made by Maduro and other government officials, has hampered the efforts of independent outlets to keep the public informed. ¹⁰⁰ Venezuelan digital information-focused NGO ProBox noted that organized civil society managed to gain space in the digital conversation countering misinformation in the early months of the pandemic, though government activity remained dominant. 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.

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) ¹⁰² 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. ¹⁰³

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. ¹⁰⁴ In May 2022, El Pitazo launched the weekly Alatakaa podcast, which is disseminated via WhatsApp groups and covers news in the Indigenous Wayuu language. ¹⁰⁵ 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. ¹⁰⁶

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 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. ¹⁰⁷

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

4/6

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 have actively used digital platforms to express their discontent on the country's political and economic crisis and demand change.

In April 2021, ProBox recorded the highest number of Twitter posts tagged with sociopolitical hashtags since its work began in 2019. ¹⁰⁸ While ProBox did not identify much online political debate during the November 2021 regional elections, the digital observatory did identify online activism around nationwide power failures at this time. The most frequently used hashtag for civil society during this period, #SinLuz, was used on at least 26 posts reporting the failures. ¹⁰⁹ Further, despite the repressive conditions, online electoral debate has emerged in the past. Ahead of the December 2020 elections, for instance, some citizen initiatives developed, such as Venezuela Documenta, a platform intended to educate voters about the weakening of democracy and human rights in Venezuela. ¹¹⁰

Though facing 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 healthcare sites using Google Maps, and a catalog of businesses that implement health measures. ¹¹¹

C. Violations of User Rights

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, ¹¹² 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. Moreover, the prolonged state of exception, in place since 2016, included provisions on countering cyberthreats and authorizing regulations to prevent “destabilization campaigns.” ¹¹³ In December 2020, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice’s (TSJ) constitutional chamber declared the state of exception constitutional. ¹¹⁴

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 Venezuelan NGO Access to Justice, 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. ¹¹⁵

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. ¹¹⁶

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, 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 if the fine was indexed to the article’s publication date of 2015). ¹¹⁷

In August 2021, the 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 Diosdado Cabello. The judge presiding over the case is the sister of the comptroller of the Maduro administration. **118**

To bring more power to the executive, and acting against the provisions of the constitution, Maduro convened the National Constituent Assembly (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. **119**

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
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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. **120**

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. **121**

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 that the government plans to further restrict freedom of expression online (see A5). **122**

C3 0-6 pts

According to an annual report by Espacio Público, 2021 saw the fewest number of arrests as “reprisals after questioning officials and public policies through their social networks” since 2016. The NGO documented at least 246 cases in 2021, a decrease of 37 percent from the year prior. ¹²³ Nevertheless, arrests for online activities continue to occur, frequently under spurious pretenses alleging instigation to hatred and ending in release under precautionary measures (see C2). ¹²⁴

Independent journalists and internet users are frequently detained for spreading critical content on social networks. Nurse Ada Macuare, for instance, was arrested in July 2021, three days after denouncing the vaccine shortage and low wages for healthcare workers via WhatsApp. Macuare was charged with incitement to hatred and terrorism and detained for 13 days before being granted her provisional freedom in August, with precautionary measures requiring her to appear in court every 30 days. ¹²⁵

In June 2021, Rafael Rattia, a columnist for El Nacional, was arrested for an article in which he criticized a former minister of education and charged with incitement to hatred. Rattia was detained for two days before being released with precautionary measures. ¹²⁶

Humor is not exempt from being penalized. The homes of humorists Napoleón Rivero and Reuben Morales were raided and their work equipment was seized by Venezuelan authorities in September 2021 ¹²⁷ after they published a parody YouTube video in which they referred to the poor state of public utilities and the scarcity of public services, for which they hold the PSUV responsible. They were charged with hate speech and computer crimes. Both, who live in Colombia, have Venezuelan warrants for their arrest. ¹²⁸

In April 2021, Olga Mata de Gil and her son Florencio were arrested for a TikTok she posted in which she was making *arepas* with fillings named after government officials. In the video, Mata de Gil made a play on words, using the ingredients to allude to officials’ past scandals. She also made a *viuda arepa* (a widow arepa, without filling) inspired by first lady Cilia Flores, stating that “we all wish for” Flores to become widowed. Attorney General Tarek William Saab then accused her of “inciting the

assassination of public figures” in a Twitter post. She was ultimately charged with inciting hatred and released after public outcry with an order to appear in court every 30 days and to post a public apology video from police headquarters. ¹²⁹

The coverage period saw some positive developments in cases against journalists that were initiated years prior. In September 2021, five years after his initial arrest, journalist Braulio Jatar was acquitted of all charges. Jatar, the director of independent news outlet Reporte Confidencial, had been imprisoned for nine months in 2016 following an arrest coinciding with his publishing on anti-Maduro protests. He had been placed under house arrest in 2017 and released in 2019, though with restrictions on travel and a mandate to appear in court every 15 days. ¹³⁰

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. The case, over Díaz’s alleged involvement in a plot to cause a blackout, had been ongoing for nearly three years; it began when he was arbitrarily detained in March 2019 while covering an electricity blackout. He was released shortly thereafter under precautionary measures. ¹³¹

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. ¹³² 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).

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. **133**

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. **134** 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. **135**

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. **136** 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... national sovereignty.” **137**

The government also has means of collecting citizens’ personal data through the implementation of public programs. The Carnet de la Patria collects basic data, including users’ address and date of birth, as well as other personal information, such as political party membership. **138** The mobile app VeQR-Somos Venezuela is associated with the Carnet. To request public benefits, citizens must scan their card’s Quick Response (QR) code and activate their cell phone’s Global Positioning System (GPS), potentially allowing the government to track both their personal data and their location. **139** According to Reuters, ZTE is working within a special unit of CANTV that manages the Carnet’s database. **140**

As of 2020, the program has advanced to become the comprehensive Sistema Patria. **141** Through this system, Venezuelans can register to receive social benefits, regardless of whether they own the Carnet, to access a virtual wallet where they can

receive payments, such as pensions. ¹⁴² 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. ¹⁴³ Beginning in June 2020, access to subsidized gas prices required the vehicle to be registered in Sistema Patria. ¹⁴⁴ Fuel customers are allowed to use Sistema Patria wallets or the biopayment system. ¹⁴⁵

The scope of Sistema Patria continues to expand. As of October 2020, it also incorporates payments for public services, such as water and electricity, and purchasing mobile phone data. ¹⁴⁶ 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. ¹⁴⁷ 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. ¹⁴⁸

Venezuelans will also be able to connect with the 1x10 of Good Governance system through Ven App (see B5). ¹⁴⁹ Digital rights advocates have raised serious concerns over Ven App's threats to user privacy. To download the app, users must allow access to their real-time geolocation and phone camera, and 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. ¹⁵⁰

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 Twitter indicate that the government is exercising surveillance in these spaces. ¹⁵¹

In November 2020, the US Treasury Department sanctioned Chinese firm CEIEC for supporting the Venezuelan government's digital surveillance efforts. ¹⁵² An expert on the relationship between Beijing and Caracas affirmed that technological support for surveillance and social control is a central component. ¹⁵³

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. ¹⁵⁴ In October 2021, the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) broadcast via state

television their use of Cellebrite's 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. ¹⁵⁵

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. ¹⁵⁶ The project's study, which observed that the teams operating the equipment are located in headquarters of security agencies, led researchers to believe that the antennas can be operated by security forces for intelligence purposes. ¹⁵⁷

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. ¹⁵⁸

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?	2 / 6
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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. ¹⁵⁹

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. 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. **160**

In a 2021 transparency report, published in August 2022, after the coverage period, Telefonica, which owns Movistar, revealed that more than 1.5 million phone lines belonging to Movistar users had been affected by the interception of communications that year. This represents around 20 percent of all Movistar users in the country. **161**

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. **162**

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
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Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because physical violence in reprisal for individuals' online activities, though still a threat to users, especially online journalists, was recorded to a lesser extent than in recent years.

Journalists, including those who work online, face violence, intimidation, threats, and sometimes physical attacks from the state, security forces, and civilians, within an environment of impunity.

In its September 2020 report, the fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) 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.

163

Journalists for online outlets sometimes face violence while covering political events. In January 2022, while covering a referendum, journalists Juan Carlos Neira of Noticiero Digital and Jesús Rey of digital news platform Portuguesa Reporta were harassed and intimidated. Neira was beaten and his equipment was stolen by unknown actors, and one of Mayor Rafael Torrealba's bodyguards asked Rey for his press credentials and demanded that he erase the photos he had taken of a collection of signatures for the referendum. **164**

Physical attacks against journalists more broadly are also not uncommon. In June 2021, writer and journalist Milagros Mata-Gil was the victim of a knife attack by two unknown aggressors. Mata-Gil had been arrested and briefly detained in April 2021, accused of incitement to hatred for writing and sharing an article over WhatsApp and Facebook in which she alleged that Attorney General Saab had attended a party held during the COVID-19 pandemic without health or safety measures. After being released, she reported having been told that she could not write about the topic or the people involved over social networks. **165** The reason for the attack remains unknown.

Physical violence against journalists was also recorded during the previous coverage period. In August 2020, several journalists, including those from outlets El Pitazo and VPItv, were attacked by violent groups at the headquarters of the Democratic Action (Acción Democrática) party in Caracas while reporting on a similar attack the day before. **166** 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 the motive behind the attack, he had regularly reported on the country's economic crisis, prompting concerns of retaliation. **167**

Intimidation and harassment campaigns against journalists, sometimes promoted by state actors, are common. Some journalists have been forced into exile due to such threats, **168** and the Venezuela-based family members of journalists living in exile sometimes face harassment from authorities. In October 2021, Venezuelan authorities

raided the Caracas home of Armando.info journalist Roberto Deniz's parents. The previous day, officials had issued an arrest warrant for Deniz, who was living in exile in Colombia at the time, on charges of incitement to hatred (see C3). The search reportedly lasted several hours; authorities did not confiscate anything, but brought Deniz's brother to police headquarters and interrogated him, before releasing him without charge. ¹⁶⁹ Deniz was also targeted with coordinated online campaigns to discredit, harass, and spread disinformation about him during the coverage period (see B5). ¹⁷⁰

NGO Espacio Público has also 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. ¹⁷¹

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 and RunRunes Web—reported cyberattacks. ¹⁷²

In February 2022, Tal Cual reported being the victim of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack. The outlet attributed the attack to its reporting on a businessman's birthday party, attended by government officials, that was held atop a natural monument in violation of environmental regulations. Investigative outlet RunRunes Web's website was reportedly targeted with a cyberattack in December 2021, the same week that the outlet reported on new construction projects—funded by private companies and approved by the Maduro administration—that pose a threat to a national park. ¹⁷³ During the previous coverage period, several news outlets were targeted with cyberattacks, including Tal Cal, which was targeted with a DDoS attack in January 2021.. ¹⁷⁴

In April 2022, VE sin Filtro reported documenting an increase in phishing attempts over WhatsApp over the past few years. They also reported that they had assisted

more journalists, activists, and civil society members targeted with these attacks in 2021 than in previous years. In one incident, an NGO lost control of a WhatsApp account that it used to communicate with victims of human rights violations in an attack that was likely perpetrated by or in coordination with state actors. **175**

Government institutions have also been subject to cyberattacks in the past. 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. **176**

The Special Law against Computer Crimes, in force since 2001, has provisions that penalize these cyberattacks, though they have not been applied. **177**

Footnotes

- 1 Juan Bautista Salas, “Cedice-Libertad: In February 2021 100% of Venezuelan households had telecommunications failures,” *El Impulso*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.elimpulso.com/2021/03/18/cedice-libertad-en-febrero-2021-el...>; “Movistar recovers 15 vandalized stations, but the operator is still under attack,” *Opinión y Noticias*, August 18, 2020, <http://www.opinionynoticias.com/noticiascorp/37508-movistar>.
- 2 “Informe cifras del sector cuarto trimestre 2020,” CONATEL, 2020, <http://www.conatel.gob.ve/informe-cifras-del-sector-cuarto-trimestre-20...>
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60% Entre los ISP, NetUno fue el que perdió mayor % de conectividad. #21jul #reporteconectividad [Power outages left #InternetVE users in multiple states without internet. The most affected are: Delta Amacuro at 58% of its normal values Táchira 59% La Guaira 60% Among the ISPs, NetUno was the one that lost the highest percentage of connectivity. #21Jul #reportconnectivity],” Twitter, July 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1417916327952592907>; Mabel Sarmiento, “Cinco regiones del occidente del país reportan apagones este #19Ago [Five regions in the west of the country report blackouts this #19Ago],” Efecto Cocuyo, August 19, 2021, <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/cinco-regiones-occidente-reportan...>; Ve Sin Filtro, @vesinfiltro, “#Apagón nacional afecta a todos los estados del país desde la 1:00 AM (-4 UTC). La conectividad a #internetVE se desplomó hasta el 26% de sus valores normales. Este es un evento en desarrollo y seguiremos monitoreando el estado del servicio a lo largo del día #KeepItOn #17Dec [National blackout affects all states in the country from 1:00 AM (-4 UTC). Connectivity to #internetVE plummeted to 26% of its normal values. This is an ongoing event and we will continue to monitor the status of the service throughout the day #KeepItOn #17Dec],” Twitter, December 17, 2021, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1471801580819296260?s=21>; Ve Sin Filtro, @vesinfiltro, “ALERTA: #Apagón en múltiples estados genera una caída en la conectividad de #internetVE desde las 11:30 am A nivel nacional la conectividad cae a 88% de los valores normales. Apure: 47% La Guaira: 58% Barinas: 65% Miranda: 73% Trujillo 77#reporteConectividad #14Oct [ALERT: #Blackout in multiple states generates a drop in #internetVE connectivity from 11:30 am Nationwide, connectivity drops to 88% of normal values. Apure: 47% La Guaira: 58% Barinas: 65% Miranda: 73% Trujillo 77#reporteConnectivity #14Oct],” Twitter, October 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1448685697158762498>; Ve Sin Filtro, @vesinfiltro, “Actualización: #Mérida y #Táchira presentan un descenso de conectividad de gran magnitud a las 11:50am (UTC-4), la conectividad de #internetVE de #CANTV decae a 80% a nivel nacional. #11EneTwitter [Update: #Mérida and #Táchira present a drop in connectivity of great magnitude at 11:50 am (UTC-4), the #internetVE connectivity of #CANTV drops to 80% nationwide. #11JanTwitter],” Twitter, January 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1480955460131905545?s=21>; Ve Sin Filtro, @vesinfiltro, “Caída importante en la conectividad por aparente falla de #CANTV, mientras algunos estados reportan fallas eléctricas. #Táchira y #Mérida quedan prácticamente desconectados. #reporteconectividad % de valores normales Táchira15% Mérida16% Cojedes36% Carabobo44% nacional 84% [Significant drop in connectivity due to apparent failure of #CANTV, while some states report electrical failures. #Táchira and #Mérida are practically disconnected. #reportconnectivity % of normal values Táchira15% Mérida16% Cojedes36% Carabobo44% national 84%],” Twitter, March 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1499439324991049731?s=21>

- 5 “VE Without Filter: Power failures cause 6 out of 10 drops in Internet connectivity in Venezuela | via: The Impulse,” HumVenezuela, April 12, 2022, <https://correodelcaroni.com/pais-politico/fallas-electricas-causan-6-de...>

More footnotes



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Country Facts

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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