

Chavez takes to Twitter to fight critics online

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Writer



In this photo taken April 8, 2010, Nelson Bocaranda, a radio program host and one of Venezuela's most popular Twitter users, taps on his blackberry at the Onda 107.9 FM studios in Caracas. Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, famed for hours-long speeches, is being forced to pack his messages into tweets to fight back at Internet-savvy opponents who have put him on the defensive. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos)

(AP) -- President Hugo Chavez has joined the ranks of those who say, "If you can't beat 'em, tweet 'em."

Facing a flurry of cyberspace critics, the loquacious leader known for hours-long speeches made a revolutionary move Wednesday, sending his first message from a Twitter account where his missives are limited to 140 characters.

"Hey how's it going? I appeared like I said I would: at midnight. I'm off to Brazil. And very happy to work for Venezuela. We will be victorious!!" it read.

Just as Chavez has been cracking down on traditional media, he finds himself on the defensive against an Internet-based opposition doing battle with computers and handhelds.

"As the government has tightened the screws on the media, the use of the Internet, blogs, Twitter and so forth has grown exponentially," said radio host and newspaper columnist Nelson Bocaranda, whose witty anti-Chavez commentary has earned him more than 140,000 followers on Twitter.

Of the 200 Venezuelans most followed on Twitter, close to 90 percent side with Chavez's opposition, said Carlos Jimenez, director of the Caracas-based online polling firm Tendencias Digitales. But he expects "Chavistas" to catch up.

Already, the president's Twitter account, "chavezcandanga," is headed toward the top of Venezuela's most-popular list, gaining more than 79,000 followers less than 24 hours after he sent his first message. "Candanga" roughly translates to "devil" in some Latin American countries, though in Venezuela it can mean "rabble-rouser."

"The opposition thinks it owns the social networking sites. They think Twitter and Facebook belong to them," said Diosdado Cabello, head of the state-run telecommunications regulator.

"We're fighting and there are 7 million of us who will have Twitter," Cabello added, referring to members of Chavez's socialist party, adding that their tweets would carry messages "from our commander."

More than 8.7 million Venezuelans were regular Internet users as of January, or about 30 percent of the population, up from 25 percent in 2008, according to Tendencias Digitales.

Some 350,000 of those users were registered on Twitter, a tenfold increase from 2009. More than 5.4 million Venezuelans were registered as Facebook users, double those in the previous year.

Chavez has been accused of cracking down on critics as he sees his popularity slip amid energy shortages and soaring inflation. His government has brought criminal charges against the majority shareholder of Venezuela's lone anti-Chavez TV channel, and pressured cable companies to drop the critical Radio Caracas Television International after it refused to comply with a new rule requiring media outlets to televise mandatory programming, including Chavez's speeches.

But that didn't stop the debate over Venezuela's most popular and divisive politician from exploding in cyberspace.

Opposition politician Oswaldo Alvarez Paz texts from the jail cell where he is being detained after saying on TV that Venezuela has become a haven for drug trafficking.

"I've been imprisoned for expressing an opinion," read one of Paz's recent dispatches, which drew thousands of responses on Twitter.

Radio host Bocaranda condemned Venezuela's close ties with Cuba in a recent [tweet](#). "It's not often that one can recognize a truthful statement from Raul Castro: 'Venezuela and Cuba are becoming the same thing.' That's true, we're retrogressing," he said.

Chavez initially called for regulation of the Internet last month, specifically urging prosecutors to act against one critical website. But he

later backtracked and said he would begin blogging instead. His new strategy to dominate [social networking sites](#) includes using a group of young "communication guerrillas" to battle opposition messages in the media and online.

Venezuelan-American lawyer and activist Eva Golinger often defends Chavez using [Twitter](#) and her blog, "Postcards From the Revolution."

She has posted information about U.S. funding for organizations that she accuses of trying to unseat Chavez and took issue with those questioning Alvarez Paz's arrest. He is charged with conspiracy, spreading false information and publicly inciting crime.

"There are so few voices out there that were not against the revolution that I almost felt like it was my obligation," Golinger said.

Some of Chavez's online critics, meanwhile, have gained a following by using humor. El Chiguire Bipolar, named after a giant rodent found in Venezuela, is now one of the nation's most popular websites with cartoons, satirical videos and bogus news reports - including a recent parody of Chavez blogging.

"Hi, my name is Hugo and I'm new to all this stuff of blogs and the Inter-Web," the site said. "They asked me for a password, but the truth is that I forgot the one I'd always used."

In a second mock entry, Chavez gives up, saying he'll ask Cabello "to expropriate a blog for me somewhere."

Chavez's socialist government has taken over many private businesses.

More information: Postcards From the Revolution:
<http://www.chavezcode.com>

El Chiguire Bipolar: <http://www.elchiguirebipolar.com>

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