

Venezuela passes media, Internet-muzzling law

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A customer at a cybercafe in Caracas, Venezuela. The Venezuelan parliament passed a law banning for the first time Internet content that promotes social unrest, challenges authority or condones crime, fueling outrage by the opposition.

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The law was pushed through the unicameral National Assembly in less than a week by President Hugo Chavez's ruling party. The vote came just 10 days before a new assembly in which the opposition has swelled its ranks takes seat on January 5, following September legislative elections.

The new law expands 2004 restrictions on content in radio, television

and print media. In an unprecedented move, it now also includes content from the Internet and electronic subscription services, making webpage managers "responsible for the information and content" published on their websites."

It is meant to crack down on [media content](#) that "makes an apology of crime," "promotes unrest in the population" or "challenges legally established authorities."

Webpage managers must now "establish mechanisms to restrict, without delay, the diffusion of messages... that are included in the ban."

The measure increases fines imposed on media violations to "10 percent of the previous year's gross income," in addition to "72 hours of continuous suspension of services."

Groups can also lose their media license if they commit repeat offenses.

The law says it aims "to establish social responsibility in the diffusion and reception of messages, to promote democratic balance between the duties, rights and interests" of media companies, commentators and clients.

Opposition lawmakers quickly decried what they called an unconstitutional move.

"It completely violates the constitution, [freedom of speech](#) and freedom of broadcasting in the country," said deputy Ismael Garcia.

Fellow lawmaker Pastora Medina agreed the new measure promotes "censure and self-censorship... (and) will not improve the education process that comes as the result of good communication."

Opposition lawmakers practically shut themselves out of the present National Assembly after they boycotted the 2004 elections, but they made landmark gains in September when they took 40 percent -- 67 out of 165 seats -- in the new assembly.

Ruling party deputy Earle Herrera said "the new [law](#) fully guarantees the right to information, communication and media access granted by the constitution."

The leftist Chavez administration has been steadily hemming in opposition media outlets. It is currently trying to shut down Globovision TV for its strong anti-Chavez stance.

Globovision boss Guillermo Zuloaga has faced criminal charges, fled arrest and asked for political asylum in the United States.

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