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The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation

Aló Presidente!—Venezuela's Reality Show Authoritarianism

by Daniel Lansberg-Rodríguez,
Northwestern University
and *Democracy Lab* blogger

Executive Summary

Hugo Chávez's 14-year rule brought radical change to Venezuela. His talk show, *Aló Presidente*, remained a constant in the lives of Venezuelans, who found themselves in an unprecedented era of uncertainty. Every Sunday they welcomed Chávez into their homes to hear his thoughts on everything from baseball to geopolitics.

The talk show served many purposes for Chávez. He demonstrated his generosity and benevolence by giving extravagant gifts away to his supporters. In the same show, he might threaten, arrest or fire his political challengers. *Aló Presidente* also gave Chávez the platform to blame the government's many failures on a variety of scapegoats—everything from incompetent officials to El Niño, and even an iguana.

Chávez held the nation's attention by bringing international celebrities on air and sharing wacky conspiracy stories. *Aló Presidente* was the perfect populist vehicle; Chávez stayed in the public eye and helped define the political agenda on a weekly basis.

Notoriously suspicious of private media stations, Chávez created regulations that would make them economically uncompetitive, draping censorship in the "glove of the invisible hand". When their businesses started to fail, dummy corporations would buy the companies out, eventually turning them into propaganda machines. In 2004, Chávez went so far as to pass a law that criminalised criticism of the regime or public figures.

The final episode of *Aló Presidente* was aired in 2012. Yet Chávez's great narrative lives on as the current president, Nicolas Maduro, venerates him as a national hero in order to legitimise his own presidency. After all, Chávez handpicked him as his successor. And the Venezuelan media model has already had an impact on much of the region, through both emulation and deliberate export.