'Keeping news alive in Venezuela': Using social media as tactical media

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Abstract
Venezuela leads Latin America with the largest number of imprisoned journalists and extreme government-led media censorship. Our in-depth interviews with 25 Venezuelan journalists reveal that assisting journalists to combat government control are social media and technology platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, which, in Venezuela, have moved beyond their ability to share and mobilise, and have become tactical media, the media of crisis criticism and opposition.

Keywords
Censorship, social media, tactical media, Venezuela

Introduction

The development of news media in Latin America has been deeply tied to the commercial interests of private enterprises, much like in the United States (Martens et al., 2014). However, in the case of Latin America, tightly-knit relations and collaborations between political powers and private journalistic endeavours in the region have allowed the state to wield tremendous influence over the media (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Waisbord, 2014). This aspect is important for, in the early 2000s, Latin America saw the rise of leaders like Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Hugo Chávez

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in Venezuela and, consequently, a salient wave of media reforms. The ascent of these political figures saw the transformation of state media into partisan media, serving as their representatives and being accompanied by an extreme suppression of independent or privately-owned media (Boas, 2005; Lugo-Ocando, 2008). Among Latin American governments, Venezuela stands out for its role and strong dominance in influencing media policy (Cañizález, 2014; Weisbrot and Ruttenberg, 2010).

As Venezuela progressed to a deeply authoritarian system of governance, under official mandates, public media have either broadcast faithfully the governmental point of view or reproduced the commercially motivated programming of private media, ensuring that dissenting voices find little to no space (Cabrera, 2010). Today, while the constitution of Venezuela guarantees freedom of speech and expression in the country, press censorship is severe. As the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) says, Venezuela leads Latin America with the largest number of journalists jailed because of their reportage (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). As a result, Venezuela ranked in the bottom quintile (143) in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Chávez may no longer be in power, but those that followed continue this legacy of press suppression.

As Reporters Without Borders (2018a) states, 'Venezuela's president since 2013, Nicolás Maduro does his utmost to silence independent media outlets and keep news coverage under constant control'. While media censorship and its effects on the practice and profession of journalism receives important scholarly attention, and excellent research focuses on state and media connections in Latin America, Venezuela's situation remains understudied. In a bid to address this lacuna, this paper delves into the various approaches used by journalists to negotiate the procuring and dissemination of information as free from government interference as possible and the importance of digital tools in 'keeping news alive' (Personal interview, 2018) in one of the most repressive regimes of the world.

State of the Venezuelan media

In 1952, Venezuela was the ninth country in the world to acquire television sets, and by 1982, nearly 85 per cent homes had television sets (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Even in the pre-Chavismo period, publishers and political parties had close relationships, and journalists were rewarded for favourable coverage, but the presence of independent columnists and writers ensured that unbiased editorial views also found space (Coppedge, 1994). Media in the country was initially extremely supportive of Hugo Chávez and enthusiastically supported his candidature (Nelson, 2009). But when journalists began reporting on the failure of Chávez's policies (Nelson, 2009), Chávez began media crackdowns in which journalists were called out and insulted and attacked (Dinges, 2005). In 2002, following the Venezuelan *coup d'état* attempt, Chávez was removed from office, only to be reinstated 48 hours later. The media may have supported this coup but once Chávez came back to power, he consolidated pro-government and government media and 'closed, browbeaten or infiltrated almost every independent outlet' (The Economist, 2013).

First, the Chávez government passed the Law on Social Responsibility of Radio and Television (2004) and unsuccessfully pushed for the Special Law Against Media Crimes (2009), which would allow the government to prosecute media organisations if it felt that

they were disseminating information not 'pursuant to the provisions set forth in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and the laws and treaties, agreements and conventions subscribed and ratified by the Republic' (Martens et al., 2014; Microjuris.com, 2009). By 2010, the law was extended to the internet and online media and required media companies to 'establish mechanisms to restrict, without delay, the dissemination of messages' (Fossett, 2014: 2). Then came the annulment of broadcast licences for radio and television stations and the denial of foreign currency to purchase newsprint and broadcast equipment as ways to stifle or altogether eliminate critical voices. Reporting against the government was clearly dangerous and this led to a proliferation of pro-Chavista media outlets who effectively drowned out the different privately-owned, independent news media, thus successfully ensuring little to no independent coverage of the national situation.

After 20 years of relentless media censorship, of the four major privately-owned television stations, Televen and Venevisión have been pressured into self-censorship since 2004, Radio Caracas Televisión saw its concession revoked in 2007 and the only 24-hours news station Globovision in the country was bought out by pro-Chavista businessmen in 2013 (Reimí, 2020).

President Nicolas Maduro recently acquired El Universal, Globovisión and Últimas Noticias, three of the largest Venezuelan media organisations, thereby ensuring an unsaid blanket ban on critical coverage (Puglie, 2020). As the National Syndicate of Press Workers of *Venezuela* reports, during the time of Nicolás Maduro's government, between 2013 and 2018, 115 *media* outlets have been shut down, including 41 print organisations, 65 radio outlets and nine television channels (Reimí, 2020).

Fighting repression via digital platforms

In situations of information precarity that refer to unstable conditions preventing audiences from accessing unbiased news in situations of war or harsh censorship, cell phones and different technical platforms often prove to be important resources, as the experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan show (Wall et al., 2017). In Venezuela, uncensored information is scarce. What role can such technical developments play in ensuring greater access to unbiased information?

Media censorship coupled with the economic collapse has left many hungry for food and information (Nugent, 2019) and, in a bid to combat this extreme censorship of traditional mainstream media, there has been a growth of online media. The internet, which the government, until recently, had only partially controlled, is home to many online-only news sites or streaming channels on YouTube, Instagram and PeriscopeTV, a popular streaming app. For example, Runrun.es, a new website that uses citizen reporting as well as investigative reporting, was created on Twitter (Nafría, 2018) following the ousting of its creator, Nelson Bocaranda Sardi, from one of Venezuela's leading newspapers, *El Universal*, after the outlet was bought out by unknown businessmen and radically changed its editorial line. Sites like Prodavinci.com, started about 5 years ago, have seen manifold increases in the number of visitors since the government stepped up censorship of other media. Online media like La Patilla and the satirical site, Chiguire Bipolar, which satirises politicians (Minaya, 2014), are popular. As Al Jazeera (Rendon and

Kohan, 2020) has reported, sites like Efecto Cocuyo and investigative websites like Poderopedia and Infocracia.org are also a part of the digital media scenario in the country. Armando.info, started in 2014, was awarded the Knight International Journalism Award (2018) for its relentless exposés of corruption related to the country's CLAP programme (the Venezuelan state-run food aid programme)[1] (Wyss, 2018). Audiences access banned sites either through VPN services, which the government has now become savvy about closing, or though some of the peer-to-peer solutions devised by the banned outlets to circumvent censorship. comScore (2015) reported that Venezuela added a greater number of internet users per capita than any other Latin American country among visitors to online and social media. Venezuela has about 19,155,423 internet users (Internet World Stats, 2017), which means that about 60.0 per cent of the population has some kind of access to the internet. Besides news sites, as Garsd (2018) has reported, social media 'is a valuable source of information in a country that censors all forms of traditional news media. It can be a lifeline for those seeking help, and a form of protest – the only way to speak truth to power' (Garsd, 2018).

Social media during crisis

Social media, today, is criticised for being overrun by trolls and bots and for being a conduit of fake news, yet few question the role of social media and its potential to make communication more democratic (Hemsley et al., 2018). Twitter and other social media platforms have become powerful communication tools during different kinds of crises, political or otherwise (Forelle et al., 2015), and social media like Twitter can provide a 'stitching mechanism' (Hemsley et al., 2018: 2), helping articulate human and technology-based networks where new spaces of participation can be created, and where journalists, activists and citizens can connect to share news and information (Gruzd and Tsyganova, 2015). In conflict zones, such as Syria or Yemen, where war has made daily reporting difficult, social media and digital platforms like YouTube have ensured that eyewitness testimony finds space and enable journalists' access to stories from the ground (Cockburn, 2011). As Whitten-Woodring and James (2012) have shown, new media can very effectively lessen government control over information flow and increase access to communication. For example, in Syria, in the absence of strong professional reportage, citizen journalists and activists have used social media to create a 'pop-up news ecology' which is 'an entirely new, oppositional news system' to report on the war and situation of conflict in the region (Wall and Zahed, 2015: 1). As de Certeau (1984: xiv–xv) has explained, in situations where professionals with access to information are 'already caught in the nets of discipline', they must resort to clandestine 'procedures and ruses' through the use of 'tactical and makeshift forms of creativity'.

   Such tactical use of media in exigent circumstances is not rare, though using social media as tactical media is relatively new. The term tactical media rose to prominence in 1996 and denotes a type of media use and activism that is often guerrilla in nature and created purely as an intervention and thus, by default, is less permanent than usual forms of mainstream or alternative media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997; Raley, 2009), which usually involve more permanent forms of means of communication like newspapers, magazines or art. As a form of media intervention, whether they are digital platforms or

traditional media outlets, tactical media is not monolithic in character but is a flexible model that can be easily adapted to suit the culture and context within which it must operate. Tactical media and alternative media may seem similar but, unlike alternative media, tactical media do not want to create a better media per se; rather, they are responses and creations in time much like guerrilla campaigns designed to create awareness and provide a point of mobilisation. Thus, criticism against tactical media emphasises this fleeting and temporary nature, characterising them as 'ephemeral', 'hold[ing] no ground of their own', 'disappear[ing] once they are executed', and 'represent[ing] no particular politics or vision of a desirable future' (Ray and Sholette, 2008: 20).

Tactical media can be a form of digital interventionism and this is generally a creative and subversive use of communication technologies, though it can draw on all forms of media, whether new or old, to push subversive politics and non-commercial goals (Garcia and Lovink, 1997; Raley, 2009). Thus, like other media used as tactical media, social media platforms can be used as products that exploit 'moments of opportunity and possibility' (Meikle, 2014: 121) and provide space for collaboration between various groups and audiences and even those working both inside and outside mainstream media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997), much like the Syrian citizen journalists who use social media channels to post material for their mainstream media collaborators, creating, in the process, what is now known as the Collaborative News Clip, where traditional media organisations incorporate work produced by citizen journalists into mainstream content (Wall and Zahed, 2015: 1). The nature of such uses of social media as tactical media is also thus framed and created by collective and collaborative efforts (Kavada, 2015).

In the area of journalism, while not every reporter is convinced about the usefulness and value of social media (Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck, 2014), as traditional news organisations are socially and commercially forced to adopt a more participatory style of news (Lewis, 2012), journalists, at least in the USA, are veering towards using social media predominantly as information-gathering tools and much less to interview sources or to validate information (Carlson, 2018; Weaver and Willnat, 2016). In the Venezuelan context, the production and use of online news sites and social media were reactions and mechanisms to combat extreme state media censorship. From 2016, news consumption on social media has grown in Venezuela (Nalvarte, 2016). Facebook (70%) and WhatsApp (53%) are the most popular platforms in the country followed by Twitter (24%), according to a Statistica (2019) report. A June 2018 survey conducted by Consultores 21 (2019), a well-known Venezuelan consumer research agency, showed that Venezuelans are no longer turning to television for news. Instead, social media (Twitter and Facebook) as well as online news sites and peer-to-peer networks (mainly WhatsApp) seem to be the main sources of their information. But as Maduro faces intense pressure to step down as president, social media is being heavily monitored and, as Zerpa et al. (2019) reported, the government is 'rolling internet blackouts and gag orders that have largely stopped the free flow of information'. Recent comparative analysis of journalists' use of social media and digital platforms in Latin American countries like Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru (Saldaña et al., 2017) have shown that journalists use Twitter for sources and stories and are open to participatory journalism; however, they mistrust political sources and the information they provide. Although the study stated that journalists from different Latin American countries use social media in various ways, it did

not explicitly look at how such digital use impacts and influences the practice and profession of journalism in Venezuela, especially in times of such censorship.

In this light, this study seeks to understand:

RQ1: How does the use of digital and social media influence the ways in which journalists in Venezuela work and function as journalists?

Methodology

This analysis draws upon 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Venezuelan journalists from online as well as traditional media, based in different cities and regions of Venezuela, such as Caracas, Maracaibo, San Juan de los Morros and others. The snowball sample technique (Browne, 2005) used allowed access to participants without organisational intervention or influence on responses. While 12 of our sample were women, 13 were men. The journalists' ages ranged from 25 to 78 years and their media experience ranged from 5 to 50 years in various media like television, radio and print and web portals. Our participants are a part of media like Runrun.es, Efecto Cocuyo, Poderopedia and Infocracia.org as well as other mainstream news channels. Five of our interviewees worked exclusively for online media. Twelve participants had worked for pro-government outlets and five said they work for media that 'toes the government line'. Interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish, over phone and Skype, from October 2018 to March 2019. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 to 120 minutes.

Our primary motive was to examine how the use of digital and social media influenced the ways journalists in Venezuela work and function as journalists. Our questionnaire was adapted from the surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Columbia Journalism Review in 2002 that lend insight into self-censorship in journalism as well as recent studies by organisations such as Freedom House (2018) and Human Rights Watch (2017). A series of open-ended questions, asking about their typical routines, organisation support, the ways in which they used social media, the kinds of censorship they faced, and the value of digital media in their work were asked. McCracken's (1988: 85) long interview technique, which allows researchers to 'step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves', was used and journalists were asked to explain and describe the situations they referred to for our understanding. Each interview, considered a unit of analysis, was translated and transcribed by the authors. Our theoretical framework and research questions guided the classification of the data which were coded into categories by grouping together and comparing interrelated ideas (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2011), and reviewed multiple times by the two authors for critical understanding and to find latent and manifest meaning. Given the Venezuelan situation, the participants only granted permission to audio-record their interviews. All identifying information has been removed as per IRB requirements. It was very important to keep the identities of the journalists anonymous to protect them from any repercussions. Our sample size is small (25 participants), and this is an acknowledged weakness. But as other studies (Chadha and Steiner, 2015) have shown, a participant pool of 10 is sufficient to go beyond the

anecdotal and 'investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation' (Plas and Kvale, 1996: 20).

Results

As our interviews emphasise, in Venezuela, social media and digital media play a 'huge role' for journalists (Personal Interview, 2018), representing one of the main means through which journalists can inform and seek out information. Digital media and online news are means to combat the restrictions placed on newsprint to prevent circulation as well as a chance to combat the government narrative. As our participants said, Twitter is used mainly to connect directly with sources (particularly political sources), while Instagram is used as a source for images and videos to accompany multimedia stories. What stood out was the use of WhatsApp. Quotes, representative of most of the responses, have been used below to facilitate a critical understanding of the categories and data interpretation. These and other themes as highlighted by the journalists interviewed are elucidated below.

Social media: Important means of information

Our participants overwhelmingly agreed that social and digital media was 'keeping news alive in Venezuela' (Personal interview, 2018). As one participant with 11 years of experience (print and online media) noted:

> Social media in Venezuela have become the crucial means through which citizens are informed. . ... Venezuelans are heavy users of Twitter and the. . ..media will be tweeting out the minute-by-minute of what's going on, on what's being said, while – in other countries – tweets are more spaced apart. (2018)

Journalists themselves turn to newly formed digital media for information. As one participant said: 'New media such as Efecto Cocuyo or El Pitazo, provide food for thought. . . because of the focus they put on the information, they don't simply stay with publishing the politician's quotes' (2018).

A significant number of our participants said that censorship and an ability to independently publish stories on social media has encouraged the questioning of certain basic professional norms. As one participant with print and online experience explained:

> If you're working for an outlet, the information that you have is supposed to be for that outlet. . . but in situations of censorship, those standards are not as important and you prioritize broadcasting the information, even if that can result in problems later on. (2018)

Despite all the restrictions on freedom of expression in the country, most participants said that journalists revel in the freedom offered online, even if this came with limitations. As an interviewed television journalist said, they do not even use a pseudonym online, and added: 'I'll post my opinions whenever it is that I feel them and that's about it. . .to say more things than I might be allowed to otherwise because of the station's editorial line' (2018).

While social media is useful to produce and publish news that does not find space elsewhere, as one participant with 12 years of traditional media experience said, 'if you are too loud and smoky, the political police will come looking for you' (2018). There is also a sense that the government (which controls the telephone monopoly) has introduced distortions in the availability of internet access whenever things get heated, many times blocking altogether access to certain sites. As our participants introspected, given the particularities of the Venezuelan situation, social media use and digital platforms grew at an astounding pace, filling the void left by the absence of mainstream media amidst the high volatility of the political process. This, in turn, produced a chaotic adoption of social media, causing these spaces to develop as information centres, using a combination of opinions, information and personal topics. Perhaps, one participant said, it is because of this abrupt explosion that social media has become so central in the dissemination of information in Venezuela, 'a place they hold now more than ever, representing a platform for the discussion and formation of public opinion in the country' (2018). As another respondent said, the relative freedom provided by social media finds in their haphazard adoption and growth in Venezuela 'somewhat of a problematic perception, as it is still unclear what kind of spaces they really are' (2018). There is no editorial control and journalists post about 'real situations on the ground' (2018), prompting one participant to ponder, 'is every news fact checked?' (2018).

Use of digital and social media

A significant number of participants said that journalists use social and digital media in a variety of ways to combat state suppression. The one theme that echoed in every respondent interview was that 'social media and digital tools have had very far reaching effects on the profession and practice of journalism in the country' (2018). Our interviewees agreed that such tools not only gave them an outlet for news but helped them create 'virtual newsrooms' and coordinate information among themselves in ways that could not have been conceived without this digital assistance. Social media and digital platforms '. . .have become a fundamental means of communication for journalists (in Venezuela). . .you have no idea how many groups of journalists there are' (2018), one respondent pointed out.

Virtual newsrooms

With regard to the widespread adoption and use of WhatsApp and Telegram (a messenger system) among Venezuelan journalists, one participant (with 25 years of both print and digital experience) said that the platforms operated not just as a source of information, but also as virtual newsrooms. They explained:

> If there's something Chavismo has been tremendously effective in doing is the dismembering of the newsrooms. . .the exchange (of information) suffered and so did the analysis. Deliberate or not, but making journalists go out and work as freelancers – at least those of my generation – was a communicational success for Chavismo because it did away with that structure of analysis. . .which has been somewhat recovered through the use of WhatsApp and Telegram channels'. (2018)

As our interviews show, WhatsApp groups function as spaces where information is shared and contrasted, news analysed, and sources cross-checked. Groups are often created in response to events in which journalists, hungry for information, share and exchange the little official voices they can find access to and post about situations as they unfold. One journalist with 11 years of digital and traditional media experience said:

> . . .the groups serve to share information and, sometimes, to vent and release some steam about this entire situation. They help coordinate coverage among journalists and alert other colleagues when street protests turn dangerous, providing up-to-the-minute information regarding what routes are safe. (2018)

These WhatsApp groups also operate as co-working non-profits and, as one participant explained, they serve to distribute important news and information in a coordinated manner, such that it is impossible for the government to crack down on select journalists. By distributing the responsibility of publishing something big, outlets are able to band together and break through censorship in 'Fuenteovejuna style journalism dynamics' (2018), referencing the early 17th century play by Lope de Vega in which the villagers of a Castilian town commit a crime but escape punishment by diluting the blame among the entire population of the town. The term has been broadened and applied to situations in which no particular actor(s) can be clearly held responsible for an action that would carry some form of individual penalty. As such, the blame is diluted among all the involved actors, without the possibility of any of them being punished for it.

Public information system

Besides virtual newsrooms, social media platforms like WhatsApp help journalists create information distribution systems for journalists and the public. As one participant said, 'The case of "El Pitazo" is quite something. . .they're distributing some 'noti-audios' (voice notes) via WhatsApp, especially to combat misinformation perpetuated by the government' (2018). Our participants highlighted how this was done during the 2017 protests when different opposition leaders were arrested, and the government refused to resolve the situation. Various well-known journalists set up a WhatsApp group called the Public Information System – an information system that sought to minimise or altogether eliminate the rumours that were being spread on social media. They sourced and curated other journalists' work and took on various editorial functions. This initiative has distributed independent reports over WhatsApp whenever there are tumultuous events and provide journalists with verifiable information that each one could then forward to their own (non-journalistic) contacts. Although this initiative was created during the 2017 street protests, it continues to operate today. Different web portals also distribute articles via WhatsApp and other forms of social media, breaking them down into Twitter threads, creating visual pieces that highlight quotes from the articles, and even turning to printing materials based on their articles and distributing them among users, schools and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Incorporating citizen media

The rise of such platforms has also encouraged the use of citizen reports and media in reporting. As our interviews show, reduced reporting staff at mainstream media has

meant that staff stationed in the capital, Caracas, rely on citizen-produced images and information to learn about what is going on in the provinces. These citizen reports are often the initial reports that indicate to journalists the issues that need coverage. Some digital outlets also hold citizen journalist training workshops and, later, these trained citizen journalists function both as reporters in their own communities and as distributors of the various WhatsApp 'products' the portal puts out. Each of these distributors is asked to post the portal's contents to their list of contacts, thus, greatly increasing the overall reach. But the fear of government reprisal is real. As one participant said: 'I'm afraid, certainly. . .as a safety measure, I'll erase all of my WhatsApp chats once or twice a week' (2018).

WhatsApp groups immediately remove members who are arrested, only to reinvite them, if and when they are returned to freedom since, as our respondents emphasised, the phone is the first thing taken when journalists are arrested.

Journalist 'cartel'

Digital media is sustaining investigative journalism in the country. Our sample of journalists interviewed often referred to the Armando.info site, which was blocked after being sued by Alex Saab,[2] the prime beneficiary of a massive corruption scheme around the CLAP programme to emphasise the kind of reporting that was available on these sites and their importance in conveying the ground reality in Venezuela.

As one respondent said:

> . . .journalists have collaborated in getting the information out to the public and social media is an important means of doing this. They (armando.info) ran another story about Alex Saab and a large number of websites got together to publish the report simultaneously. . .although armando.info was running it, we *cartelized* to continue working and stand united in pushing back against people not receiving the information. (2018)

Collaborating through these groups also allows them to increase their access to information, as individual access is compounded into a shared wealth of knowledge of what's going on in the country. As one participant explained, there are plenty of internal debates, therefore, allowing for a multiplicity of approaches. The use of WhatsApp to verify information is seen as a crucial step for journalists in Venezuela, for contrasting information via peer-to-peer networks allows journalists to somewhat break the information opacity imposed by the government.

These virtual newsrooms make journalists hopeful about the future of Venezuelan journalism. However, in terms of the larger public, there are important barriers to viewing these as all-encompassing solutions to censorship. Journalists value social media, but they are also aware of certain crucial issues. As one participant stated:

> The problem with WhatsApp and Telegram is that they only reach a certain segment of the population. . .there's another segment (of the population), I'd dare say half of Venezuelans, who are solely consuming the information or propaganda being put out by the government. (2018)

Our participants agreed that, even while understanding the value these spaces have, the cumbersome process demanded by all the workarounds certainly limits their usefulness. One participant described how, even though these are important mechanisms to skirt around government actions that limit access to information, the added work that is required draws from their daily activities, thus underlining that, one way or another, censorship ends up altering their everyday practices, both as a citizen and as a journalist. Furthermore, it is clear to them that no matter how hard they try to circumvent government censorship, it is nearly impossible to entirely escape the complex network of measures that limit freedom of information in Venezuela. For example, in a prior job, when they weren't allowed to publish certain news or information, they would post to their social media accounts, directing readers to visit other outlets where the information was being published. In time, they became increasingly fearful, in part because there were office rumours that the newsroom had been bugged (2018).

The emergence of digital media in Venezuela has also altered the way in which stories are decided upon or assigned. Unlike traditional media, these recently formed digital outlets commission pieces from freelance journalists. As one participant said, 'They clearly lay out the focus of the story and that gives me the chance to accept or reject a specific assignment' (2018). Once an assignment is offered, the outlet runs the story. This change also reduces the frictions that could arise from the dynamic of having journalists pitch ideas only to find later on that they won't be run due to censorship or pressure from groups in power.

Journalism of cooperation

Although there is no clear policy with regard to censorship of web portals in Venezuela, our respondents referred to what is known as a 'selective blocking strategy', which is enforced by both CANTV (the state-owned telephone monopoly) and the private carriers who are compelled to do so via legal instruments. This 'selective strategy', our interviewees pointed out, meant that some sites will be blocked on some days and made accessible on others, making it extremely difficult to document this type of censorship, which the government usually attributes to network or server problems.

In this atmosphere of extreme censorship, WhatsApp groups and social media provide safe spaces for journalists to produce news and exchange and verify information. However, this has also done away with the idea of 'scoops', thereby fostering a journalism of cooperation rather than one of competition, where getting facts rights and out to the public are the main motivations ('Whoever can say it, have them say it'). As one journalist with over 20 years of media experience said:

> In Venezuela, the way you cover a story has changed. . .it's no longer about seeking to have the scoop, but rather as 'let's all go together to cover this story' more like a mechanism to protect ourselves, because if there's 10 journalists it's better than if there's only one. . .at least, one of them will be able to inform that the others have been detained. (2018)

Again, as previously seen, the interviewed journalists were not blind to the drawbacks of digital media platforms. As one participant pointed out, these WhatsApp

groups run the risk of resembling what was formerly known as reporters' pools, where different reporters from different outlets got together to share information, leading to similar headlines across competing media. They also feared the misuse of these groups. They recalled an incident when a journalist had uncovered Odebrecht's[3] (Latin American construction giant) payment of US $15 million dollars to the then opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski,[4] and other colleagues exerted pressure on them to not publish the story, as it 'debilitated the democratic cause'. This, they say, is completely contrary to the principles of journalism. But these groups, as they point out, also lead to discussions on ethics and the implications of coverage and they think this is 'good, because if there was one thing that wasn't done in Venezuelan newsrooms, it was talking about journalism' (2018). Another participant emphasised that the amount of fake news that is distributed through these platforms, mainly through voice notes claiming to have direct evidence of things that are simply false or outright factually incorrect, is a menace (2018).

As government censorship expands to the internet and online media, independent media in Venezuela, said two participants, have resorted to going offline in order to distribute information to the population. As one respondent said, 'we have that capacity to be resilient – which is something, I think, all Venezuelans have nowadays – so if they close a door, we'll climb in through a window' (2018).

Discussion

Our in-depth interviews with 25 journalists reveal that social media have certainly emerged as tactical media where the 'tactical and makeshift of creativity' (de Certeau, 1984: xiv–xv) of such social and digital platforms by journalists have deeply influenced the way professional journalism is being practised in the country. Theoretically, this study extends our understanding of tactical media beyond the nature and function of such media to its implications and influences on the practice of journalism in Venezuela. Censorship in Venezuela has encouraged the media to move to spaces where government censorship is slow to reach. While the Maduro administration has continued Chávez's keen use of social media to increase its sphere of influence, while blocking news sites that dare to publish unfavourable coverage, social media platforms have emerged as major collaborative spaces to encourage the sharing of news and information, effectively melting organisational boundaries. Tactical media is about collaboration, and working together on digital platforms has transformed the competitive nature of the profession in Venezuela, creating a journalism 'not of competition but of cooperation' (Personal Interview, 2018), where getting the story first is no longer important but ensuring that audiences have timely access to the right information is the driving motivation. Mounting government pressures, closures and purchases of mainstream media outlets have prompted the creation of online spaces for journalists, which enable the production of information 'relatively free' (Personal Interview, 2018) of government interference. More importantly, these outlets distribute 'something big' (2018), major news, in a coordinated manner, making it harder for the government to crack down on individual journalists. This dynamic, which one of the interviewees referred to as 'Fuenteovejuna style journalism' (2018), enables them to band together and break through censorship.

While the bid to combat censorship has encouraged a journalism of collaboration, we see that with social media, it has also brought forth a journalism of participation in which citizen reports on social media help journalists find stories on the ground. The media too have realised the value of citizen reports and, in some cases, citizen reporters are being trained to find and distribute news.

Social media and technology platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter have moved beyond their ability to share and mobilise, and have become embodied actors in the fight to produce free and unbiased information and emerged as the media of crisis criticism and opposition. Although there are recent examples of the tactical use of social media in Syria, especially with the idea of the pop-up newsroom, such uses in journalistic practice, and in Venezuela in particular, remain relatively unexplored. In Venezuela, journalists have emerged as tactical media creators, using social media and platforms like WhatsApp to not only broadcast news but also create virtual newsrooms where news is fact-checked and discussed and issues debated. These spaces are also safe zones where journalists are informed about arrests and unsafe situations. Groups formed by journalists in Venezuela on this peer-to-peer network operate as 'co-working non-profits' (Personal Interview, 2019), functioning as newsrooms where journalists share tips or information, trying to contrast it with that obtained by their peers.

Even though such tactical media have been described as 'ephemeral', 'hold[ing] no ground of their own', 'disappear[ing] once they are executed', and 'represent[ing] no particular politics or vision of a desirable future' (Ray and Sholette, 2008), the tactical nature of social media use in Venezuela – especially in virtual newsrooms and the Public Information System on WhatsApp – have lasted, helping many independent online sites to distribute large parts of their content through social media, thus ensuring that 'news in Venezuela [isn't] dying' (Personal Interview, 2018). They not only represent but also are creations of a vision for independent media. Born in situations of extreme censorship that has lasted years, these newsrooms and groups are certainly more permanent than other examples of tactical media. Social media and digital platforms in Venezuela are subversive tactical digital interventions; they protect information from censorship and ensure that different voices are included in the new media environment. They certainly exploit 'opportunity and possibility' (Meikle, 2014: 121), using groups to inform each other about arrests, interventions and stories, in the process gathering journalists together for collective action and creating stronger connective logics that ensure sustained participation. Arrested journalists are removed from groups, although the groups also serve as points of contact to ensure that persecuted reporters are helped. While social and digital platforms may have emerged as tactical media, they also influence the way journalism works in the country. WhatsApp groups often serve as an important 'stitching mechanism' (Hemsley et al., 2018: 2), where within a context of extreme suppression and information opacity, it provides information in Venezuela for citizens and journalists alike, both in terms of having access to public figures as well as incorporating citizen journalism into their work. Social media is crucial, say the interviewed journalists, especially given the prevalence of government propaganda in mainstream media and the opacity and unavailability of official information. Journalists 'caught in the nets of discipline' (de Certeau, 1984), in danger of being censored, are creatively using new media to weaken government authority over information flows (Whitten-Woodring and James,

2012). While Facebook is the most popular medium, for journalists WhatsApp and Twitter are the most useful.

Social and digital platforms, like tactical media in general, has not changed the nature of mainstream media but, unlike tactical media used elsewhere, they are certainly emerging as strong alternative contenders. They are also ushering in a journalism in which discussions of news, values and ethics are important. As one participant said, '. . .one thing that wasn't done in Venezuelan newsrooms, was talking about journalism' (2018). But as our participants reported, while they may have been successful in containing the effects of censorship, self-censorship often prevents them from participating more actively. For example, journalists frequently wipe clean their WhatsApp chats to avoid exposing sources in case they are arrested. While journalists effectively use digital media platforms to cartelise a story, as the Armando.info example showed, they are also very aware that circumventing government censorship can often prove to be impossible and that 'if you are too loud and smoky, the political police will come looking for you' (2018).

Since news and information distribution and creation developed amidst a state of emergency leading to the chaotic growth and adoption of such mechanisms, journalists were very aware that in spite of these platforms emerging as media ecosystems where public opinion could be created and incorporated into the news, they were also contested spaces. There was little editorial control and not all facts were always checked. Journalists are also aware that this is a flawed medium where fake news and misinformation abound and where echo chambers may be easily created. Journalists erase conversations for fear that if arrested, their phones might reveal sensitive information.

While social media may have opened up new journalistic spaces, practising journalism in situations of such extreme repression, where fear of government reprisal is ever-present, is exhausting.

While our analysis sheds light on the digital practices and social media use among journalists, our sample size does not allow for generalisation of results. Also, certain important questions remain unanswered. How does this exhaustion of dealing with censorship both as citizens and as journalists influence the profession? While, for now, social media is an active enabler, helping find and distribute information, as censorship expands into this area, how will journalists reprise their use of platforms? While this research is focused on the implications of government censorship on the practice and profession of journalism in the country, we do not explore, in depth, the important issue of self-censorship among journalists. How does self-censorship govern norms of participation? These are important questions that invite further investigation, especially in the Venezuelan context.

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Notes

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Committees_for_Supply_and_Production
2. https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-venezuela-alex-saab-case.
3. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-39194395.
4. A leading opposition politician, Henrique Capriles Radonski was the presidential candidate who ran against Chávez and Maduro, losing to both of them in questionable elections.

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