

# AN AUTOCRAT'S PLAYBOOK

## Nicolás Maduro's Use of Social Media to Erode Venezuelan Democracy

By Mackenzie Berwick

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's autocratic techniques have pushed Venezuela closer to authoritarianism and farther from democracy. These techniques involve newer tactics that build on his predecessor's success in suppressing democracy and work quietly and efficiently to disrupt elections. Dodging accountability for his hand in Venezuela's democratic backsliding, Maduro avoids explicit breaches of international codes and laws, choosing instead to operate within the grey areas of misinformation and information manipulation around which legal consensus is still being formed. The Venezuelan 2020 parliamentary elections provide a clear and compelling image of Maduro's use of misinformation on social media platforms to threaten election integrity and erode democracy. While Maduro still relies on traditional routes to suppress dissent and maintain authority, the development of discrete, targeted demonstrations of autocratic power on social media platforms must be taken seriously for the threat they pose to global democracy.

### I. Introduction

Venezuela has remained steadfast as a self-defined nation fiercely resistant to the American-led spread of democracy. Hugo Chávez's presidency solidified Venezuela's status as an undemocratic nation and drew international condemnation as socialist policies destabilized domestic markets and drove citizens into poverty. However, amid this undemocratic-ness, the exercise of authoritarianism beckons a closer look. Maduro's playbook involves newer moves that work quietly and efficiently to disrupt elections and manage information access. While Maduro still relies on traditional routes to suppress dissent and maintain authority, the development of discrete, targeted demonstrations of autocratic power, especially on social media platforms, must be taken seriously for the threat they pose to global democracy.

Maduro has deployed traditionally tyrannical techniques inherited from his predecessor during the campaign and selection period of elections to maintain his authority, including unequal access to media, the misuse of state resources, and the arbitrary disqualification of opposing candidates. Since rising to power in 2013, Nicolás Maduro has engaged in the process of autocratic consolidation, in which the state represses the opposition and manipulates citizens' access to information. Further, the state-run media configuration deployed during the 2020 parliamentary elections offers better coverage of the ruling party. A European Union election monitoring group found that incumbent coverage was dominant and "disproportionately favorable" on state

television and “highly significant” on private television shows and radio stations.<sup>1</sup> The regime’s press structure utilizes television and news outlets alongside private media published on the internet to uphold its arrangement. Some internet tactics include blocking access to certain pages or paying citizens to boost hashtags to represent popularity inauthentically.<sup>2</sup>

As democracy-protecting institutions have been more frequently and quietly deconstructed, Maduro has taken Venezuela from a “country at the crossroads” of democracy, at best, to a full-fledged authoritarian regime.<sup>3</sup> As democracy has declined gradually, Maduro dodges accountability for his undemocratic policies. By avoiding the explicit breach of international policies, Maduro has managed to erode democracy and disrupt elections in an increasingly discreet fashion. This phenomenon is called strategic election manipulation, and it is a fundamental form of democratic backsliding.<sup>4</sup> Many may also recognize this formation by the term “competitive authoritarianism.”<sup>5</sup> Competitive authoritarian regimes are neither democracies nor full-scale authoritarian governments.<sup>6</sup> These regimes use formal democratic institutions to exercise political authority as incumbents violate the statutes of basic democracy “so often and to such an extent... that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”<sup>7</sup> Operating below the radar and repurposing state institutions to support incumbent continuity allows autocrats to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents in a way that does not make elections appear fraudulent.<sup>8</sup> Those seeking to protect whatever remains of Venezuela’s fading democracy must ask the question: How has Nicolás Maduro used misinformation on social media platforms to threaten election integrity and erode democracy in the Venezuelan 2020 parliamentary elections?

The autocrat’s playbook includes many strategies to maintain power and build a regime resilient to resistance from an increasingly dissatisfied public. While Maduro employs many undemocratic strategies, the regime’s approach to the internet and traditional media beckons a closer, more critical look. Social media platform manipulation is poised to take the stage as one of the regime’s favored tools to manage information access and consumption. Platforms like Twitter,<sup>9</sup> YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram<sup>10</sup> offer anonymity, accurate audience targeting, and exploitable algorithmic structures, making them well-suited to serve an autocrat’s agenda. While traditional media repression—like the intimidation of journalists and strategically timed internet blockages—may be harder to treat within the boundaries of national sovereignty and Venezuela’s quick-to-trigger security environment, the role of social media and disinformation offers both hope and concern. If defenders of democracy can better understand the tactics in Maduro’s social media playbook, perhaps making these platforms more resilient to bad actors may preserve Venezuela’s election integrity in subsequent elections.

## II. Historical context and literature review

To understand Maduro’s authoritarian playbook, one should look at the trajectory of his actions set against the backdrop of emerging social media platforms as well as forms of authoritarianism. As history intersects with theory, Maduro’s strategies can be more fully revealed.

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- 1 Misión de Observación Electoral de la Unión Europea República Bolivariana de Venezuela, “Declaración Preliminar,” (European Union, Caracas, November 21, 2021), 2. [https://www.eods.eu/library/declaracion\\_preliminar\\_moe\\_ue\\_venezuela\\_2021\\_es.pdf](https://www.eods.eu/library/declaracion_preliminar_moe_ue_venezuela_2021_es.pdf).
  - 2 Esteban Ponce de Leon Rosas and Daniel Suárez Pérez, *Digital Autocracy: Maduro’s Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment*, The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) and The Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, March 2021, 9, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DigitalAutocracyVEN-FINAL.pdf>.
  - 3 Angel Alvarez, “Countries at the Crossroads,” Freedom House, 2011, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/VENEZUELA.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/VENEZUELA.pdf).
  - 4 Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1, (2016): 13, doi:10.1353/jod.2016.0012.
  - 5 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2020): 51, [https://scholar.harvard.edu/levitsky/files/SL\\_elections.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/levitsky/files/SL_elections.pdf).
  - 6 Levitsky and Way, “Elections Without Democracy,” 53.
  - 7 Levitsky and Way, “Elections Without Democracy,” 52.
  - 8 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 13.
  - 9 Twitter refers to the same platform now called “X.”
  - 10 It should be noted that Facebook and Instagram now form part of a network called “Meta.”

### A. Maduro rises to power

After winning the 1988 election, the late President Hugo Chávez took office and began implementing a “socialist revolution” that absorbed private entities into the state’s structure. Chávez’s largest and most impactful project in the oil sector began Venezuela’s transition from semi-democracy to authoritarianism. Chávez’s administration moved to convert *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* from a state-owned oil company to a multitasking organization designed to support the operations and continuity of the incumbent regime.<sup>11</sup> PDVSA financed the ruling party, rewarded loyalists, and secured trade deals.<sup>12</sup> Javier Corrales names this practice “function fusion,” an authoritarian tactic in which existing institutions are granted the ability to perform functions reserved for other institutions, offering autocrats an added form of resilience to resistance and higher chances of survival.<sup>13</sup> Institutional blending presents itself similarly to “function fusion.” However, when institutions step outside of their mandated role in an authoritarian regime, they do so to further an incumbent’s interests.<sup>14</sup> For instance, a government agency focused on communication may declare that it permits certain aspects of media independence, a topic outside its directive, while quietly silencing dissenting voices using internet blocks.

In mid-2011, President Chávez’s health raised questions about Venezuela’s political future, and rumors spread about emergency surgeries and unnamed cancer.<sup>15</sup> After winning another six-year presidential term in October 2012, Chávez confirmed that his cancer had returned and tapped his successor by sharing his support for Vice President Nicolás Maduro.<sup>16</sup> In Venezuela, the president appoints the vice president, and after Chávez won the presidency for the fourth time, Maduro was sworn into office as vice president in October 2012.<sup>17</sup> In 2013, President Chávez succumbed to his health complications and advocated for Maduro to take over the presidency after his death.<sup>18</sup> Vice President Maduro became interim president, taking the oath on March 8.<sup>19</sup> Chávez’s death triggered Article 233 of the Venezuelan Constitution, in which the government sets a date for a new presidential election within 30 days.<sup>20</sup> With Chávez’s posthumous power manifested in his endorsement, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)<sup>21</sup> named the acting president as its candidate. In April that year, Maduro narrowly beat his opponent and took power. Under his rule, an already weakened economy plunged, and the nationalized oil industry suffered poor infrastructure and worse management.<sup>22</sup> The country suffered from hyperinflation, crime, food storage, and a lack of basic supplies.<sup>23</sup> Maduro took up the mantle left by his populist predecessor and continued to socialize Venezuela while increasing his hold on power to stabilize his long-term plans. Before Maduro’s rise to power, Chávez had used peaks in government-owned oil revenues to leverage increasing control over state institutions for the PSUV.<sup>24</sup> This leverage allowed Chávez to build a complex, state-sponsored communication apparatus to secure his position and his party’s, an effort that Maduro has benefitted from and expanded.<sup>25</sup>

Since taking power, Maduro has hardened the traditional authoritarian traits innovated by his predecessor and added new ones, particularly in the world of social media. To survive, Maduro has become more authoritarian and repressed political resistance to an autocratic reality.<sup>26</sup> Maduro has applied the “function fusion” tactic to the

11 Javier Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn’t Fallen,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 41, doi:10.1353/jod.2020.0044.

12 Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 41.

13 Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 40.

14 Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 43.

15 Mark P. Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death: Implications for Venezuela and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, (Library of Congress, April 9, 2013): 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R42989>.

16 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 1.

17 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 1.

18 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 3.

19 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 3.

20 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 3.

21 Translated from Partido Socialista Unida de Venezuela.

22 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

23 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

24 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

25 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

26 Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 40.

military, which has diversified its domestic activities; organized civilian groups, which conduct quasi-military activities and criminal initiatives; and foreign armed forces, which manifest Venezuelan sovereignty.<sup>27</sup>

### *B. Democratic backsliding*

Experts have shown concern for the extent of the democratic backsliding in Venezuela since Maduro took office. Nancy Bermeo defines democratic backsliding, or erosion, as the “state-led debilitation or elimination of political institutions sustaining an existing democracy.”<sup>28</sup> Bermeo argues that blatant election-day voting fraud or intimidation is replaced with “longer-term strategic harassment and manipulation.”<sup>29</sup> This trend certainly rings true as the Maduro regime integrates more subtle forms of social media platform manipulation into an already robust armory of information and influence operations. Bermeo also cautions that backsliding can yield increasingly fluid and ill-defined situations as once-democratic are subjected to weakening forces, making action to defend democracy “particularly difficult.”<sup>30</sup>

Strategic election manipulation is an indicator of backsliding, tilting the electoral playing field to favor incumbents without making elections appear fraudulent.<sup>31</sup> Autocrats may limit social media access, use government resources for incumbent campaigns, change electoral rules to favor incumbents, and harass opponents to keep them off the ballot.<sup>32</sup> These strategies are more subtle than other traditional tactics; however, they effectively influence democratic elections. Bermeo clarifies that this form of democratic backsliding tends to occur long before election day and rarely involves blatant legal violations, strategically remaining below the radar of international and domestic election observers.<sup>33</sup>

### *C. Elections under Maduro*

Since rising to power, Maduro has redesigned the state's institutional approach to the internet and traditional media, refining his techniques over time. In doing so, Maduro has accelerated the subversion of the judiciary system and, soon after, the nation's legislative branch, the National Assembly.<sup>34</sup> In 2015, Maduro's party lost the elections for the National Assembly for the first time since the party's creation in 2000.<sup>35</sup> Maduro stacked the courts with supporters to ensure the judiciary branch would support his ignorance of the National Assembly's mandate.<sup>36</sup> When Maduro created a counterpart legislative body, the National Constituent Assembly, he used the legitimacy and authority of the court to uphold only that organization's legal status. The National Constituent Assembly convened in 2017 with the mandate of writing a new constitution after a special election was held to fill its seats.<sup>37</sup> A power struggle commenced between the two assemblies as each challenged the other's ability to pass legislation and override its counterpart. In addition, Maduro's National Constituent Assembly passed a broadly written law in 2017 that authorizes fines and imprisonment for anyone who amplifies information deemed “intolerant” through traditional or social media, tightening Maduro's grip on the Venezuelan information space.<sup>38</sup>

In 2018, Maduro was re-elected to his second six-year term as president. Opposition actors boycotted the election, leading international bodies and nations to declare that the process was flawed and “illegitimate.”<sup>39</sup> The European Union, the United States, and fourteen Western Hemisphere nations belonging to the Lima Group, a

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27 Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 41.

28 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 5.

29 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 6.

30 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 6.

31 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 13.

32 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 13.

33 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 13.

34 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 3.

35 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

36 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

37 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

38 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 5.

39 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

multilateral group formed in 2017 to counteract the breakdown of democratic order under Maduro, all dismissed the results.<sup>40</sup> In the Congressional Research Service Insight Report, Latin American specialist Clare Seelke described the elections as “minimally competitive.”<sup>41</sup> Many prominent Venezuelan opposition politicians were imprisoned, exiled, or barred from seeking office in late 2017, leaving a less populated slate in May.<sup>42</sup>

The disputed nature of the election led Juan Guaidó, a leading member of the National Assembly, to declare himself interim president in January 2019. Backed by the National Assembly in his challenge of Maduro’s executive authority, Guaidó gained recognition from nearly fifty organizations and entities, including the United States and European Union.<sup>43</sup> The lack of a unified mandate in the executive branch destabilized Maduro’s legitimacy further, leading to the implementation of more authoritarian tactics to preserve his power in the face of lingering popular support. The battle between competing sources of authority continued for two years, and among opposition parties who remain steadfast in their support of Guaidó, it continues today.

In December 2020, Maduro reclaimed control of the National Assembly, bringing the final check on his authority under his control.<sup>44</sup> Like 2018, opposition forces boycotted this election, and the United States and European Union again declined to recognize the results. Just 31 percent of nearly 20 million eligible voters participated in the election, raising concerns about polling access and voter intimidation.<sup>45</sup> The Organization of American States (OAS) published a resolution stating that “the lack of minimum democratic conditions” has failed to guarantee free, fair, and transparent elections.<sup>46</sup> The regional organization also expresses concern for the wellbeing of the National Assembly, which the published resolution calls legitimate and “the last democratic and institutional venue through which the demands of Venezuelan society can be channeled.”<sup>47</sup> Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo commented at the time that, “[The United States] condemns this charade which failed to meet any minimum standard of credibility.”<sup>48</sup> His stance was supported by a European Union Election Observation Mission (EOM) Report, which noted improvements to electoral conditions, but argued that “persistent structural difficulties” were cause for concern.<sup>49</sup> This election demonstrates that Maduro has perfected a political system in which he need not resort to outright fraud to maintain power, even with little popular support.<sup>50</sup>

Unequal access to media, misuse of state resources, and the arbitrary disqualification of opposing candidates continued from previous elections.<sup>51</sup> The European Union’s election groups monitored media and discovered that coverage of the ruling party was dominant and “disproportionately favorable” on state television and “highly significant” on private television shows and radio stations.<sup>52</sup> The report notes that the use of state media for political campaigns goes against international standards of impartial coverage during election periods.<sup>53</sup> Institutions and public officials disclosed their support of PSUV candidates on social media, potentially swaying voters and creating an uneven playing field for opposition candidates.<sup>54</sup> Beyond these traditionally autocratic election tactics, the Atlantic Council’s Digital Autocracy report demonstrates that more targeted and sophisticated

40 Sullivan, “Hugo Chávez’s Death,” 1.

41 Claire Ribando Seelke, “Venezuela’s 2018 Presidential Elections,” Congressional Research Service—Insights, (Library of Congress, May 24, 2018): 1, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IN10902.pdf>.

42 Seelke, “Venezuela’s 2018 Presidential Elections,” 1.

43 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

44 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 4.

45 Vivian Sequera and Deisy Buitrago, “U.S., EU Say They Do Not Recognize Venezuela Parliamentary Vote,” Reuters, Reuters, December 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-results/u-s-eu-say-they-do-not-recognize-venezuela-parliamentary-vote-idUSKBN28H0L3>.

46 General Assembly, “Press Release: The lack of minimum democratic conditions to guarantee free, fair, and transparent elections in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” Organization of American States, (Organization of American States, October 22, 2020): 1, [https://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=S018%2F20](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S018%2F20).

47 General Assembly, “Press Release,” 1.

48 Sequera and Buitrago, ““U.S., EU Say They Do Not Recognize.”

49 Misión de Observación, “Declaración Preliminar.”

50 Isayen Herrera and Anatoly Kurmanaev, “In Venezuela’s Flawed Vote, Maduro Shows One Way to Retain Power,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/world/americas/venezuela-election-maduro.html>.

51 Herrera and Kurmanaev, “In Venezuela’s Flawed Vote.”

52 Misión de Observación, “Declaración Preliminar,” 2.

53 Misión de Observación, “Declaración Preliminar,” 2.

54 Misión de Observación, “Declaración Preliminar,” 2.

strategies were employed on social media to undermine the integrity of the 2020 parliamentary elections. Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy

The unprecedented weaponization of social media to achieve political and electoral goals is a crucial player in the narrative of Venezuela's democratic backsliding. Disinformation on social media presents a unique threat discrete from the historical influence of propaganda.<sup>55</sup> Social media algorithms allow content producers or circulators to target specific users and influence the type of content they see on their feed. The structure of social media platforms can be exploited to serve nefarious purposes when misinformative narratives are deployed to reach a targeted audience.

Global Americans' 2021 report, *Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America*, argues that new forms of political influence are a crucial security concern for democratic countries, especially those that operate through state-sponsored media disinformation campaigns.<sup>56</sup> This report argues that the defense of democratic norms, public discourse, and transparency requires an understanding of the methods exercised in state-led campaigns.<sup>57</sup> Researchers discovered "overt and direct" disinformation from external actors, namely China and Russia, and, more prominently, Venezuelan authorities who undermined democratic forces in the country.<sup>58</sup>

Online disinformation threatens what political scientists call "deliberative democracy," or the normative theory of democratic legitimacy. The validity of democracy is based on the idea that "those affected by a collective decision have the right, opportunity, and capacity to participate in consequential deliberation about the content of decisions."<sup>59</sup> Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove seek to characterize the critical vulnerabilities of social media platforms that disinformation actors exploit to erode democratic systems. These authors draw analytical attention to "transmission mechanisms," which do not transfer claims but also filter, shape, or contest them. Transmission mechanisms are pivotal to creating empowered spaces of discourse that are held accountable to "the wild public sphere."<sup>60</sup> Social media platforms can play a dangerous role as transmission mechanisms because the shaping and filtration of ideas are not made transparent to users who are unaware that an algorithm has acted on the information they are viewing. Hyperlinks, hashtags, and memes serve as novel forms of transmission, undermining existing mechanisms of information sharing.<sup>61</sup>

Disinformation actors exploit three principal vulnerabilities in deliberative systems traditionally and online: (1) the architecture of engagement and amplification, (2) anonymity and unaccountability, and (3) inadequate democratic oversight.<sup>62</sup> Social media platforms have replaced journalists in some ways as gatekeepers; however, these platforms and their algorithms are not neutral in this intermediary role. As more people seek out news and information sources online, algorithms rather than journalists influence much of the information uptake by users. Disinformation campaigns exploit algorithms that determine the discoverability of content via search engines and provide micro-targeted lists of trending topics, using their responsiveness to engagement to push provocative content and allow the algorithm to disseminate it virally on social media to a larger audience.<sup>63</sup> Second, online communication has introduced new ways to mask the authors of the content, affecting the surveillance capability of governments while removing accountability for creators and amplifiers of disinformation. McKay and Tenove highlight the effect of enhanced perceived inclusion and the resulting "false impression of conformity" of opinion

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55 Anthony Nadler, Jonathan Corpus Ong, and Kimber M Quinney, "Disinformation & Democracy," *Arts and Lectures*, California State University San Marcos, October 12, 2020, <https://www.csusm.edu/globalcommitment/disinfodemocracy.html>.

56 Global Americans, ed., *Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America* (Global Americans, 2021): 4, <https://theglobalamericans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021.10.28-Global-Americans-Disinformation-Report.pdf>.

57 Global Americans, *Measuring the Impact*, 4.

58 Global Americans, *Measuring the Impact*, 6.

59 Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy." *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2021): 704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>.

60 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 704.

61 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 705.

62 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 705.

63 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 705.

on issues, meaning that the amplification of an idea can lead users to believe it is more popular or widely accepted than it is in reality.<sup>64</sup> Source blindness and misrepresentations of identity leave users unable to judge the biases or interests of the speaker and create opportunities for deceptive or strategic communication to a mass audience.<sup>65</sup> Third, social media companies are only subject to internal user agreements rather than regulatory frameworks. Without accountability, there is no guarantee of an empowered discursive space existing online where deliberative democracy can take place uninhibited. Social media platforms influence mass communication, but their effect on public opinion has been opaque, and monitoring projects (especially on the topic of disinformation) are challenging to design; thus, few organizations have begun to dive into this cross-section. The means of influence deployed, including algorithmic boosting and unseen targeted messaging, are not transparent and hard to detect without widespread platform transparency.<sup>66</sup>

Global Americans' Venezuela Country Report explains that freedom of expression is limited by independent portal blockages and period power outages designed to restrict citizens' access to information.<sup>67</sup> While other forces work to solidify Maduro's autocratic foothold, the media environment determines the Venezuelan government's capacity to disseminate its domestic, regional, and international agendas thoroughly.<sup>68</sup> Primary misinformative narratives include exaggerations of the impact of American sanctions, conspiracies about secret coups influenced by external powers (namely the United States and Columbia), and unwarranted praise towards the Maduro regime for its management of the nation's economic and humanitarian crises.<sup>69</sup> While many of these narratives are shared through the television broadcasting network, which supports and affirms Maduro's rule, social media has played a crucial role.

Social media analyses are often directed through open-source methods of data collection. However, few organizations research social media platforms using tools like Tweetdeck, Graph Tips, and Rappler to collect thematic and trend-based information about the social media habits of disinformation spreaders. The Atlantic Council's DFR Lab is an exemplary example of cutting-edge research in this field. Like the New York Times' Visual Investigations Team, other organizations have also founded open-source investigative bodies. However, there remains a dearth of data on how social media platforms' structures are weaponized to achieve political ends, particularly using disinformation. Further funding and governmental support are needed to explore better the relationship between platforms, their users, and their exploiters. Brookings' recent Democratic Defense Against Disinformation 2.0 report notes that as influence operations become more efficient, the world's democratic societies must invest in resilience and resistance to win the new war over information.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, the study of dis- and misinformation can be a challenging enterprise as distinctions between terms and types of content can be vague and hard to apply. While misinformation is simply untrue content, disinformation is actively harmful, inaccurate content spread with malintent. When researchers assess a user's intent in posting or resharing information, it can be extremely hard to determine what is and is not disinformation. Due to this complexity, even fewer organizations have taken up the mantle of assessing the information space on social media platforms. The methodology, training, and mandate for a human brain to process intent are barriers to entry.

Due to the high level of attention and consequential outcomes, elections are an ideal event and opportunity for influence operations.<sup>71</sup> With future elections on the horizon, governments must work with social media companies and civil society to quickly implement best practices and defend against disinformation to prevent democratic backsliding and preserve election integrity.<sup>72</sup>

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64 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 706.

65 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 706.

66 McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat," 706.

67 Global Americans, *Measuring the Impact* 16.

68 Global Americans, *Measuring the Impact*, 16.

69 Global Americans, *Measuring the Impact*, 18.

70 Alina Polyakova and Daniel Fried, "Democratic Defense against Disinformation 2.0," (Brookings Institution, June 2019): 1, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/democratic-defense-against-disinformation-2-0/>.

71 Polyakova and Fried, "Democratic Defense," 1.

72 Polyakova and Fried, "Democratic Defense," 1.

### III. Primary sources

To best capture the state of Venezuela's domestic information environment and its impact on press freedoms and national democratic quality, the cumulative analysis of three sources offers a clear picture. First, the Atlantic Council's Digital Autocracy report lays out the condition and evolution of Venezuela's sophisticated information management and manipulation operations on social media platforms while explaining how this sphere factors into a larger, state-influenced television, news, and media association. Second, the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Ranking reports trace the international threats to independent and dissenting journalism, offering country-specific scores annually. Venezuela's annual reports demonstrate an increasingly poor information situation tracing back to 2013. Lastly, Freedom House's Freedom in the World reports track the state of democratic institutions worldwide on an annual basis using teams of regional experts, targeted assessment questions, and general scoring. A repeated pattern of worsening overall scores in combination with low scoring in the category of electoral process integrity since 2017 speaks to the relationship between the metrics of social media platform manipulation, press freedom, and democratic quality.

#### *A. Digital autocracy—Atlantic Council's digital forensic research lab*

A 2021 report published by the Atlantic Council and the Adrienne Arsht Latin American Center, *Digital Autocracy: Maduro's Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment*, unpacks the nature of Venezuela's information ecosystem with data collected from the Digital Forensic Research Lab's (DFR) monitoring conducted from October 2019 through February 2021. The DFR Lab operationalizes the study of disinformation using open-source investigation techniques, mainly on social media platforms, to expose falsehoods and build digital resilience across the globe.<sup>73</sup> This sixteen-month open-source monitoring project, known as #AlertaVenezuela, documented the context in which the 2020 parliamentary election occurred. This project studies the information space to document domestic information operations and foreign influence, investigating the digital capabilities of the regime and the opposition.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, the report catalogs the instability resulting from contested claims to presidential authority from Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó.<sup>75</sup> This political and electoral conflict occurred on a more profound and historically developed background of humanitarian disaster and economic variability. Maduro and his regime have used various repressive and inauthentic techniques across social media platforms to maintain control of the domestic information environment.<sup>76</sup> The Atlantic Council's DFR Lab monitoring findings reveal "positive" propaganda that promotes the regime's policies and successes while obscuring politically unfavorable realities, using state-run media accounts, falsely boosting hashtags, and limiting access to the internet.<sup>77</sup>

In 2018, an annual opinion survey interviewed 20,000 people in Latin America and found that 74.2 percent of Venezuelans said they used social media.<sup>78</sup> The most used platforms were Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.<sup>79</sup> However, Maduro's regime deploys selective internet shutdowns to limit information flow during high-profile protests and disrupt opposition communication. For example, in the monitoring period, the DFR Lab found that Guaidó was primarily restricted to broadcasting via the internet, most often through YouTube or Periscope.<sup>80</sup> Netblocks, a global internet freedom monitor, reported forty temporary blockages of social networks in 2019, including platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Periscope to prevent the opposition from spreading campaign messages.<sup>81</sup> Despite such widespread blockages on platforms, Maduro's regime deploys

73 "Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab," Atlantic Council, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/digital-forensic-research-lab/>.

74 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

75 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 3.

76 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 3.

77 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 3.

78 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 9.

79 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 9.

80 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 9.

81 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 9.

most of its tactics on Twitter. Venezuela boasts the highest rate of active Twitter users regionally at 24.1 percent of its population, compared to just 12 percent of regional neighbors.<sup>82</sup>

The DFR Report offers many details of the tactics used on Twitter to gain public support and consensus. Maduro's government uses two main strategies: the false inflation of pro-Maduro hashtags and coordinated narrative building.<sup>83</sup> These strategies are deployed in combination with traditional forms of censorship, the persecution of journalists, the silencing of opponents, and internet shutdowns.<sup>84</sup>

In January 2019, Twitter announced it had removed 1,196 accounts engaged in a Venezuelan "state-backed influence campaign targeting domestic audiences."<sup>85</sup> The automation of retweeting features allowed government actors to amplify domestic propaganda by taking advantage of social media algorithms that signal boost popular content that receives high engagement. Official accounts like Maduro's Ministry for Petroleum, the Minister of the Interior, the Central Bank of Venezuela, and the Bolivarian Army of Venezuela were coordinated to reach trending topics daily.<sup>86</sup> The accounts were also used to promote hashtags to distract from state-based violence or protests. For example, on January 15, 2020, the regime promoted the hashtag #PuebloHeroicoyVencedor<sup>87</sup> to dilute the discussion of violence that day as regime supporters physically harassed National Assembly members and blocked them from entering the assembly building.<sup>88</sup>

Open-source investigators tracked the movement of state-backed information through the social media ecosystem as actors used the hashtag algorithm to boost user exposure. The strategy begins with the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información,<sup>89</sup> the regime's communications ministry.<sup>90</sup> The account posts an etiqueta del día, or "hashtag of the day," on Twitter that serves the domestic propaganda effort, referring to the "Bolivarian revolution" or promoted government policies.<sup>91</sup> Then, hundreds of anonymous accounts begin to signal boost the hashtag by retweeting the ministry's tweet or writing their own, bringing the hashtag higher on Twitter's popularity indicators and ensuring it reaches more users.<sup>92</sup> Then, when users first interact with the hashtag, it holds an imbued authority as a popular "hashtag of the day," no matter the inauthentic mechanisms used to make it appear popular. Many of these accounts belong to average Venezuelan citizens, who serve the purpose of bots in exchange for government payments. These human bots afford the operation a degree of authenticity and allow government actors to skirt Twitter's policies that prevent the use of automated accounts.

The DFR Lab found that accounts that tweeted or retweeted the regime's hashtags were rewarded with cash bonuses, paid through an app on the Google Play store connected to the Carnet de la Patria<sup>93</sup> program.<sup>94</sup> On Telegram, a group messaging platform, users discussed and shared methods to maximize profits from this program, surpassing the quota of using the "hashtag of the day" 400 times from Monday to Sunday (see Figure 1).<sup>95</sup> Other accounts on Twitter that had previously used the "hashtag of the day" shared screenshots of the Google Play app's financial dashboard, showcasing the rewards for their posts.<sup>96</sup> Many users in this post-for-purchase community also signal boosted posts in a scheme the DFR Lab labels as a call-to-action structure. Accounts sharing the "hashtag of the day" would tag other accounts, which would retweet the post and amplify the hashtags exponentially.<sup>97</sup> Figures 2 and 3 show the DFR Lab's visualization of this scheme.

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82 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 10.

83 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

84 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

85 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

86 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

87 Translates to "Heroic and Victorious Nation."

88 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 16.

89 Translates to "Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information."

90 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

91 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

92 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

93 Translates to "Motherland Card."

94 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 12.

95 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 13.

96 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 13.

97 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 13.

For instance, on April 17, 2020, the “hashtag of the day,” #AtenciónMedicadeCalidad,<sup>98</sup> was released to boost public confidence in the Venezuelan healthcare system’s capacity to support citizens through the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>99</sup> Ten percent of the most active accounts generated 83 percent of total mentions of the hashtag, demonstrating a small group of users’ ability to signal boost with extreme engagement.<sup>100</sup> Through these committed groups of paid users and the “hashtag of the day” structure, the regime claims an exaggerated and empowered role on social media platforms, especially Twitter. In fact, of all of Venezuela’s trending hashtags in 2020, hundreds came from the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información account or other pro-Maduro accounts and were retweeted by newly-created accounts.<sup>101</sup> In fact, in a study of the hashtag #VenezuelaSolidaridayHumanista,<sup>102</sup> which trended on January 27, 2021, the DFR Lab found that more than 50 percent of the accounts tracked were created in earlier that month. Further, this set of accounts generated 80 percent of the tracked content, 98 percent of which were retweets alone.<sup>103</sup> While other hashtags criticizing the regime made the trending topics list, mainly from protesting civil society organizations, the nearly 7 million monthly tweets from pro-regime accounts ensured that dissenting groups generated thirty times fewer posts than pro-regime posts, diluting voices not endorsed by the regime.<sup>104</sup>

This hashtag-of-the-day scheme works by exploiting Twitter’s platform and its algorithmic structure. The algorithm identifies hashtags that spike in popularity, factoring in the number of tweets on the topic and the amount of time it takes to generate them. The element of time is crucial to this strategy and Maduro’s utility of the platform to achieve his political goals. Popularity, coverage, transmission, potential coverage, and reputation all contribute to a topic receiving trending status.<sup>105</sup> Many sources confirm the presence of fake accounts on Twitter. Many of these fake accounts are controlled by “bot-masters” and are used to manipulate account dynamics and falsely produce trends.<sup>106</sup> Maduro’s regime employs actual users to inauthentically elevate strategic topics to trending status, shirking Twitter’s vigilance for bot accounts as real users’ behavior appears authentic and legitimate.

In contrast to the regime’s most apparent information management strategies, the DFR Lab did not find any direct connections to Guaidó beyond some operations designed to benefit Guaidó and opposition to the regime.<sup>107</sup> On August 31, 2020, Facebook removed a network of accounts engaging in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” targeting the regime, tracked by Stanford University’s Internet Observatory and organized by the American firm CLS Strategies.<sup>108</sup> Further, an account called VenezuelaLucha<sup>109</sup> amplified pro-Guaidó and anti-Maduro content to its 1.4 million followers in conjunction with Facebook pages that impersonated media outlets to boost anti-Maduro content.<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, in its report, the DFR Lab argues that anti-regime content seems to be “motivated by profit,” not ideological reasons.<sup>111</sup> No matter the nature of anti-regime content, it is made less effective by the suppressive and manipulative techniques deployed in Venezuela’s information system by the Maduro regime.

Beyond actors in Venezuela’s own information space, external actors also seek to manipulate public opinion and access to accurate information. Maduro’s playbook has proven to be internationally transferable. Other political leaders have attempted to use social media platforms and mass media to share propaganda, achieve partisan goals, and sway public opinion. For example, the DFR Lab’s report reveals evidence of Russian interference or, at the very least, interest in Venezuelan domestic affairs. Russian interest in the state of Venezuelan

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98 Translates to “Medical Attention to Quality.”

99 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 15.

100 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 15.

101 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 15.

102 Translates to “Venezuela Solidarity and Humanity.”

103 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 15.

104 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 16.

105 Yubao Zhang, Xin Ruan, Haining Wang, Hui Wang, and Su He, “Twitter Trends Manipulation: A First Look inside the Security of Twitter Trending,” *IEEE Transactions on Information Forensics and Security* 12, no. 1 (January 2017): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1109/tifs.2016.2604226>.

106 Zhang et al., “Twitter Trends Manipulation,” 153.

107 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 20.

108 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 20.

109 Translates to “Venezuela Fights.”

110 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 20.

111 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 20.

democracy is not surprising, as the two nations each share an adversarial relationship with the United States that is strengthened by allied, autocratic powers. Further, Russian President Vladimir Putin hopes to expand foreign relations to the Latin American sphere and counter American presence and influence.<sup>112</sup> The Russian-owned news outlet “R.T. in Spanish” has been a major supporter to the regime, leading campaigns to favorably bolster responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, compliment the administration on its migration policies, and downplay humanitarian disasters within Venezuela.<sup>113</sup> R.T. in Spanish’s website received 27.16 million visitors in December 2020, and 13.5 percent of those originated in Venezuela, the site’s second most active location.<sup>114</sup> Further, an analysis of nearly 43,000 news articles published on the site concluded that, between January 2019 and July 2020, R.T. in Spanish primarily used social media to share links to its own stories based on U.S.-relevant topics, but Venezuela-related topics have seemingly received more engagement on average.<sup>115</sup> Using the search tool Alexa, the DFR Lab found that R.T. in Spanish was ranked fortieth out of the top fifty websites with the most visitors in Venezuela in January 2021.<sup>116</sup> However, R.T. in Spanish was the second media outlet on the list after anti-Maduro outlet La Patilla and before pro-Maduro website La Iguana.<sup>117</sup> Specifically, in the social media atmosphere, R.T. in Spanish has used its associated accounts to support the regime, including a YouTube channel called Ahí les Va!<sup>118</sup>, which posted two videos that supported the regime-controlled parliamentary elections in 2020.<sup>119</sup> The role of both domestic and external actors in the Venezuelan information space both during the DFR Lab’s monitoring period and particularly during the 2020 parliamentary election.

Iran also engages in Venezuela’s social media ecosystem through its state-funded Spanish-language news outlet—“HispanTV.”<sup>120</sup> However, in 2020, both Twitter and YouTube suspended its accounts, hindering the efficacy of campaigns targeting Venezuela.<sup>121</sup> These campaigns were timed with domestic political events, like the 2020 parliamentary elections, and commercial exchanges between the regimes, like a controversial fuel shipment sent from Iran in March 2020.<sup>122</sup> Thematically, Iranian actors use similar techniques as the regime to support domestic influence operations. Quid-pro-quo hashtag-boosting, most frequently deployed by pro-Maduro and state-run accounts, also occurs between pro-Maduro Twitter accounts and HispanTV articles. The DFR Lab found that a pro-Maduro account, @adelso\_Car, was the most active user of the hashtag #IranYVenezuelaUnionAntiimperialista<sup>123</sup> created in an Iran-funded HispanTV article.<sup>124</sup> HispanTV shared a screenshot in another article from the account @adelso\_Car praising Venezuelan and Iranian anti-imperialism.<sup>125</sup> This comparison yields an interesting overlap of anti-imperial narratives shared by the Venezuelan and Iranian regimes and reveals a critical observation of social media-based relationships between state-backed news outlets and pro-regime accounts.

According to the DFR Lab, Cuba and Venezuela also engage in coordinated narrative-building operations. In February 2020, Twitter accounts in Cuba and Venezuela promoted the hashtag #OEATraidoraDeSuramerica<sup>126</sup>, a regional organization known to support democratic development and economic freedom in Latin America.<sup>127</sup> At the time, the regime blocked an OAS delegation from entering Venezuela, a topic about which Guaidó and Maduro repeatedly tweeted, leading the hashtag to trend with over 42,000 posts.<sup>128</sup> A study from the Stanford Internet Observatory analyzed six hashtags posted by Cuban accounts that were critical of American blockades

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112 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 23.

113 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 23.

114 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 23.

115 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 23.

116 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 24.

117 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 23.

118 Translates to “There you go!”

119 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 24.

120 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 25.

121 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 25.

122 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 25.

123 Translates to “Iran and Venezuela United in Anti-Imperialism.”

124 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 25.

125 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 25.

126 Translates to “OAS: Traitor to South America,” referring to the Organization of American States (OAS).

127 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

128 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

in Cuba and Venezuela in April and May of 2020.<sup>129</sup> The most active accounts were from Cuban embassies and organizations, contributing nearly 22,500 posts, while Venezuelan accounts contributed 10 percent of overall hashtag mentions.<sup>130</sup> Just as Venezuelan state-run accounts engage in hashtag boosting to manipulate social media platforms and users' notions of popularity, a small group of accounts generated most of the volume of mentions per hashtag in the Cuban example.

Countries governed by Maduro's opponents, like Brazil, Colombia, and the United States, used social media to promote false information rather than falsely boosting hashtags. On YouTube, many accounts geographically tagged in these countries claimed that Maduro had been overthrown, gaining more views in the Spanish-speaking world than international outlets or pro-Maduro channels, according to the DFR Lab.<sup>131</sup> Again, the DFR Lab's analysis shows profit as the primary motivation, rather than a solely political cause. This claim must be absorbed with caution as motivations can be challenging to deduce, especially when it comes to online disinformation. Still, the channels used thumbnails of memes, manipulated images, and headlines to generate more clicks from sensationalized content, boosting viewership and ad revenue.<sup>132</sup>

As the DFR Lab states, "all of these strategies are intended to ensure that users in Venezuela are exposed to the Maduro regime's own messaging before all else."<sup>133</sup> For the majority of users who lack a complete understanding of Twitter's algorithm structure or how actors can utilize that sensation-seeking algorithm to boost their content, the popularity of these hashtags appears authentic. Using state media and manipulating narratives on social media has allowed the regime to effectively influence its domestic space, despite its international efforts being less successful. For instance, the DFR Lab investigated the frequency of the "Antifa" on Twitter. Many conflict-seeking groups have exploited this term as a leading keyword in the American domestic far-right disinformation narrative. The DFR Lab found that Venezuela-based accounts posting about "Antifa" contributed to 69.1 percent of mentions, exceeding the activity of Russian and Iranian accounts.<sup>134</sup> Further, Venezuela-linked accounts also amplified false claims after the American presidential election in 2002. Accounts with locations set to Venezuela were most active in amplifying former President Trump's false narratives of voting fraud in the Spanish language.<sup>135</sup>

However, while the Venezuelan accounts boast the most mentions, engagement is low, explaining the use of spamming tactics and inauthentic hashtag boosting techniques.<sup>136</sup> By diluting domestic and international information ecosystems, Venezuelan accounts can influence public opinion and, thus, manipulate voters' access to accurate information about candidates. The Maduro regime's effort to control the country's information environment through inauthentic hashtag boosting or direct repressive measures limits access to opposition narratives.<sup>137</sup> The administration has also used repressive actions like blocking internet access to control domestic information access during critical events, like the parliamentary election in 2020.<sup>138</sup> The regime has also made it harder for users to use tools like VPNs to circumnavigate state-imposed internet blocks.<sup>139</sup> As the DFR Lab states, the Venezuelan public "has easiest and broadest access to only those narratives that the regime wishes them to see."<sup>140</sup>

The regime also uses traditional media widely to support similar narratives to social media. The Digital Autocracy report cites a study published by the European Union, Universidad de Navarra, and Transparency International Venezuela, revealing that 38.7 percent of Venezuelans use television to receive news, highlighting how

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129 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

130 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

131 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

132 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 26.

133 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 11.

134 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 31.

135 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 32.

136 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 32.

137 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

138 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 19.

139 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 17.

140 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

the Maduro regime's dominance of broadcast media controls information domestically.<sup>141</sup> Social media platforms were next, with 25.3 percent of the population saying that these platforms are a primary source of information.<sup>142</sup> Beyond state media, the regime also relies on private media from traditional outlets owned by pro-regime actors like Globovision, Últimas Noticias, television broadcaster Telesur, and hyper-partisan blogs like Lechuguinos, Misión Verdad, La Iguana, and La Tabla.<sup>143</sup> Venezuelan organizations involved in censorship monitoring recorded that Maduro has allegedly pressured 115 media outlets—65 radio stations, 41 print media outlets, and eight television channels since rising to power in 2013.<sup>144</sup> While the role of manipulation and disinformation on social media is undoubtedly overlooked and under-reported, the regime's tight control of the Venezuelan television environment reflects a critical structure of manipulation that enables the state to amplify its propaganda and counter negative coverage published by remaining sources of independent media.<sup>145</sup> For example, in March 2020, Maduro was indicted by the United States for drug trafficking. A state broadcaster reacted by alleging that the move was intended to cover up a plot to kill Maduro. This conspiracy was circulated among concentric levels of state-associated television and media despite a lack of evidence.<sup>146</sup>

The regime's disinformation operations and sophisticated hashtag promotion strategies are incredibly impactful when paired with traditional repressive techniques like internet blocking and the deployment of state-run media outlets. These hashtags promote the regime and its most politically beneficial reality and distract from other hashtags critical of the administration, many of which advocate for awareness of the Venezuelan humanitarian and economic crises.<sup>147</sup>

### *B. Press freedom ranking – Reporters Without Borders*

The Press Freedom Ranking from Reporters Without Borders serves as a dependable source to measure journalistic freedom and information access worldwide. An analysis of this dataset can contribute to a clearer understanding of the extent of democratic erosion in Venezuela caused by both social media-based strategies mentioned above and traditionally repressive techniques deployed by the Maduro regime, especially during electoral seasons.

Reporters Without Borders compiles its country index using an online questionnaire to calculate scores based on experts' responses combined with data on violence against journalists.<sup>148</sup> A team of specialists is assigned to each region to tally abuse against journalists and media outlets, relying on a network of correspondents across the world.<sup>149</sup> The abuse indicator is calculated based on the intensity of abuses against media actors during the evaluation period and then used to weight the qualitative analysis in the country based on the questionnaire responses.<sup>150</sup> Each question is linked to an indicator like pluralism, media interdependence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, infrastructure, and abuse.<sup>151</sup> Each indicator is given a score between zero and 100, which factors into a rank and overall score.<sup>152</sup>

Venezuela's country score declined from 114th to 148th over a period of eight years, representing a gradual decline in press freedom. After coming to power in 2013, Nicolás Maduro's combination of media repression and social media strategies explained in the DFR Lab report has severely restricted press freedom and, thus, public access to a balanced information ecosystem. In 2021, Venezuela was ranked 148th out of 180 assessed

141 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 8.

142 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 8.

143 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 9, 18.

144 Francisco Zambrano, "Medianálisis: El sistema mediático en Venezuela se ha empequeñecido y desaparecido en Buena medida," *Runrun.es*, July 28, 2020, <https://runrun.es/megafono/416695/los-que-no-se-rinden-medianalisis-el-sistema-mediatico-en-venezuela-se-ha-empequeñecido-y-desaparecido-en-buena-medida/>.

145 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 17.

146 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 17.

147 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

148 "Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, 2022, [https://rsf.org/en/index-methodologie-2022?year=2022&data\\_type=general](https://rsf.org/en/index-methodologie-2022?year=2022&data_type=general).

149 "Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index."

150 "Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index."

151 "Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index."

152 "Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index."

countries.<sup>153</sup> The country received a 54.29 abuse score and an underlying situation score—which measures the political, economic, and sociocultural context—of 46.16.<sup>154</sup> Looking back, Venezuela was ranked 147th with a score of 45.66 in 2020,<sup>155</sup> 148th in 2019,<sup>156</sup> 143rd in 2018,<sup>157</sup> 137th in 2017,<sup>158</sup> and 139th in 2016.<sup>159</sup> Tracing back Venezuela's country scores even further, Venezuela dropped to 137th in 2015<sup>160</sup> after ranking 114th in 2014 and 117th out of 180 countries in 2013.<sup>161</sup>

### *C. Freedom in the world—Freedom House*

Beyond the crucial role of a healthy information ecosystem, many other metrics contribute to a nation's degree of democracy. Freedom House's country reports provide a critical dataset to complete the correlation between online disinformation, press freedom, and democratic erosion. Freedom House presents an annual global report called *Freedom in the World* on political rights and civil liberties for 195 territories and 15 territories.<sup>162</sup> The report's methodology is based on the United Nations General Assembly's *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, focusing on assessing individuals' real-world rights and freedoms as they are implemented and protected by nation-states.<sup>163</sup> *Freedom in the World* uses a two-tiered system of scores and status in addition to guiding questions and tables.<sup>164</sup> Each country is awarded zero to four points for ten political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators.<sup>165</sup> A score of zero represents the least amount of freedom, and four demonstrates the greatest freedom. The political rights questions are grouped into (1) electoral process, (2) political pluralism and participation, and (3) functioning of government.<sup>166</sup> The civil liberties questions are grouped into (1) freedom of expression and belief, (2) associational and organizational rights, (3) rule of law, and (4) personal autonomy and individual rights.<sup>167</sup>

The electoral process section offers the most insight into Venezuela's democratic status among press freedom issues addressed in Reporters Without Borders' *Press Freedom Ranking* and the issues of social media platform manipulation covered in the DFR Lab's *#AlertaVenezuela* monitoring report. In 2021, Venezuela received an overall score of 14 out of 100, receiving zero out of four on all three electoral process questions and ranking “not free.”<sup>168</sup> Its internet freedom score, a measurement of freedom online recorded in Freedom House's annual *Freedom on the Net* report, sits at 28 out of 100.<sup>169</sup> In the 2021 internet-based report, Venezuela received a score of six out of 25 on obstacles to access, 12 out of 35 on limitations on content, and 10 out of 40 on violations of user rights,<sup>170</sup> demonstrating the regime's effort to close off “virtually all channels for political dissent, [restrict] civil liberties, and [prosecute] perceived opponents without regard for due process.”<sup>171</sup> The *Freedom in the World* report offers the example of Luis Morales, a rail system employee who was interrogated by

153 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>.

154 “Press Freedom Ranking,” 2021.

155 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2020>.

156 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2019#>.

157 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2018#>.

158 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2017, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2017>.

159 “Press Freedom Ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, 2016, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2016>.

160 “Country Report: Venezuela,” Reporters Without Borders, October 27, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/country/venezuela>.

161 “Country Report: Venezuela.”

162 “Freedom in the World: Research Methodology,” Freedom House, 2022, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW\\_2022\\_Methodology\\_For\\_Web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_Methodology_For_Web.pdf).

163 “Freedom in the World.”

164 “Freedom in the World.”

165 “Freedom in the World.”

166 “Freedom in the World.”

167 “Freedom in the World.”

168 “Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2022>.

169 “Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022.”

170 “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2021>.

171 “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net.”

state intelligence after sharing a comment over social media about the effects of a Chinese-produced COVID-19 vaccine. According to Freedom House's expert groups, Morales was dismissed from his job and deleted his account at the recommendation of government officials, directly affecting his freedom of expression and belief through the control of citizens' social media activity.<sup>172</sup>

Due to the length of Maduro's term and the struggle for legitimacy that occurred between Maduro and Guaidó, Freedom of the World's 2021 report gave Venezuela no points in response to the question, "Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?" After the 2018 presidential elections, Maduro was sworn in for a new term, and the democratically elected National Assembly elected Guaidó as interim president with international support, leading Maduro to be recognized by fewer than twenty countries.<sup>173</sup> However, international recognition of Guaidó has waned as well. This turn of events left executive power disputed and unstable. In response to the question, "Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?" Venezuela received no points. Freedom in the World cites the major opposition parties' refusal to participate in the vote for the next National Assembly term as a point of concern as those parties believed Maduro's regime would not oversee a fair election.<sup>174</sup> The report highlights the 20 out of 23 governorships and 212 out of 335 mayoralities won by pro-government candidates, likely due to a voter turnout of 42.5, which represented the lowest in twenty-five years.<sup>175</sup> An E.U. Election Observation Mission called the elections "relatively well conducted" but noted that state resources were used to support pro-regime candidates and judicial actors interfered.<sup>176</sup> In response to the final election-related question, "Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?" the report cites political manipulation and institutional interference as sources of democratic erosion, offering no points again.<sup>177</sup> The 2018 presidential elections and the 2020 legislative elections were characterized by disqualifications of opposing candidates, abuse of government resources for political use, and the diminished presence of international observers—as expected within the greater context of Maduro's regime.<sup>178</sup> However, Freedom in the World directly references an "uneven access to state-dominated media" as a flaw in the electoral framework and its fairness.<sup>179</sup>

In 2020, Venezuela received an overall score of 16 out of 100, earning no points in the electoral process category.<sup>180</sup> In 2019, the nation received a 19 out of 100 and was not assigned any electoral points.<sup>181</sup> In 2018, Venezuela had 26 out of 100 points, earning two points in response to the question, "Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?"<sup>182</sup> The 2018 report cited the 2017 gubernatorial elections as a site democratic issue. The regime restricted opposition candidates' campaigns, changed voting locations without proper notice, reduced access to polling stations in opposition-held neighborhoods, allegedly bought votes, abused government resources, and intimidated voters and election observers.<sup>183</sup> Three opposition parties boycotted the polls in protest of "unjust conditions," leading Maduro's National Constituent Assembly to effectively ban those parties from participating in the 2018 presidential election.<sup>184</sup> The report afforded Venezuela two points as Maduro was still serving his six-year term. This specific question opened assessments of executive power and its manifestations—like gubernatorial elections. Yet, the

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172 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022."

173 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

174 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

175 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

176 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

177 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

178 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

179 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report."

180 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2020>.

181 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2019 Country Report," Freedom House, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2019>.

182 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2018 Country Report," Freedom House, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2018>.

183 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2018."

184 "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2018."

nation did not receive any points for the other two questions in the electoral process category. Finally, in 2017, Venezuela received a score of 30 out of 100.<sup>185</sup> While no category-specific point allocations are recorded, the report cites the 2015 National Assembly election as a point of conflict in its electoral process assessment. Freedom in the World explains that “a delayed initial announcement, a campaign environment tilted in favor of the ruling party, disqualifications of prominent opposition candidates, government abuse of public resources to boost voter support, uneven access to the state-dominated media, a near extinction of independent traditional media, a lack of international observers, some violence, and reported intimidation and monitoring by superiors of state employees with the aim of ensuring that they voted for the government, followed by threats and firings after the results were announced” as problematic traits in the field of democratic election practices.<sup>186</sup>

A multi-year review of Freedom House's Venezuela Country Reports shows a continued “not free” status and a progressively sophisticated election disruption, manipulation, and management system. The regime maintains control through the deployment of a variety of anticipated techniques in addition to the use of social media to suppress and falsely inflate particular narratives. The current information environment in Venezuela is heavily influenced by the regime's pay-for-retweet and spamming strategies, weaponizing social media platform algorithms and structures to saturate users' feeds with pro-regime content.<sup>187</sup> With its control of traditional and internet-based media, the Maduro regime amplifies certain narratives while restricting others, making Venezuelans unsure of what is true in an environment where their notions of popularity or public approval have been manipulated.<sup>188</sup> In a democracy, accurate and accessible facts about all candidates and the realities of a governing state's management of humanitarian disasters are required to foster robust, grounded political debate. The Maduro regime's control of Venezuela's information environment represents a critical threat to the integrity of its elections, and the role of social media as part of the democratic erosion narrative cannot be overlooked.

#### IV. Analysis

Analyzing these key sources reveals that as Maduro's popularity wanes, his autocratic techniques to maintain power only become more prominent and refined. By tracking democracy and the freedom of Venezuela's press through the Press Freedom Ranking and the Freedom in the World report, it is clear that democratic backsliding has occurred. The mirrored trend of declining press freedom and a dropping global democracy score demonstrates that Maduro relies on the tightening control of press narratives to maintain power. Simply, as press freedom falls, so does the state of Venezuelan democracy, and vice versa. It is a self-sustaining feedback loop.

Still, the symbiosis between these factors is nothing new in the field of autocratic regimes. Instead, the role of social media, in particular, presents an angle worth addressing. An increasingly restricted information ecosystem reduces the plurality of opinions and limits access to opposition campaign information. Whether through traditionally repressive actions like internet blocks or more subtle and targeted strategies like weaponizing social media platform characteristics, autocratic aims can be achieved to consolidate power. As discussed by McKay and Tenove, autocrats seeking to spread or legitimize false claims or state propaganda are in the position to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent to online discursive platforms: (1) the architecture of engagement and amplification, (2) anonymity and unaccountability, and (3) inadequate democratic oversight.<sup>189</sup>

The cumulative effect of these autocratic techniques has kept Maduro in power as his popularity has diminished. As reflected in *Digital Autocracy: Maduro's Control of the Venezuelan Information Environment*, Maduro has doubled down on his manipulation of social media platforms with inauthentic operations to present a more politically favorable reality in Venezuela through disinformation and propaganda.

The 2020 parliamentary elections offered an opportunity to concretize the techniques used to manage and distort information. The last hope for checks and balances in an ever-frail Venezuelan democracy fell as the PSUV

185 “Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2017 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2017>.

186 “Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2017.”

187 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

188 Rosas and Pérez, *Digital Autocracy*, 36.

189 McKay and Tenove, “Disinformation as a Threat,” 705.

grabbed an even-larger share of power. This election was momentous because the opposition had everything to win, and Maduro had everything to lose. A landslide win for the opposition party would have represented a sizable resistance to the regime and, worse, one capable of claiming political power. Maduro exercised all of his quiet-yet-powerful tactics on the electoral landscape, knowing observers would watch with a close eye after the 2017 and 2018 confrontations with Guaidó.

In a display of democratic backsliding, Maduro engaged in strategic election manipulation to structurally tilt the playing field towards his party without making the 2020 gubernatorial election appear blatantly fraudulent. As Nancy Bermeo describes, this form of democratic backsliding begins operation long before the election day.<sup>190</sup> By managing the information passed between opposition candidates and the general public using newer social media techniques that went unseen by most international bodies, Maduro strategically remained below the radar of election observers, who reported on the regime's more obvious and traditional tactics instead.

Maduro's manipulation of the 2020 gubernatorial elections represents a more intensive and carefully shaped effort refined over the past decade to operate discreetly under a discerning international gaze. The application of these techniques threatens the integrity of future domestic elections and holds the potential to erode what remains of Venezuelan democracy.

## V. Conclusion

When looking holistically and temporally, it becomes clear that Maduro's interference in the 2020 parliamentary election was crucial to solidifying his authority by eliminating the threat of the National Assembly. However, the development of discrete manipulation techniques is not new to the regime. Maduro began creating democracy-disabling mechanisms capable of functioning under international scrutiny when he ascended to the presidency in 2013. The poor electoral conditions present in the 2020 election were strategically evolved to be more efficient and targeted with each passing year of democratic erosion.

While few solutions exist, amending the structure of social media platforms to be more resilient to autocratic manipulation may be a solid option to slow Venezuela's democratic backslide. In "Twitter Trends Manipulation: A First Look Inside the Security of Twitter Trending," the authors recommend strengthening the Twitter trending algorithm by considering more complicated factors that are harder for spammers or inauthentic actors to emulate.<sup>191</sup> Another strategy involves detecting anomalies in tweet sources, allowing platforms to interrupt trend manipulation as it occurs.<sup>192</sup> Tracking previously manipulated topics may prove fruitful in boosting the early detection of abnormalities. While these recommendations are specific to Twitter, they could be easily adapted and applied to other sites of disinformation distribution like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms. By sorting out manipulated and regular topics, researchers and platform moderators can uncover connections between similar manipulation strategies and link new, inauthentic topics with previously manipulated topics.<sup>193</sup> Hindering or deactivating the regime's ability to act through Twitter to carry out undemocratic motivations may offer a promising resolution to make the deconstruction of democratic information more difficult.

As Venezuela approaches future elections, monitoring organizations, election observers, and democratic allies must work cooperatively and collectively to address this autocratic regime's growing hold on citizens' access to uncompromised information. The lessons learned in Venezuela may prove illuminating in the fight to preserve global democracies as disinformation spread on social media presents an urgent, evolving threat.

## VI. Appendix

Since the authorship of this paper, Venezuelans have cast their votes in the 2024 Presidential Election in which President Nicolás Maduro has emerged as the victor. Though overt and covert autocratic techniques may have had

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190 Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 13.

191 Zhang et al., "Twitter Trends Manipulation," 153.

192 Zhang et al., "Twitter Trends Manipulation," 153.

193 Zhang et al., "Twitter Trends Manipulation," 154.

a hand in this result, many hold hope that Venezuelans will continue to fight for free and fair democratic elections. Venezuela está luchando por su libertad y un día, su hora llegará.

On Telegram, a group messaging platform, users discussed and shared methods to maximize profits from this program, surpassing the quota of using the “hashtag of the day” 400 times from Monday to Sunday (see Figure 1). Figures 2 and 3 show the DFR Lab’s visualization of this scheme.

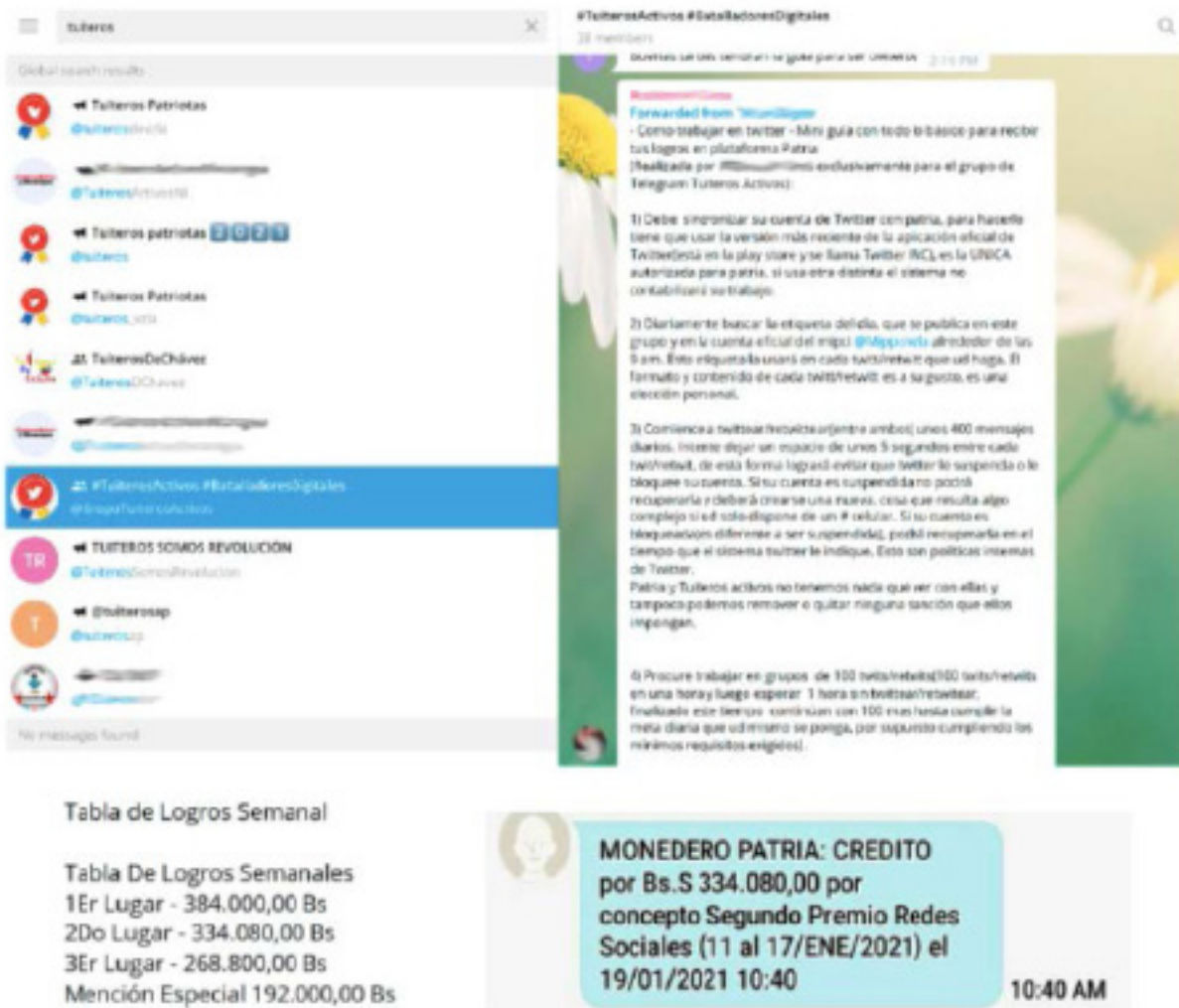
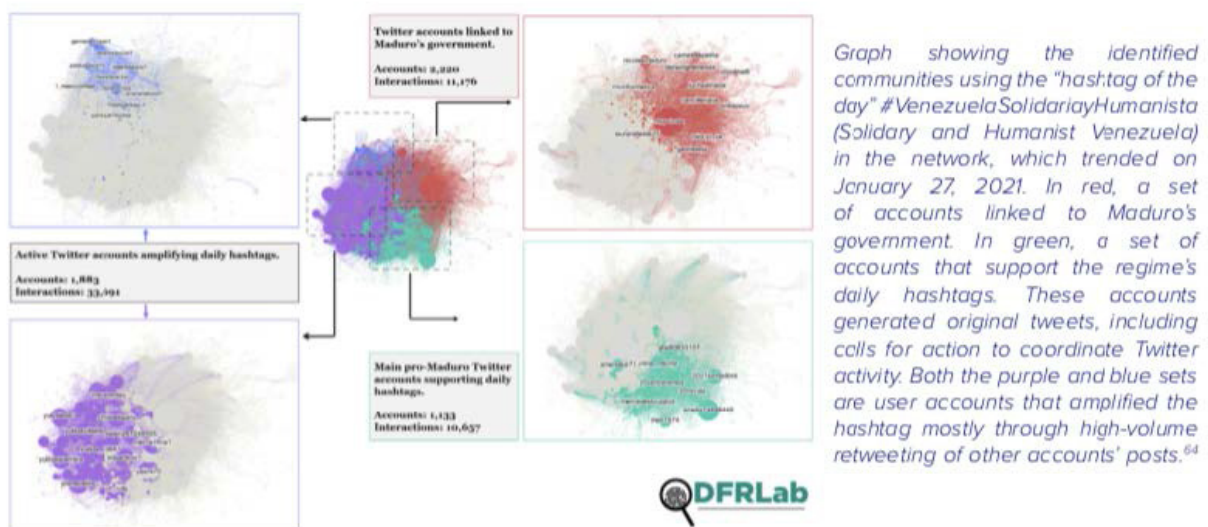


Figure 1.



The flow of a single “etiqueta del día,” with the MPPCI account introducing it (left), two accounts—both of which exhibit suspicious behavior, such as anonymity, extremely high posting rates, and ratio of retweets to original tweets—retweeting it (top middle and right), and a PSUV-affiliated account reusing it (bottom).<sup>58</sup>

Figure 2.



Graph showing the identified communities using the “hashtag of the day” #VenezuelaSolidariayHumanista (Solidary and Humanist Venezuela) in the network, which trended on January 27, 2021. In red, a set of accounts linked to Maduro’s government. In green, a set of accounts that support the regime’s daily hashtags. These accounts generated original tweets, including calls for action to coordinate Twitter activity. Both the purple and blue sets are user accounts that amplified the hashtag mostly through high-volume retweeting of other accounts’ posts.<sup>64</sup>

Figure 3.

## VII. Glossary and key terms

#AlertaVenezuela — a six-month monitoring campaign conducted by the DFR Lab to investigate the Maduro regime's domestic and international media strategies in traditional and online environments.

Algorithm — a specific sequence of numbers or a code that gives well-defined instructions to process data and perform a function.

Deliberative democracy — the normative theory that democratic legitimacy is responsive to the condition that “those affected by a collective decision have the right, opportunity, and capacity to participate in consequential deliberation about the content of decisions.”<sup>194</sup>

Democratic erosion or backsliding — the “state-led debilitation or elimination of political institutions sustaining an existing democracy.”<sup>195</sup>

DFR Lab — the Digital Forensic Research Lab created and funded by the Atlantic Council.

Disinformation — information shared with the express intention to deceive.

Function fusion — an authoritarian tactic in which existing institutions are granted the ability to perform functions reserved for other institutions, offering autocrats an added form of resilience to resistance and higher chances of survival.<sup>196</sup>

Election integrity — the presence of free and fair elections.<sup>197</sup>

European Union Election Observation Mission (E.U. EOM) — an observation mission commissioned by the European Union to record, analyze, and document elections and their democratic or undemocratic traits, typically using the criteria of “free and fair” to determine the integrity or quality of elections. *Misión de Observación Electoral de la Unión Europea República* in Spanish.

Guaidó, Juan — Venezuelan politician who represented the state of Vargas in the National Assembly. In 2019, the National Assembly declared him the interim president of Venezuela, commencing the presidential crisis and challenging Maduro's authority.

Maduro, Nicolás — President of Venezuela, successor to Hugo Chávez.

Misinformation — untrue information that is circulated widely.

National Assembly — Venezuela's legislative unicameral body, founded in 2000.

National Constituent Assembly — the legislative body created by Maduro in 2017 to counter the National Assembly after it recognized Guaidó as interim president.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) — a multifactor methodology for collecting, analyzing, and making decisions about content and data which is publicly accessible.

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194 McKay and Tenove, “Disinformation as a Threat,” 704.

195 Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 5.

196 Corrales, “Authoritarian Surviva,” 40.

197 “Election Integrity,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/election-integrity>.

Organization of American States (OAS) — the regional organization of Central and South American nations.

Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) — the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the party to which Maduro belongs.

Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA) — the Venezuelan state-owned and operated natural gas and oil company. Translates as “Petroleum of Venezuela.”

Signal boosting — the behavior of reposting important information from another source to circulate that content and share it with one’s followers.

Transmission mechanisms — sources of democratic discourse that do not only transfer claims but also filter, shape, or contest them. They are pivotal to creating “empowered spaces of discourse that are held accountable to ‘the wild public sphere.’”<sup>198</sup>

VPN — a Virtual Private Network that users can install and use to change their source location to another country, allowing them to access content blocked by location.

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