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A Letter To Hugo Chávez

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By Diana M. Daniels
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Dear President Chávez:

Last week I spent three days in Venezuela following up on an open invitation from a representative of the Venezuelan legislature. (It had been extended at the March meeting of the Inter American Press Association.) I had been looking forward to meeting you and other members of the Venezuelan federal and provincial governments to have an open dialogue about freedom of expression and freedom of the press in your country. To my regret, no one from the Venezuelan government was willing to meet. Instead of having that dialogue, I found the organization I represent in the unusual circumstance of being the object of petty name-calling by officials of your government, behavior somewhat akin to what my children do when they throw a temper tantrum and they can't think of anything better to say.

Here is what I would have wanted to talk about with you if we'd had the chance.

As head of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, whose founding was rooted in the democratic movements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, what is it about a truly independent and free press that is of concern to you? As Simón Bolívar stated in his Carta de Jamaica, written in Kingston on Sept. 6, 1815: "The first steps of all the new governments are marked by the establishment of juntas of the people. These juntas then draft rules for the convocation of congresses, which produce great changes. Venezuela erected a democratic and federal government, after declaring for the rights of man, establishing a system of checks and balances, and passing general laws granting civil liberties, such as freedom of the press and others."

Paying lip service to the concept of freedom of the press and freedom of expression is just that -- lip service. The current Venezuelan Constitution provides for freedom of expression and a right to information, but requires that that information be "timely, truthful and impartial." Those qualities are all in the eye of the beholder. What is impartial to you may be biased to others and vice versa. Remember the days not so long ago when, under President Carlos Andrés Pérez, copies of newspapers were confiscated if your picture appeared in them, and your vice president, José Vicente Rangel, was harassed and threatened for articles he wrote that were critical of that regime.

If a government is confident that it is representing the will of the people and working in their best interests, then that government should be confident enough to withstand the scrutiny of a critical press. By restricting freedom of the press and freedom of expression, you take away an essential right that belongs not to the press but to the Venezuelan people.

How are the interests of the people served by threats to take back the radio and television licenses held by the independent media should these media publish or broadcast any news item that annoys the government or one of its officials? How would allowing the government not only to decide editorial content and staff hiring policies but also to set strict time limits on newscasts further the interests of the Venezuelan people? What makes the efforts of the government in Bolívar state to evict and close down the Venezuelan daily newspaper *Correo del Caroní* anything more than a clumsy attempt to silence an independent media outlet and set an example for others who dare to be critical of the government?

In a time of jet travel, Internet and cellular telephony, and instant messaging, information is hard to control. It will be very difficult to keep it from the Venezuelan people. By trying to eliminate the independent media, you will only make the people of Venezuela and the rest of the world wonder what you're trying to hide.

Why not let the independent media flourish in your country? Let Venezuela become the model for the rest of the hemisphere for tolerance, and have the confidence to allow a diversity of views to be voiced. As Walter Lippmann, the 20th-century American columnist, wrote, "A free press is not a privilege, but an organic necessity in a great society." Venezuela can be that great society, but first it must have a truly free press that applies not just to a single person's right to publish ideas but also to the right of print and broadcast media to express political views and to cover and publish news freely without interference, intimidation or reprisal.

It is up to you, Mr. President, to lead and to carry on the tradition of a free press in Venezuela begun so many years ago by Simón Bolívar.

The writer is general counsel of The Washington Post Co. and president of the Inter American Press Association. She was accompanied on the IAPA mission to Venezuela by newspaper representatives from Chile, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic.

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