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Telesur to Give Leftist Latin America Its Own Voice

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The Venezuelan government has joined a number of other governments to fund Telesur, a 24-hour news and culture television network, debuting the channel on July 24. A host of progressive figures attended the unveiling of the network, which is intended to provide a southern voice for South American viewers. The US Congress, before the network had even gone on air full time, approved legislation to beam propaganda broadcasts into Venezuela to counter the station, a move many analysts have called wrongheaded.

Effort to break the northern broadcast-network monopoly Televisora del Sur, or Telesur, founders say they intend to provide South American countries with news and culture programming that does not originate in US cities like New York, Miami, or Washington, DC. They say most news about the region comes to viewers from the US, Spain, Britain, or France.

The main proponent of the network is the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, which says the channel seeks to create an alternative to traditional media conglomerates like CNN or Univision, which are US-based. Telesur launched with an initial investment of US$2.5 million dollars. Venezuela has 51% of the shares in the network, while Argentina holds a 20% interest, Cuba 19%, and Uruguay 10%.

"The initial budget including building projects and equipment, as well as operational costs has totaled roughly US$10 million," said general manager Aram Aharonian. These funds were put up by Venezuela, which has also contributed installations and facilities made available by the state. Telesur's head office is in Caracas. Member states of the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru have expressed interest in exchanges and alliances with Telesur, according to Telesur executives.

Andres Izarra moved from heading Venezuela's Information Ministry to take charge of the network. The former television reporter complained that his former employers when he worked in the nation's private broadcast media practiced censorship during the time of the 2002 coup that temporarily removed Chavez from power.

The network says it will keep permanent news correspondents in Bogota, Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, Havana, Montevideo, La Paz, and Washington and a network of collaborators throughout the region to "guarantee broad and responsible coverage." The network hopes to create a "medium that permits all of the inhabitants of this vast region to spread their own image, debate their own ideas, and transmit their own content, freely and equitably." This means Telesur will have correspondents' offices in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, the US, and Uruguay.

In Uruguay, the smallest partner in the network, Telesur's operations will be based in the offices of the public TV network Tveo and will be broadcast via the signal of local cable station TV Ciudad, run
by the Montevideo city government. Network leaders have been unabashedly leftist in many of their statements.

"It is without doubt a political and strategic project," said general manager Aharonian, a Uruguayan journalist. "It deals with reclaiming the authority to speak that was kidnapped during more than three decades of dictators, corrupt politicians, and genuflections before capital," he said. "We have begun to dismantle the Latin American mediatic latifundio in which we find ourselves [to move] toward the democratization of the television spectrum." The term latifundio normally refers to large landed estates. International figures from the left like actor Danny Glover and author and editor of the New Left Review Tariq Ali were on hand at the July 24 debut in Caracas.

Programming included documentaries like Memorias de Fuego, which take direct inspiration from the Latin Americanist writing of Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano. Other programs included movies, both classic and contemporary, shows about contemporary urban life, modern traditional and agricultural labor, Latin American social movements, and travel shows. The station had a trial period beginning in May where it worked out technical details and ran promotions and short productions before it began its full time programming.

**Regional media beset with violence, too much sports**

Repeated studies have shown a lack of diversity of issues in South American broadcasts or have blamed "cronicas rojas," or sensationalist news, for cultivating fear among viewing audiences. One study in Chile by the Consejo Nacional de Television (CNTV), for example, found that 27% of the central news programs in the country were sports news stories, 12% police news, and political news took only 11.8%. Arts and culture news took 3.3% of the airtime in the study, which examined 10 weeks between February and April in which the group recorded almost 35 hours of news programming.

Another study presented in Guatemala found that publications about violent acts or cronicas rojas were generating fear in Latin America because of the tone of alarm used to write them, according to Colombian researcher Omar Rincon of the Centro de Competencia en Comunicacion para America Latina. He says his analysis looked at 795 news articles on violent homicides, rapes, assaults, abuse of minors, and security policies printed in 14 newspapers from Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Colombia.

Rincon said that because of the tone of the articles "societies feel that they are threatened and fearful and a climate of insecurity is created that can be related to the quantity and narrative" of the news. He also says such news tends to stigmatize social sectors like the poor, the young, or immigrants as responsible for crime. He suggested media spend more time training reporters, among other recommendations, to improve the quality of coverage.

With its focus on populist movements, Telesur and TV Brasil Internacional a similar Brazilian-driven project may succeed in implementing some of Rincon's recommendations, if they draw a significant audience.
Colombian intelligence concerned over network

One regional controversy broke out in Colombia regarding content during Telesur's trial period when an image of Manuel Tirofijo Marandula, commander of the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), appeared in a promotional clip. There were also images of a young woman singing what Colombian intelligence agents thought was "eta, eta, eta."

The intelligence agents told Bogota newspaper El Tiempo that they interpreted this as possibly being a song in praise of ETA, the Basque separatist group that has conducted bombings throughout Spain. But Telesur officials denied that they were advocating terrorism with such images and said such accusations were exaggerated.

Information director Jorge Botero said that the woman was singing along to a song by Brazilian Caetano Veloso where the chorus is "eita," or "caramba" in Spanish. Eita in Portuguese can sound like eta in Spanish. He said the image of Tirofijo lasted one second and pertained to a documentary about the aging rebel, a personality present through decades of national Colombian life. Other countries' broadcast networks are still deciding how much of Telesur's content they want to carry, if any at all.

As of Aug. 1, directors of Ecuador's national television were still evaluating the content of Telesur prior to determining whether their airwaves would carry the network or not. US House approves opposition, anti-Chavez broadcast funds Florida Rep. Connie Mack (R-FL) led an effort to counteract Telesur in the US House of Representatives before the July 24 debut of the network.

On July 21, House members approved a proposal for broadcasts to Venezuela similar to the Radio and TV Marti programs to Cuba. Rep. Mack, who sponsored the amendment, said it was intended to provide news and other information as well as to promote democratic principles in Venezuela. The amendment authorized the government "to initiate radio and television broadcasts that will provide a consistently accurate, objective, and comprehensive source of news to Venezuela."

"Chavez has clearly gone astray and doesn't believe any more in freedom and democracy. He has said that he is on a march to socialism," Mack said. "What we are saying to Chavez and his cronies is that we're keeping an eye on him." Mack cited Chavez's recent purchase of military equipment, newly enacted laws restricting media freedoms, repressive acts against political opponents, and alliances with Cuba, China, and Iran as reasons for growing concern. He also said that the Caracas-based Telesur could be used to spread anti-American sentiment across the region.

The White House did not immediately react to the Venezuela broadcast proposal, passed by voice vote as an amendment to a bill authorizing other US-funded broadcasts such as Radio and TV Marti, the US-government funded stations created to broadcast programming and news against the Cuban government. The text did not specify the broadcasts' funding or home base. It must still pass the Senate to become law.
Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera said his country respects a free press. He defended Telesur as "another voice," and in a sarcastic tone added that, instead of creating a new broadcast for Venezuela, US lawmakers should focus on getting the US-funded Voice of America radio rebroadcast by the country's predominantly anti-Chavez private media.

Chavez vowed to block the signals with whatever technology was at his government's disposal.

John Dinges, former foreign correspondent at The Washington Post and National Public Radio and currently a professor of journalism, said, "Putting the term 'accurate news' in the same sentence with government-sponsored broadcasts is not only an oxymoron, it is disingenuous in the extreme. Governments have political agendas; when they hire journalists to report the news you can be sure the 'news' will fit the government's agenda." Dinges argues that Venezuela's "energetic, free, and combative radio, television, and newspaper establishment" distinguishes it from the Cuban media environment and that picking a fight with all the countries involved in the network would be a mistake for the US.

Columnists like The Miami Herald's Andres Oppenheimer, no advocate of chavismo, concurred. US audiences would be unable to view US broadcasts to Venezuela, since federal law prohibits domestic distribution of propaganda meant for overseas audiences.

Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel said that Telesur "scored a victory before it even went on the air," adding that the US House of Representatives was "inconsiderate" toward opposition politicians and media in Venezuela, who already "faithfully and freely transmit Washington's point of view."

The Venezuelan government says Washington is trying to repeat the failed initiatives of Radio and TV Marti. While Radio Marti can be picked up in Cuba from signals sent by military aircraft, the Caribbean island's authorities have succeeded in blocking transmission of TV Marti, which continues to be broadcast without being seen by its target audience.

Former information minister Izarra said that, in addition to the anti-Telesur initiative, the House of Representatives also agreed to earmark US$9 million in 2006 and another US$9 million in 2007 to support opposition political parties, media, and civil-society organizations in Venezuela, "in what they refer to as the defense of the state of law and the promotion of democratic governability." "This is a new attack on Venezuela and Latin American integration by the US government, and it is being carried out in coordination with the groups in Venezuela that are calling on people to abstain from voting on Aug. 7" in local government elections, which polls correctly predicted would result in another resounding victory for the ruling coalition.

Al Jazeera of Latin America? Telesur's concept as a pan-Latin American network has drawn frequent comparisons with the Middle East's Al Jazeera, funded in part by the government of Qatar. The network took the lead in the region as a pan-Arabic network, becoming the region's top source for television news and supplanting US networks like CNN.
US government officials have called it an outlet for propaganda, just as they have accused Telesur of being an "anti-American" outlet. Al Jazeera has faced vociferous criticism from US officials, the former regime of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi regime that the US installed after Hussein's fall, and many other Middle Eastern governments.

Several Al Jazeera reporters have died in the course of war coverage and workers at the network have alleged that some incidents were intentional killings of journalists by US military. Currently, Al Jazeera, the leading network in the region, is banned from reporting from Iraq. But Al Jazeera managers like senior producer Samir Khader say the network wants first and foremost to introduce Western journalistic principles to Arabic broadcast media.

"We don't want to alienate the Americans....We are what they want for the region: an Arab channel with a Western mentality," says Khader. He stresses telling both sides of a story in an independent manner, something he argues that media in the Middle East has heretofore lacked.

Hugo Chavez compares Telesur with other integration projects like Petrosur and Petrocaribe where Venezuela offers its oil resources to regional countries under preferential terms. He and other South American leaders have undertaken a number of trade and energy-integration projects in recent months, and Telesur may ultimately serve as the media piece of the South American integration puzzle, if more regional countries pick up its broadcasts and audiences find it compelling enough.

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