

## 4 **Rebellious audiences**

### Information platform migration and use of WhatsApp in a tyrannized society

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#### **Abstract**

In Venezuela, the populist-authoritarian regime has been creating a new structure for national communications since 2007, where the media scheme favored the official voice. Their goal was consolidated in 2013, when Maduro assumed his presidency after the death of Chavez. After that hegemonic control of media channels, Venezuelan audiences began to migrate to other non-traditional media channels, including digital media, which reached very high numbers. This analysis assesses how audiences have been migrating during the last decade from different information platforms. The migration happened, as a process, in different stages. The chapter also highlights the importance of alternative channels, based, among other sources, on official data from the official opposition TV channel in YouTube and primary data from public opinion polls. The findings suggest that in 2020 WhatsApp is the new destination for Venezuelan audiences seeking political information. This chapter also uses cluster analysis to propose a taxonomy for users of WhatsApp in Venezuela.

#### **Tyrannization: is a neologism needed?**

The word “democratization” appeared in 3,257 academic articles in the library index of my university, Universidad de Navarra. I looked then for the opposite term “tyrannization” and it appeared in only three articles, one of them as related to insomnia and two to bullying. But social tyrannizing exists and is a process that leads from democracy to autocracy, and that in Venezuela began at the end of the 20th century with the authoritarian populism of Hugo Chavez. Populism was in Venezuela the transition to tyranny.

In Venezuela the populist regime created a new communicational architecture, in which the new national media scheme clearly favored the official voice. The effort started in 2004, but it was consolidated in 2013, the same year that Chavez passed away. After the hegemonic control of media channels instituted, Venezuelan audiences started to migrate to other non-traditional media channels, including digital media. The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the importance of those alternative channels, based on data from the official opposition TV channel in YouTube, and from other data, including a national poll conducted during January 2020.

Democratization in the late 20th century Huntington suggested an unstoppable global trend. Over 30 countries worldwide shifted from authoritarian to democratic systems of government between 1974 and 1990. Overall, the world saw remarkable processes of democratization and progress for over three decades. There are abundant cases that explain its process (Diamond, Przeworski), which entails a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the strengthening of fundamental institutions, respect for human rights, the separation of powers, the search for freedom of the press, and the right to information. The tyrannization of societies has been less documented and researched (Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. 2019, Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). From the 1970s to the end of the 20th century, the number of electoral democracies rose from about 35 to over 100 (Fukuyama, 2015). The number increased dramatically because, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many societies under the “steel curtain” began a process of democratization. The promise of convergence in the political and the economic realm lived its best times. However, that optimistic notion was just an unfilled promise. Tyrannization matters. In Venezuela it started with populism in 1998. Chavez was a nice “strong man” who felt a special connection with his people, such a strong connection that it did not need any intermediary institution. Few years later, Maduro would attempt to complete the antidemocratic task.

### **Communicational hegemony**

A “communicational hegemony” was the goal of Chávez’ government since the Simón Bolívar National Project of 2007, in which the concession of RCTV (the leading private open TV outlet) was withdrawn. The new communicational architecture was set from that point. The new national media scheme favored the official voice. The effort started in 2004 but was consolidated in 2013. The Venezuelan presidential election of April 2013 threw a virtual tie between the two political blocks that made up the country. Henrique Capriles Radonski had competed with Nicolás Maduro, who had been anointed as heir after the death

of Hugo Chavez. After Maduro assumed the presidency, efforts to achieve the “communication hegemony” were intensified. Chavismo achieved communicational hegemony almost at the same time that it began to become a political minority, from 49% of popular support in December 2013 to 20% in September 2015 (Datanálisis 2013, 2015). Reaching political balance in the country in 2013, one of the halves was silenced by the media due to the restrictions of the new media system that consolidated the government’s communication hegemony.

During the second semester of 2013, a new communicational architecture was consolidated (Fernández, 2018), with a national media scheme that clearly privileged the official voice. From having only one official television signal in 2004, this number grew to six in 2013. The government operated three national radio circuits and more than 250 community radio stations, most of them mere repeaters of the official line. To this were added three newspapers financed with public funds and numerous private media, but with an editorial line aligned to the official one. The consolidation of the hegemonic communication model and the government’s control over the media were achieved by combining aggressive media occupation with an effort, facilitated by the government, for friendly businessmen to acquire private media.

Unlike what happened in 2007, when concessions were withdrawn from RCTV, the new model implemented by Maduro was less aggressive than that of his predecessor Chávez: it consisted of buying the media with a neutral or favorable editorial line. The acquisition was not forced and was paid for at high prices, although it is possible that there might have been pressure from the government to sell (Reyes, 2013). In this way, the government of President Maduro managed to obtain a network of media and oligopolistic control of information, aligned in the message with the official voice.

However, a different thing happened with audiences. Even when the media could be bought and sold in the market freely, audiences do not trade their media consumption as easily, and they assumed clearly rebellious positions. A television audience report (Nielsen, 2013) showed that five private television stations were watched by almost half of the national audience, while the group of national public television stations had only 8% of the total viewers. The Venezuelan state failed in its effort to win over audiences. After the revocation of the RCTV concession in 2007, the audience numbers of the successor channel (TVES) decreased significantly: from an average of over 30% to less than 2% (Fernández, 2018).

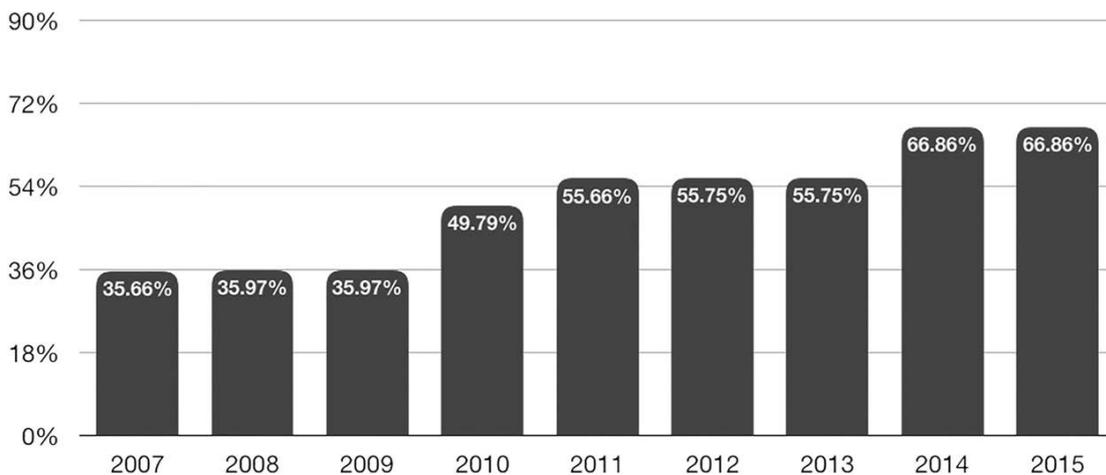
The failed effort to conquer their own audiences resulted in the indiscriminate use of radio and television networks. President Chávez spoke on the national radio and television network for more than 100

hours a year (Monitoreo Ciudadano). An even more intense pace was followed by his disciple Nicolás Maduro, with an average of half an hour daily, as reported by the monitoring of the NGO Monitoreo Ciudadano (2013–20). With the increase in radio and TV channels, the country’s cable operators found a very important incentive for sales of paid channels. The cable television industry in Venezuela grew to such a level that today two thirds of urban households have access to subscription television, free of national channels.

After the design of this new communicational architecture, and the hegemony of the consolidated message during the second half of 2013, the penetration of cable television increased by 11 points, from 55.75% or 1,177,748 homes with the alternative service to open-signal TV, to more than two thirds of the country, 66.86% equivalent to 1,390,608 households (AGB Nielsen, 2013).

After the notorious failure in audience numbers during the Chavez government, the new model of media occupation promised to improve. However, the media controlled since Maduro’s presidency also experienced a constant decline in the affections of the audiences. Nielsen’s audience measurement of August 2013, after the sale of Globovisión, gave the channel only 3.18%, when it used to be around 8%, doubling that figure in electoral periods.

But not only television audiences migrated to pay TV. There were also internal tropisms in the digital media. Both phenomena agree with what was identified by Iyengar and Hahn (2009): there is growing evidence that in the new media scheme, voters identify biases in the news channels and look for alternative sources of information that are more consistent with their political preferences. The existence of



*Figure 4.1* Penetration of pay TV in Venezuelan households (2007–2015).

Source: AGB Nielsen Venezuela / LAMAC.

alternative information options makes it possible for audiences to contrast information sources and decide to change channels and/or migrate platforms. The development of cable TV and the existence of numerous informational options on the Internet create a much more fragmented and competitive information environment than one that could have existed 20 years ago, giving audiences wider range to choose sources.

These audience preferences were also shown in news sites on the Internet. During that semester of great changes in the owners of the media and the editorial lines, showing their ideological posture, the ranking changed. The top five digital media sowed the deliberate decision of the audiences of not accompanying the editorial changes. The new media architecture in Venezuela made it easier for the government to control and guide the national news agenda, but this new communicational architecture proved incapable of reversing political opinions and sympathies.

A classical view of media consumption might tell us that it might be determined by the predispositions of the audience, which seeks to confirm or reinforce their opinions in the media content (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1972). When analyzing the data of sources to get political information, crossed according to the voter's political preferences, the phenomenon of selective exposure occurs, as pointed out in a previous article (Rodríguez-Virgili and Fernández, 2017). Twenty-six percent of Venezuelan opposition supporters reported social networks as their main means of political information, while only 8% of the ruling party's partisans do the same. That is, citizens seek information that aligns as closely as possible with their previous ideas about reality. Our statistics from YouTube opposition's channel can support the selective exposure theory in the Venezuelan populist case.

### **A milestone: 2015 parliamentary election**

The parliamentary elections of December 6, 2015 were held in this environment of communicational hegemony and the nationalization of information. Despite the nationalization of the media spectrum and the control of the message, there was a substantive change in voter political preferences, in the election outcome. With a participation of 74.17% of the electorate, an increase of 7.7% compared to the 2010 legislative elections, the elections to the National Assembly gave the Venezuelan opposition an important victory. The Democratic Unity Table (MUD), the main opposition movement against President Nicolás Maduro, reached 112 deputies out of the 167 who make up the National Assembly (CITE). With 56.2% of the national vote, the

opposition won 72% of the parliamentary representation and closed the long cycle of electoral victories for Chavismo that had lasted 17 years and more than a dozen elections.

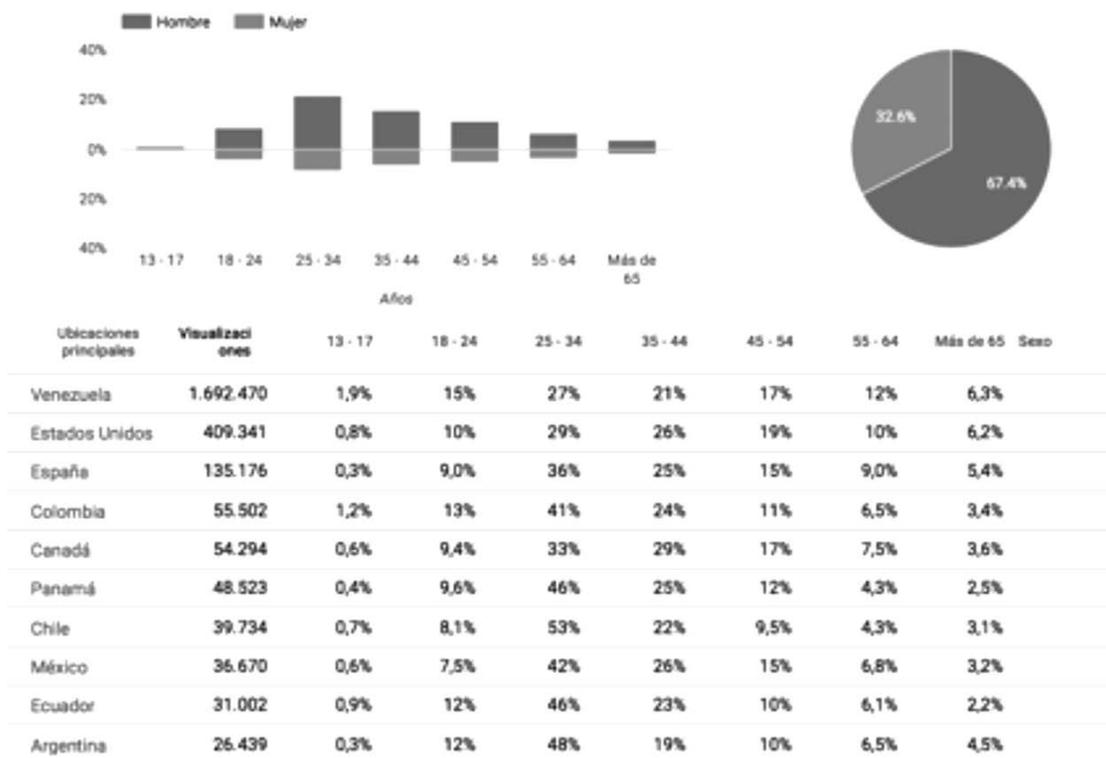
At the beginning of the race the campaign and the election ran into an obstacle that seemed difficult to overcome: the government's monopoly on communications. It is within this framework that the YouTube channel was devised as a fundamental platform for the communications of the Democratic Unit. The platform became an alternative to the official voice that reached a peak in its audience levels on election night, after the anxiety of a long delay in the delivery of results.

The YouTube channel reached broad audiences, repeatedly superior to those of open-signal TV channels, and thus became an important informative alternative to that of the official voice. "We had peaks of 90 thousand people watching the live broadcast," says Maria Fernanda Flores, founder and manager of the channel (CITE). Since 2007, Venezuela has been the Latin American country with the most intense use of the network as an instrument of political activism (Fernández, 2008). The cyber-citizen used the network as a prosthesis of freedom: to alleviate their deficiencies, either in their capacity for political action or in their possibilities of obtaining free information, in a society with reduced freedom of the press.

The average user of the channel "Sala de Prensa Unidad" was male (67%), between 25 and 44 years old, and accessing the channel from Venezuela. Already in the statistics of the users it is clear, even at this time, the growing demographic importance of the Venezuelan diaspora, especially the one based in the United States, Colombia, and Spain, and the attention that it gives to local politics. Even to date, the Venezuelan migratory exodus was incipient, and will reach a higher proportion in the following years.

After the parliamentary election, voters were asked, in a nationwide survey, which had been the most used means of communication to inform themselves of the electoral event. By then in Venezuela, TV was still the main medium chosen by ordinary voters to inform themselves politically, with 26% of voters reporting through open-signal TV, with content controlled to a greater or lesser extent by the national government (Datincorp, 2016). However, a similar number (23%) did so through cable channels, or subscription TV, which included high-impact foreign production chains with great interest in local politics, such as CNN, TVE, and Antena 3. The social networks and Internet publications together reached another important 26%.

The data from the citizen political information channels based on the political preferences of the voter, as already pointed out in previous



*Figure 4.2* Profile of the users of the Unit's press channel on YouTube.

Source: Analytics from the Press Room Unit channel on YouTube.

articles (Rodríguez-Virgili and Fernández, 2017, Serrano-Puche et al., 2020), showed some interesting trends. We found that those TV channels whose editorial management was dominated by the government were used as a means of political information mainly by those who are supporters of the government. While 36% of supporters of the ruling party used open-signal TV as the main political information channel, only 17% of the opposition did the same. Regarding social networks as the main means of political information, the exact opposite was found: 26% of the opponents informed themselves politically through the RRSS, while only 8% of the ruling parties did the same. In total 36% of Venezuelan opponents had their main source of political information from digital (social networks plus informative publications on the Internet), while only 12% of supporters of the ruling party claimed the same.

Also, in social networks citizens seek information as closely aligned as possible with their previous ideas about reality. These results confirm the theory of selective exposure: media consumption is determined by

the predispositions of the audience, which seeks to confirm or reinforce their opinions in media content (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1972). In other words, citizens look for information as closely as possible with their previous ideas about reality (Stroud, 2010). “The theory predicts that, as a way to minimize dissonance, people look for the information with which they hope to agree” (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009) (Figure 4.3).

For fear of being recipients of ideological propaganda, audiences in Venezuela migrated to all communication platforms. This phenomenon is consistent with other political processes studied in the United States (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). The demand for news varies with the perception of affinity with news organizations in consumer political preferences. In an experimental setting, Iyengar and Hahn found that Republican American voters preferred to read news reports attributed to the Fox news network and avoided CNN and NPR news, while Democrats behaved exactly the opposite: dividing their attention between CNN and NPR, but avoiding Fox news. This self-selection based on party affinity was presented not only in news coverage of

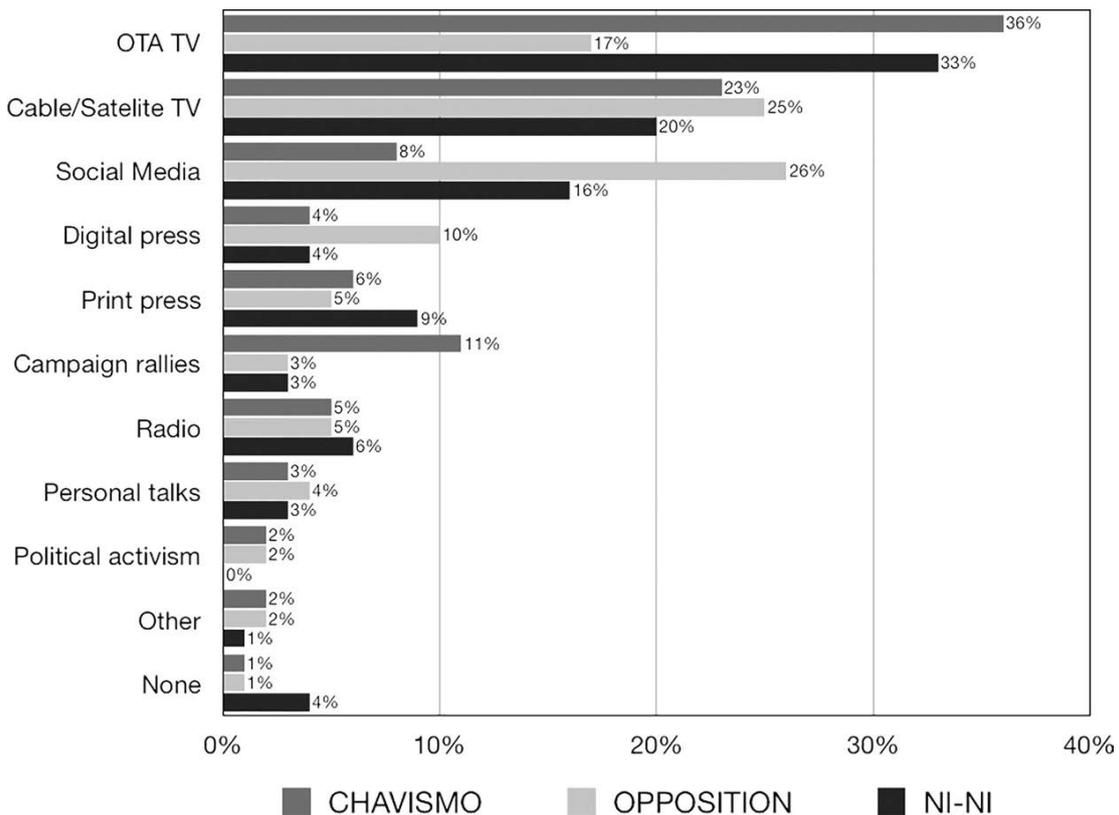


Figure 4.3 Venezuela 2016, platform by political preferences.

Source: Datincorp Venezuela, national survey, with verbatim suggested by Carmen Beatriz Fernández, April 2016, n = 1,207.

Question: During the last parliamentary elections, which channel did you use the most to find out about the electoral process?

controversial events, but also with respect to relatively innocuous matters such as crime and travel.

The communication hegemony has not been able to prevail over the citizen voice. The media was powerful putting together the agenda of the issues that are discussed in the country (“agenda setting”), but they have been much less effective in changing the opinions of voters and their political behavior.

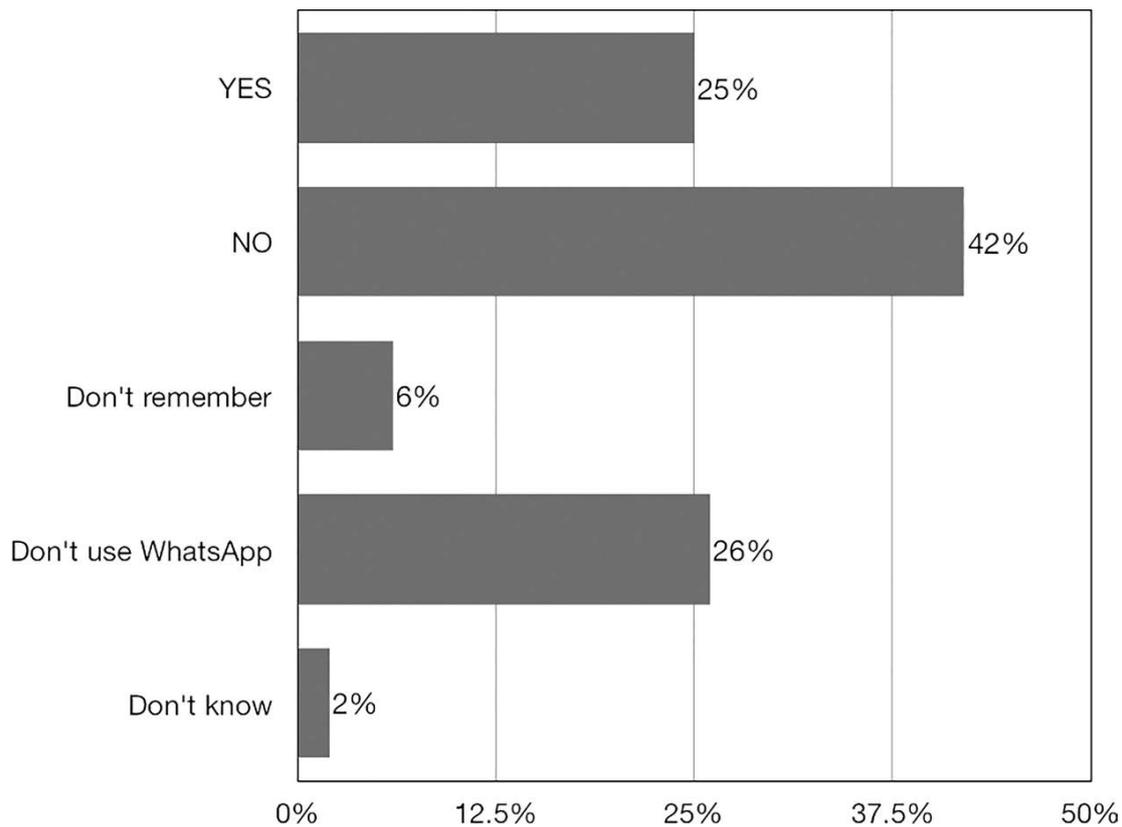
However, as the Maduro government in Venezuela advanced in the installation of an autocratic project, new ways to silence unofficial voices were designed by the central power, and social networks began to be penetrated and controlled. The new media had offered a window to freedom and diversity of information, but in 2014 the government created a new Vice-Ministry of Communication for Social Networks, with regulatory efforts, while the repression reached social networks. The incarceration of several tweeters was an alert message to this entire community. In 2017, a “Law against Hate” was enacted, which sought to support repression 2.0 that mainly targeted Internet users and distributors of online content and information.

Such government “noise” in social network, together with fear of repression, might have pushed Venezuelan users to use other platforms with less visibility, as WhatsApp. During the heavy protests against the government in Venezuela in 2017, social media was the main channel for getting informed. As has occurred in other societies, including the Arab Spring, social media diminishes the collective action problem in anti-government protests (Hamanaka, 2020). One every two protesters (47.9%) was informed about the rally through social media, while just 15.4% reported they were informed from digital media (More Consulting, May 2017).

One in four Venezuelans reported having received a political message via WhatsApp in the previous week. The data were overwhelming and suggested that WhatsApp would be the new destination in the migration of platforms as a source of political information.

The new ways to silence opposition voices from the government included a few disinformation techniques. During the 2018 elections, for example, the Maduro government impeded the diversity of online expression, to interfere with the political opposition’s discourse and the organization of civil society (Puyosa, 2018) (Figure 4.4).

Puyosa identified three different government disinformation strategies on Twitter: coordination of official and automated accounts to ensure reaching the daily trending topics; promotion of distracting hashtags accompanied by emotional, scandalous, misleading,



*Figure 4.4* Venezuela: Use of WhatsApp for political information, Dec 2017. Source: Datincorp Venezuela, national survey, with verbatim suggested by Carmen Beatriz Fernández, December 2017,  $n = 1,009$ .

*Question: During the last seven days did you receive any political content by WhatsApp?*

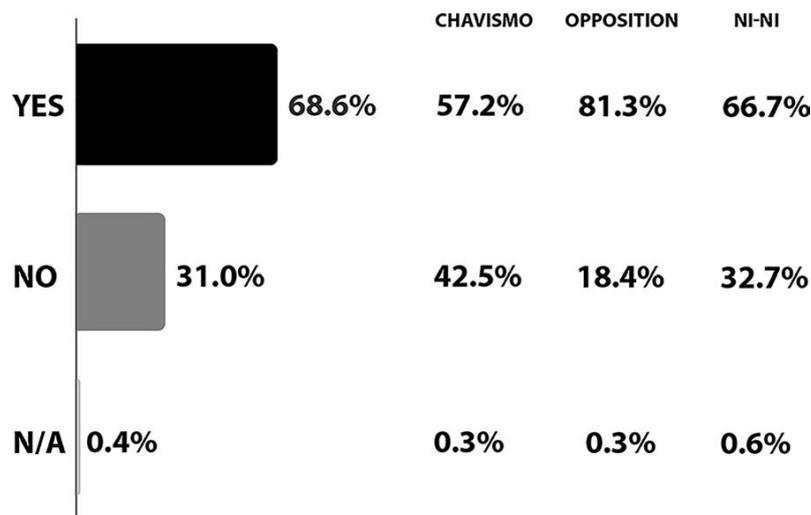
offensive, and/or false messages through cyborg and bot accounts; hijacking of oppositional hashtags to distort their messages and interfere in the conversations of the various opposition communities.

### **Trending: cyber politics 2020 with WhatsApp**

Foreseeing a new trope for national audiences, we inquired in a nationwide survey about the role of WhatsApp as a source for political information searching for alternative forms of access to information.

Two out of every three Venezuelans use WhatsApp. However, analyzing among opposition members this number increases to 81.3%, while among chavistas it decreases to 57.2%.

The initial sample was one thousand two hundred and sixteen (1,216) cases. It was refined to analyze only WhatsApp users; thus, the final sample was made up of eight hundred and thirty-four (834) cases (Figure 4.5).



*Figure 4.5* Venezuela: Use of WhatsApp, January 2020.

Source: MORE, national survey, with verbatim from Digital News Report questionnaire, January 2020,  $n = 1,009$ .

*Question: Do you use WhatsApp instant messaging?*

When comparing between users and non-users of the application, we see that the profile of the WhatsApp users differs from non-users in the following: (i) age – as age increases the use of WhatsApp decreases; (ii) level of study reached – where the higher the level of study achieved, the greater the use of WhatsApp; (iii) the socio-economic level – where the use of WhatsApp is greater in the upper strata; and (iv) the political self-positioning – where the opposition supporters tend to use the messaging system more than those who support Maduro.

One in three Venezuelans have reported to have heard a voice message with a news and/or rumor via WhatsApp, during the previous week. Also, one in three have read the headlines of the news. One out of every four clicked the links seeking to read the entire notice. One in five forwarded the news and/or a voice note with a rumor.

Cluster analysis was used to create a political taxonomy of the Venezuelan users of WhatsApp. Cluster analysis is a multivariate statistical technique with the purpose of dividing a set of objects into groups so that the profiles of the objects in the same group are very similar to each other (internal cohesion of the group) and those of different cluster objects are different (external isolation of the group). For the analysis, the statistical software Spad version 5.6 was used (Figure 4.6).

The result was obtained from the analysis of several variables from the survey, as were: gender, age, educational level, political self-positioning, interest in news, trust in news, intensity of WhatsApp use.

**KNOW-NOTHING** (22% of the total WhatsApp users): The main characteristic of this cluster is their total passivity before news reaches

	TOTAL MENTIONED
I saw the headlines, but did not read the news	29,5%
I clicked a link wanting more information for a notice	24,4%
I sent a news article	10,6%
I made RT to a news article	19,5%
I discussed about a notice in a chat group	11,3%
I discussed privately (with one or two people) about a notice	19,4%
I heard a voice note from WhatsApp on a notice/rumor	30,6%
I sent a voice note from WhatsApp on a notice/rumor	18,4%

Figure 4.6 Venezuela: Use of WhatsApp, January 2020.

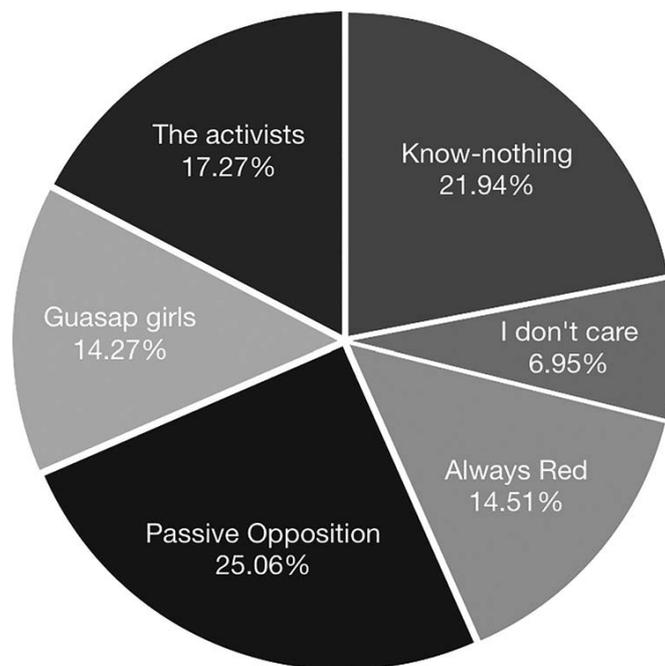
Source: Data from MORE, national survey, January 2020,  $n = 834$ .

Question: Regarding the news that comes to you by WhatsApp instant messaging, which of the following have you done last week?

them through WhatsApp. Members of this cluster do not report that they receive news from the platform. They are apathic and disinterested in what is happening in their country and/or in the world. They are mostly young, between 18 and 24 years old. From medium-low socioeconomic level, most of them check their WhatsApp messages just once per day (Figure 4.7).

**IDON'T CARE (7%):** The main characteristic of this group is their total indifference and distrust for news and politics. They assume that all politicians are equal. In this group the lack of interest is a deliberate attitude. The use of the term “fake news” to discredit politicians did not worry them at all. They are used to give no response when asked about their ideological position. Their political belief is “All politicians are the same.”

**ALWAYS IN RED (14.5%):** The main characteristic of this group is their political position oriented to Chavismo and the Maduro presidency. They identify with the government and consider themselves to be on the extreme left. They use WhatsApp to get news, and receive voice notes from the platform. Their educational level tends to be low (incomplete secondary) as does their social status. They are commonly mature men (45–54) from the urban sectors. Their main source of political information is the TV. They are concerned about disinformation to the extent that foreign agents might be involved. They might be concerned about using the term “fake news” to discredit politicians.



*Figure 4.7* Political taxonomy of WhatsApp users, January 2020.

Source: Data from MORE, national survey, January 2020,  $n = 834$ .

**PASSIVE OPPOSITION (25%):** This cluster belongs to the upper stratum with completed university studies, and politically center-right opponents. They usually read the headline news through WhatsApp, even when they also get news and information from social networks, and they might discuss the news privately.

**GUASAP GIRLS (14%):** Members of this group are mostly females. They are active WhatsApp users who might read the headlines, forward the news, or listen to audios. They usually discuss about news privately. Their political position is “All politicians are the same.” Their educational level is incomplete secondary. They belong to poor rural social strata, and mainly their news sources come from conversations with family and friends. They are concerned about the citizens and/or members of their community as agents of disinformation.

**THE ACTIVISTS (17%):** This cluster is the most active in the use of WhatsApp for getting news. They oppose the Maduro regime. They might read news headlines and go to the links to read the entire story. They listen to audios and forward them. They forward the news and discuss them privately. They have a high level of education, completed university or postgraduate, and belong to the upper strata of the population. They can be said to be addicted to the news (receiving them at least twice a day, and most of them six and ten times a day) and seek to interact from it with the rest of the people. They are very concerned about the use of the term “fake news” to discredit politicians.

## **Discussion**

The phenomenon of the increase in the relative importance of new media is global. However, the issue seems to be more intense and accelerated in the Venezuelan case, where, in addition to a migration of audiences from the analog to the digital world, there is a deliberate rebellion and an ambition to escape the control of information from the national government.

This analysis has shown how audiences migrated in successive stages from one platform to another, in a bid tried to find a safe place from tyrannization, in digital platforms.

WhatsApp was the last of these stages, and the newest migratory destination for Venezuelan audiences seeking political information. The cluster analysis identified a political taxonomy for six different types of users of WhatsApp. Each group member is similar to each other, showing their internal cohesion, and different to those members of the other groups (external isolation of the group). From the “know-nothing” (22%) group to the anti-government activists (17%), there is a gradient of different users and uses. The balance is clearly favorable to the anti-government side, which reinforces the importance of WhatsApp platform for the Venezuelan opposition.

When Chavez won his first election in 1998, Venezuela was the oldest democracy in the subregion, and had been leading the democratization of the continent. Venezuela helped decisively the democratization of Central America, Brazil, and the Southern Cone, and its support was equally important in the subregional rejection of the regime of Alberto Fujimori, the penultimate dictatorship of the continent. However, the worst fears with Chávez were fulfilled. During his popular government, and through plebiscitary mechanisms the Venezuelan case marked a negative inflection in the global democratizing era. A democratic setback with 30 years of democratization of the world has been reversed since 1998. What finally will happen with Venezuelan democracy will say whether the tyrannization of a society deserves or not to be the subject of study in the next decade.

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