



## Article

# The Media's Influence on the Government: A Case Study of Venezuela's Media Agenda Setting with a Non-Free Press and Its Repercussions

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**Abstract:** A free and open press (unincumbered by political pressures) is necessary to hold government officials accountable. When governments become entangled in the business of licensing and regulating news outlets, news outlets succumb to the pressures of only publishing stories favorable to the current regime. The temptation to publish negative stories could result in losing one's publishing license. This scenario has been playing out in Venezuela for the past two decades and has led to a media culture of misinformation, confusion, and propaganda. This paper first analyzes the Venezuelan view on the influential forces on its government through the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Second, it explores how the Venezuelan government vanquished the free press by affecting the Venezuelan citizens' attitudes towards the press. Finally, it reviews how the internet and social media are creating new avenues for publishing uncensored and unregulated information in an effort to challenge current government restrictions.

**Keywords:** Venezuela; media agenda setting; mass media; ISSP; survey



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## 1. Introduction

A war is being waged on the media in Venezuela—its citizens want information, but the press is struggling to get accurate information out (Menna 2018). In a non-free press country such as Venezuela, journalists are often asked have their stories changed to promote the will of the government (Walter 2015). This study aims to further explore this topic by looking specifically at the policies, practices, and attitudes regarding the media in Venezuela. Currently, Venezuela has rather draconian policies that restrict the media from showcasing negative stories about the government (Venezuela Profile—Media 2019). An established survey (International Social Survey Programme) indicates that Venezuelans believe that the media plays a significant role in influencing government actions. This creates a paradox: 1. The citizens believe that the media influences government policies, but 2. The media is strictly regulated by the government. Therefore, there is a disconnected illusion of media influence, when in fact, the government is the institution setting the agenda and crafting the narrative that is being propagated by the media. Ultimately, citizens need access to an objective, free press that yields real power and influence over government institutions. This fosters an environment of transparency and accountability within the upper echelons of government agencies. Without true freedom of the press, the Venezuelan government can continue shaping favorable narratives about the current administration with no real accountability. This study specifically analyzes Venezuela and its teetering media. We first discuss the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and its results and applications for Venezuela. We then provide a basis for media agenda setting and move into specifics about Venezuela's relationship with the media. This study ends with a discussion on the implications and repercussions of a non-free press.

## 2. Materials

### 2.1. Background on Venezuela's Media Agenda Belief

To test the belief of the media's influence on the government, an international survey was conducted by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) yielding free data services provided by GESIS. Evolving from various national studies starting in 1985, the ISSP has grown into a multinational survey from 57 countries with 11 survey topic modules, and four additional topics are either planned or under development ([About ISSP n.d.](#)). In 2020 alone, there were over 10,000 publications utilizing data from this source ([Smith and Schapiro 2020](#)). This specific research focused on the topic "Role of Government" from the 2016 data collection year, available in 2018. According to the ISSP website, "'Role of Government' is one of the 11 ISSP topic modules. Central themes are issues, such as attitudes towards government responsibilities and government spending, state intervention in the economy, civil liberties, political interest, trust, and efficacy ([ISSP Research Group 2018](#))".

#### 2.1.1. Survey Format and Data Collection

The Role of Government topic had data collected in 5 various years; 1985, 1990, 1996, 2006, and 2016. Each survey administered contained some repeat and new questions. Our primary focus was the 2016 survey, which contained the new questions regarding the influences on government action, Q9A and Q9B (see [Box 1](#)). That same survey contained 23 government specific questions, often with additional parts to each question. Demographic information was added on to each questionnaire after the 23 questions. For Venezuelans, 74 questions were asked in their native language.

**Box 1.** ISSP question 9 from 2016 used for analysis.

Here is a list of people and organisations that can influence government actions.

Please read through the list and write in the boxes below the letters corresponding to the ones you think have the most and the second most influence on the actions of the (COUNTRY) government?

- A. The media
- B. Trade unions
- C. Business, banks and industry
- D. Religious organisations/authorities
- E. The military/army
- F. Organised crime
- G. People who vote for the party/the parties in government
- H. Citizens in general
- I. Civic and voluntary organisations
- J. International organizations (e.g., United nations, International Monetary Fund)
- K. Can't choose

Internationally, 35 countries participated with 48,720 total respondents. Venezuela had 1045 respondents. The data collected from each country was done numerically over a cross section time method through various data collection organizations during 2016 to 2018. Venezuela's data was collected by Instituto Delphos, Caracas, Venezuela during 2 September 2016 to 4 October 2016 ([ISSP Research Group 2018](#)). Face to face, self-administered, and telephone interviews were the modes to collect the information, while in-person or

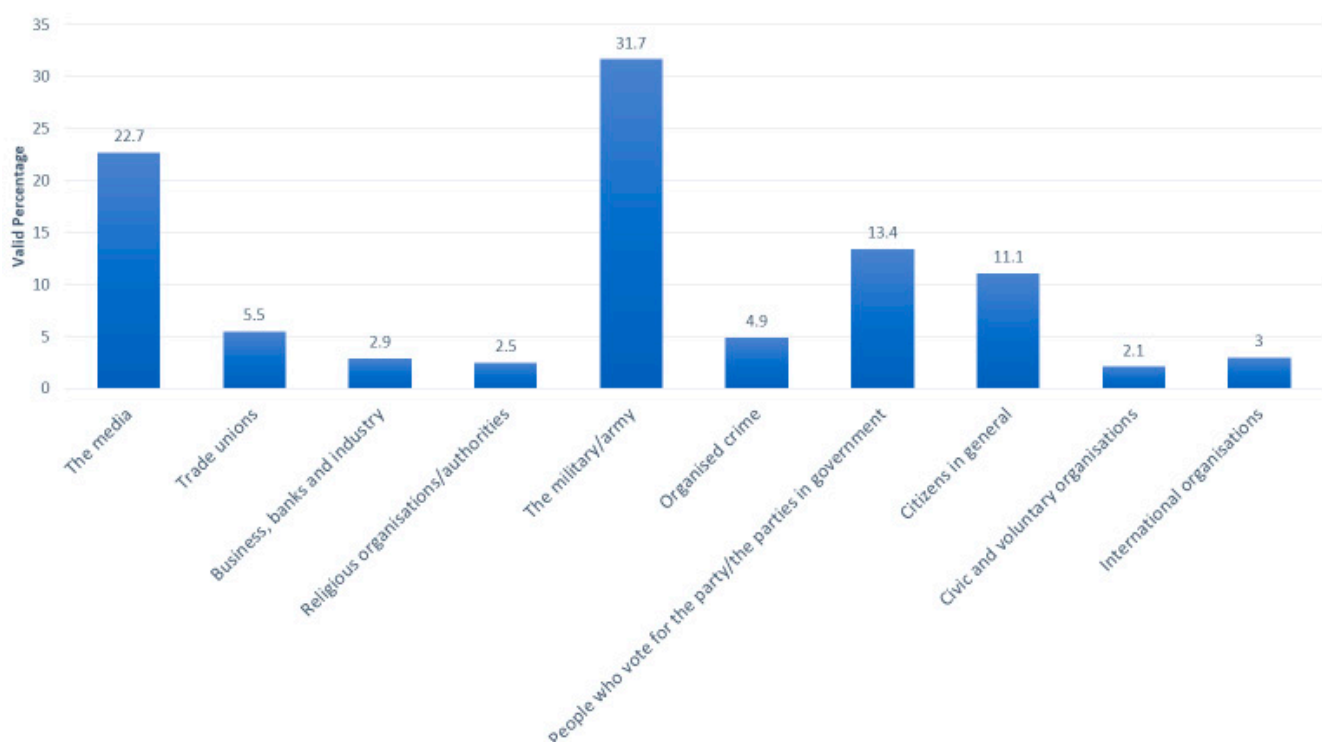
commuter assistance was often utilized. The analysis system to hold the data was SPSS or Stata; a link to the data can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13052> (accessed on 18 February 2021).

### 2.1.2. Limitations

As with all surveys, there are limitations to this study. First and foremost, it is weak in validity and strong in reliability (Babbie 1998). However, the ability of this survey to be used throughout the population and through the various collection mechanisms limits the insufficiencies of the validity. Also, some of the response numbers are relatively low ( $n = 1$ ), thus providing some relevant information but which is not as essential nor dynamic as other populations.

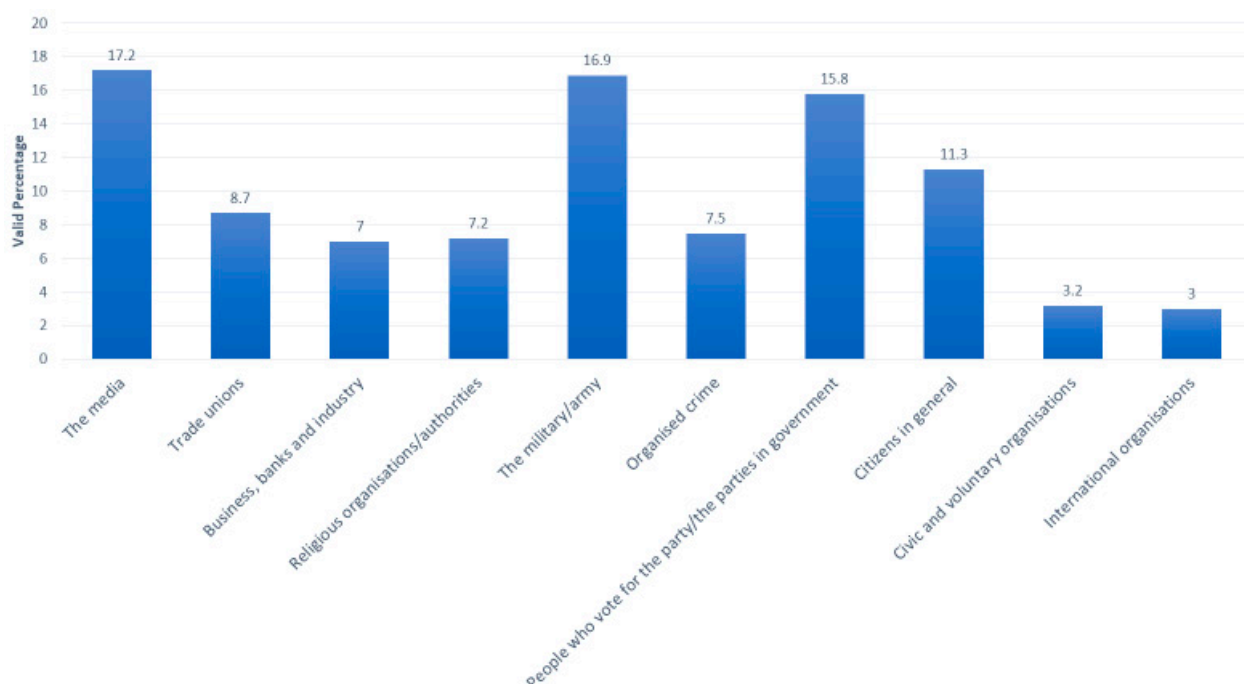
### 2.1.3. Results

Internationally, over almost 50,000 responded to this survey question ( $n = 48,720$ ). Specifically mining for Venezuelans, we found that 1045 responded, and obtained  $n = 955$  for “Most influence” (90 missing) and  $n = 941$  for “Second most influence” (104 missing). Figure 1 illustrates the findings. The most influential group on the Venezuelan government in the view of respondents was the military/army ( $n = 303$ , 29.0%) followed by the media ( $n = 217$ , 20.8%), and people who vote for the party/the parties in government ( $n = 128$ , 12.2%).



**Figure 1.** Percentage of responses suggesting that a group had the most influence on the government.

Figure 2 illustrates the findings of the second most influential group on the Venezuelan government. The “second most” influential is “the media” ( $n = 162$ , 15.5%) with “the military/army” ( $n = 159$ , 15.2%) close behind, and “people who vote for the party/the parties in government” ( $n = 149$ , 14.3%) in third.



**Figure 2.** Percentage of responses suggesting that a group had the second most influence on the government.

The top three influential options remain the same for first and second most influential group on the government—the military, the media, and people who vote for the political parties.

#### 2.1.4. Venezuelan Demographic Results

Demographic questions of age, gender, and geographic residence were also used to differentiate the data. Geographic residence refers to the variation between urban and rural and the respondent answers to the specific question of; “Would you describe the place where you live as . . . .?” (ISSP Research Group 2018). Gender showed no significance for responses for either “most influence” or “second most influence.” Focusing specifically on the “most influence” question, age and geographic residence both showed a significant difference. Figure 3 shows the age difference significance for the top three choices of military, media, and people who vote for the political parties. The data for the ages was collected per age year, which ranged from 18–100 years old. The ages were grouped by a consistent seven-year increments, rather than year by year, to get a group picture of their choices. The age group 50–57 narrowly displayed a difference between choices of influence by choosing “the media” as most influential group ( $n = 25$ , 25.8%) rather than “the military/army.”

Figure 4 shows the frequencies and percentages for the various residence locations of the top three choices of military, media, and people who vote for the political parties. Their place of living was determined by respondents’ selection of one of the five options. Suburbanites indicated that “the media” is the most influential group ( $n = 74$ , 28.2%) rather than choosing “the military/army” in the same way as the broader population. The farmers believed that “the media” are the third most influential group ( $n = 1$ , 12.5%) rather than “the people who vote for the political parties” which the broader population designated as third.

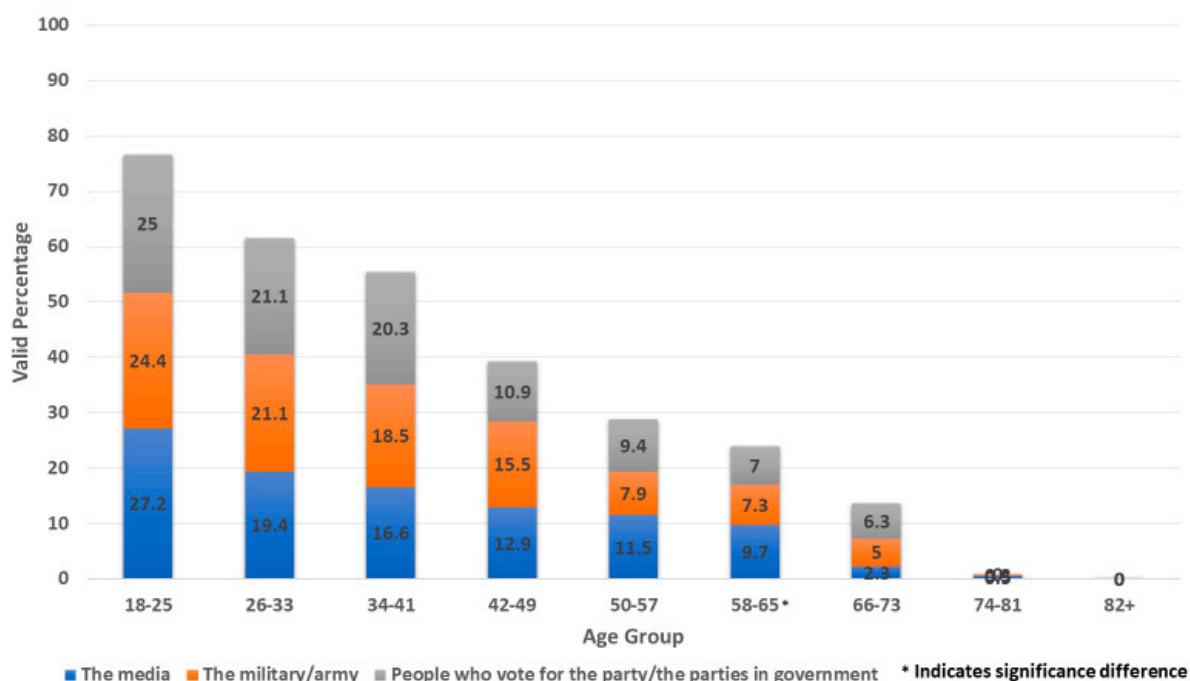


Figure 3. Age group percentage and influence on the government.

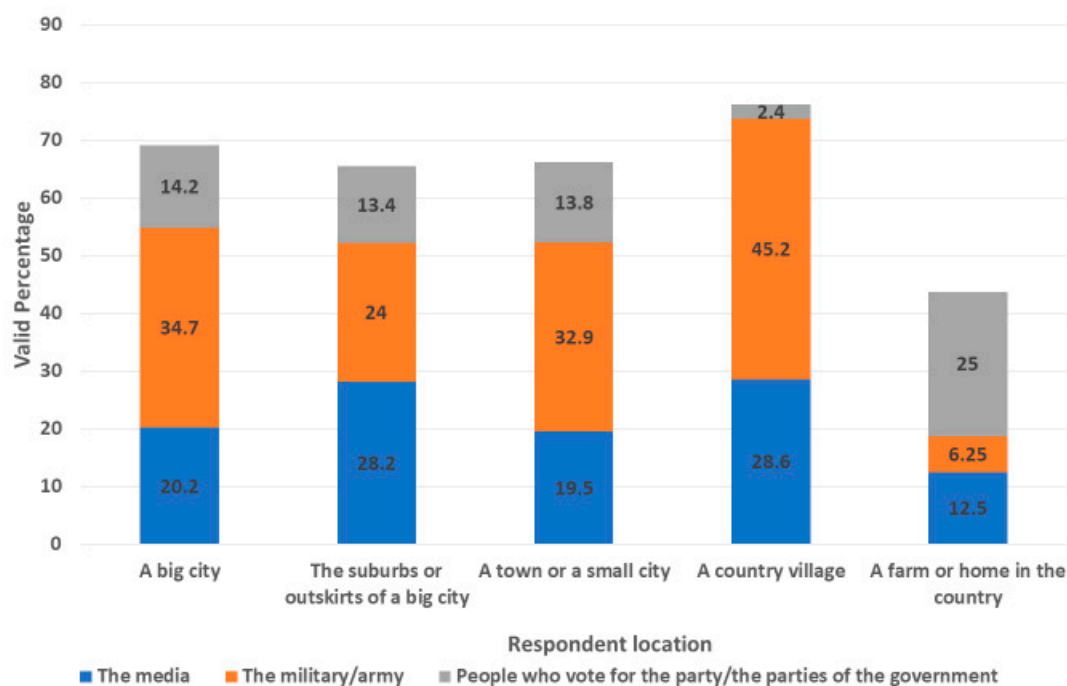


Figure 4. Location of the respondents compared to the percentage of their responses on the most influential groups on government.

Once again, Venezuelans most often believe that the military influences the government's actions, with the media closely following suit or overtaking the military's influence. This makes it appear as if the two might have an interchangeable degree of influence on the government, thus aligning the military to the media in some respects.

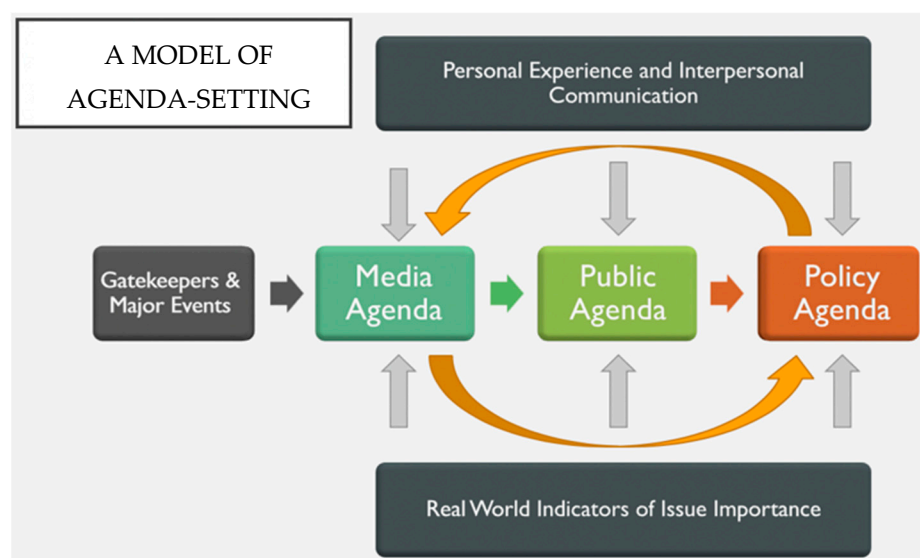
## 2.2. Background: Media Agenda Setting

The media's influence on various audiences has been well documented over the years. *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippman argued that mass media created images for the general

public to interpret (Lippmann 1946). Cohen furthered this concept to add that the press has the ability to tell the reader what they need to think (Cohen 1963). However, the first and most dynamic media agenda setting theory was developed through studies by McCombs and Shaw (1972). They proved that mass media can “set” the agenda for public discussion (McCombs and Shaw 1972). As their abstract stated:

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign. (p. 176)

Although this original study applied predominately to political campaigns in the United States, over the years it has been extrapolated to a larger audience outside politics and into the greater public sphere, where the media is shown to help filter and shape reality (McCombs 2005; McCombs and Shaw 1993). A visual image illustrating the various components of agenda setting, including the inputs from interpersonal communication and issue importance, is demonstrated in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Model of agenda-setting (Mores and Georgacopoulos 2020).

Since these initial studies almost 50 years ago, over 400 publications and further studies have illustrated this convergence of media and public reality, especially for democratic states (Davie and Maher 2006; McCombs et al. 2014).

Multinational studies, outside of the dominant Western culture, have shown that the media does have an agenda affect. Rosenthal (2014) found the “... agenda-setting theory’s multinational applicability and show that the agenda-setting function operates in similar ways across nations despite cultural and linguistic differences as well as dissimilar media systems” (Rosenthal 2014). However, the Western dominated approach to agenda setting theory leaves cultural diversity out of the picture, thus limiting its global application or for those countries at various levels of government interventions (Du 2013; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Rosenthal 2014; Winfield et al. 2000; Yin 2008).

### 2.3. Venezuela and the Media

Pertaining specifically to Venezuela, early research (1975) into the developing nation illustrated that:



Although media use and avoidance measures appear to be valid enough in our Venezuelan setting, they are overshadowed by media exposure items in accounting for variation in both knowledge and the public agenda of important problems, on the whole. At the same time, media exposure is not a matter of simple “time spent” or “attention to” the newspaper or television news. Instead, our most powerful independent variables in the study have been the specific measures of exposure to “politics” in the media. (Chaffee and Izcaray 1975, pp. 392–93)

This illustrates that in order for Venezuela to be considered a more economically and modernized country, more media availability and a more literate society is needed.

During 1970s to the late 1990s, Venezuela’s journalists seemed to enjoy a period of power. Stating that their mission was anti-corruption and a voice of the people, the press were seen as being more powerful than any branch of the Venezuelan government (Gardner and Stevenson 1988; Samet 2017). The media filled a gap for which the political parties could not (Stelling 2012). However, as political uprising increased including two coup attempts, along economic devastation due to oil pricing, and corruption, changes to the power of the press were sure to come about (Alvarez 2011).

Later international dynamics also played a role in the mass media’s international applicability, increasing Venezuelan desires to participate in the media even further (Fuentes-Bautista and Gil-Egui 2011) while also having an influence (Hayden 2013), especially during Hugo Chavez’s years (Salojärvi 2016). The Chavez presidential era starting in 1998, when he was elected, triggered some of the most radical losses in the freedom of the press (Cazalis 2011; Fontes and Lessa 2019; Ratke-Majewska 2014; Sullivan 2011). By campaigning on a promise to end corruption, poverty, and to create a new political system, especially with the media embracing his rhetoric—which mirrored the media’s previous stances—Hugo Chavez won his presidential election by a vast majority of votes (Venezuela’s Chavez Era n.d.).

In 1998, 88% of Venezuelan television was independent and not subjected to government control. This allowed journalists and news media to disseminate information without fear of having their funding pulled or licenses revoked for unfavorable coverage. However, during the Chavez era, the number of television stations in Venezuela quadrupled, as the government then publicly funded 54% of all channels (Corrales 2015). Venezuelans were elated at all the new television programs. However, the repercussions of this move limited the freedoms of the press and actually encouraged the criticism of 52 human right organizations (Sullivan 2011). By the time Chavez died in office on 5 March 2013, more than half of all stations were now government controlled, and the remaining 46% were under threat of sanctions if they chose to step too far out of line. The Chavez regime no longer had to threaten independent journalists and news outlets. Instead, independent media towed the line due to fear of repercussions.

Chavez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, in his first five years in office, closed over 100 media outlets (U.S. Department of State 2015; *Durante el gobierno de Maduro se han cerrado 115 medios de comunicación, según el SNTP* | NTN24 | [www.ntn24.com](http://www.ntn24.com) 2018; Romero and Mijares 2016) and in the aftermath of the 2019 disputed election against Juan Guaidó, Maduro has engaged in at least 350 documented incidents where he deliberately suppressed oppositional speech (Venezuela 2019). He has gone on to retain control of the media and its coverage (Venezuela: *Ever More Authoritarian* | *Reporters without Borders* 2021) and has privatized many media outlets (Hall 2012). Since January 2019 (over two years at the time of this writing), Maduro and Guaidó have been locked in a political battle over who won the disputed presidential election that has caused a major economic, humanitarian, and refugee crisis in Venezuela. With the backing of the state-controlled media and censorship, Maduro could shape the overall political message and paint his opponents as undemocratic tyrants, who were trying to steal the election. Conversely, Guaidó and his supporters are at a disadvantage as they simultaneously try to resist state-sponsored media as well as

disseminate their own messages without the support of large media outlets. It comes down to who controls the stories (Fox 2019).

Knowing this background information about Venezuela and its relationship to free speech, we are interested in researching how Venezuelan citizens understand the relationship and influence between the media and the government because history has shown that Venezuelans know the power of the press (Fox 2019; *Llaguno Bridge: Keys to a Masacre (Video)* (2012)).

### 3. Discussion

Using the ISSP survey as a basis for this case study, our study has shown and reiterated the fact that Venezuelans believe the military and the media are seemingly influential on the government, but the issue is that the two are almost interchangeable or appear as one. The data indicated that the citizens of Venezuela believe the media still has significant influence over government policies and actions. Venezuela has a mixture of public and private media outlets—but the government is so powerful that media independence is slowly dying (Allsop 2019; Corrales 2015; Rapoza 2017). However, how can the media influence the government when the media *is* the government? There is a definitive concern that because the press is not free in Venezuela, the media is simply propagating approved government talking-points, which limits the people's ability to hold the government accountable, or persuade the government to act in the interests of the people. Overall, the literature has shown that Venezuelans believe that the media, in its current government-sponsored model, has an influence on government actions. Unfortunately, these findings conclude what we know about the censorious actions of the Venezuelan government for the past two decades; the interconnectedness of the government and the media are such that the government has diminished the free press (Venezuela 1992).

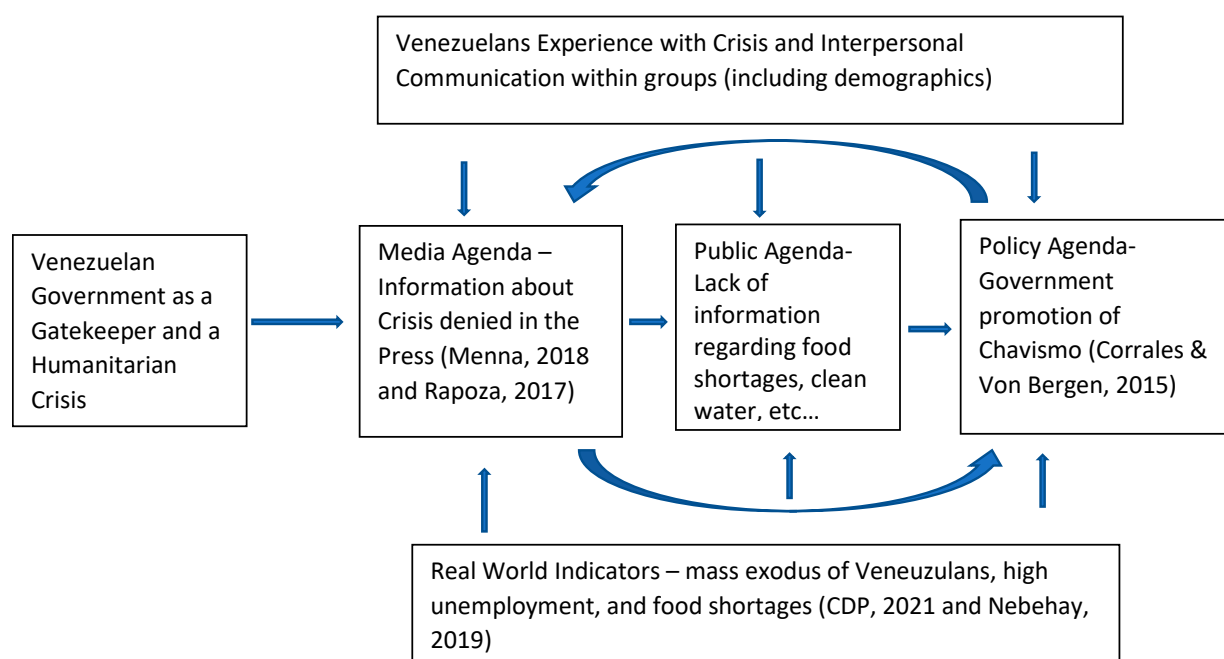
Demographic qualifiers (age and residence) also have a significant impact on the respondents' choices of who they believe influences government actions. However, it is only specific subgroups within those demographics that believe the media has a more prominent influence on the government than the military—the 50–57 years old age group and suburbanites. This age group has seen and lived in a free-press era, so they might still be holding on to that belief while younger generations have not seen that in Venezuela. It might also be determined that citizens that live in suburban areas are removed from the struggles in the city and do not see the military's presence as much as the city dwellers. This parallels the already known literature that the older, poorer, and rural populations are the ones getting less reliable information (Venezuela 1992).

Of an interesting note are those categories that do not appear to influence the government. At the bottom are the International Organizations ( $n = 29$ , 2.8%), Business, banks, and industry ( $n = 28$ , 2.7%), Religious organizations ( $n = 24$ , 2.3%), and Civic and voluntary organizations ( $n = 20$ , 1.9%). Even the United Nations has stated that only Venezuelans can solve their own problems (*Only Venezuelans Can Resolve Venezuela's Deepening Crisis, DiCarlo tells Security Council* 2020). Furthermore, religious organizations have limited influence on the government; none can speak up without risking an onslaught of serious threats. For example, "President Nicolás Maduro has warned Roman Catholic clergy to avoid speaking about the upheaval or criticizing the government. Pro-Maduro paramilitaries and protesters have targeted churches and threatened priests in a pattern of violent incidents ... (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs n.d.; Vargas 2018)." There is a significant cry for the predominate Catholic faith, 71% of Venezuelans identify as Catholic, to influence the government on behalf of those most afflicted (Freier 2018; Vargas 2018).

#### *Repercussions and Implications*

Repercussions from this case study of Venezuela illustrate the complexities of these issues. As Figure 5 illustrated the agenda setting model (Mores and Georgacopoulos 2020), applying that to current Venezuela gives us Figure 6.





**Figure 6.** Venezuelan Case of Agenda Setting. (CDP 2021; Corrales and Von Bergen 2015; McCarthy 2017; Menna 2018; Mores and Georgacopoulos 2020; Nebehay 2019; Rapoza 2017; *Venezuelan Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis* 2021).

The implications are clear though when it comes to government influence and control. The government is influenced by the military and media, but the military and media are controlled by the government. Venezuelans understand this nuance and interactive dynamic. Furthermore, it appears that a free press, which can influence a government from a nonbiased objective place, is not achievable currently, but it is a desirable outcome for international democracy (Kalb et al. 2018). Venezuelans are asking for, almost begging, for objective, independent, and trustworthy news; real news that is not politically sponsored or motivated propaganda (Nugent 2019). One particular journal has called for “... the action of professional associations and trade unions will continue being essential in their fight for a free press” (*Venezuela* 1992). In order for this to happen, there needs to be a significant increase in Venezuelans’ belief in the ability of associations and unions to exert influence because currently, trade unions are 5th in both in their “most influential” and “second most influential” group on the Venezuelan government. This would result in quite a leap, over citizens even, and seems improbable.

Instead of promoting trade unions and associations, Venezuelans are stepping away from the normal media streams. Turning to digital formatted media created a chance to answer that call to provide more information (Rendon and Kohan 2019). But in Venezuela, even the internet comes with its own set of difficulties. Currently, Venezuela has a 28/100 on the Freedom House Freedom of the Net (2020 score, which indicates a significant lack of infrastructure reliability and within country penetration (*Venezuela* 1992; *Venezuela: Country Profile* n.d.). One particular website had been developed to defy the government’s hold on free press—Armando.info (Otis 2018), and Venezuelans have also turned to social media to help create public discourse and provide information (Said Hung and Segado-Boj 2018; Joyce and Macedo 2021). Polls by Delphos showed 16.1% use social media for political information and the Hinterlands survey claimed 18% trust these social media outlets (Garsd 2018; Harwell and Zuñiga 2019; *Social Media Stats Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela* n.d.; *Venezuela* 1992). All of this has not undone the interconnectedness of the media and the government, nor the loss of a free press. But it has diverted the stream of information and created new avenues for political communication. These new internet and social media streams are what needs to be studied more thoroughly and perhaps part of the next ISSP questionnaire (Guevara 2018; Said Hung and Segado-Boj 2018).

#### 4. Conclusions

This study reiterates the connectiveness and symbiotic relationship of the military and the media over the influence of the government. Venezuelans consider that “the media” and “military” are the first and second most influential forces on their government actions, yet it has not stopped them from wanting more trustworthy information and news, especially as the country has spiraled into economic and political devastation (Cheatham and Labrador 2021; Venezuela Crisis: How the Political Situation Escalated 2020; Venezuela Crisis in 300 Words 2020). When the media has so much influence on a citizenry, it is imperative that the media is objective, neutral, independent, and able to report without the threat of government censorship (Wike and Fetterolf 2018). The censorious actions of the Venezuelan government have made it impossible for the media to be as trustworthy as desired. People need trustworthy news sources for a functioning democracy. They use this information to elect their leaders, vote on policy, and shape their worldviews. The media is a powerful tool in shaping reality. Therefore, it is intolerable and unjust to allow governments to control the stream of information in attempt to cling to power. Venezuelans seem to understand the persuasiveness of the media, but the media should persuade through robust debate and diligent fact-finding. Instead, citizens are being fed a steady diet of unchecked propaganda forced to conform to government talking points for fear of dire sanctions. Yet, there is a small glimmer of hope as Venezuelans begin to turn to outside mainstream media outlets for unfiltered information. And at least a portion of the Venezuelan population has been able to utilize internet sites and social media to obtain independent information. Further research on how social media helps citizens break-free of media monopolies and government propaganda is now needed.

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