

Chavez: with friends like these...

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Hugo Chavez may or may not be the man who can turn Venezuela into a thriving pluralist democracy, but he is certainly a man who closes down TV stations and has reduced media freedom. You would think that even his supporters among journalists would be concerned about that. I first went to Venezuela 15 years ago and my friend is now minister for higher education. So it was sad to hear journalists at a [debate](#) happily accepting the trade off between Chavez being in power and a loss of freedom of expression.

I don't know if [Richard Gott](#) claims the title of journalist any more but this man who once chronicled the actions of Che Guevara has obviously fallen in love with Chavez and can't conceive of any reason to doubt him. He peddles the nastiest line in denunciation of anyone who dares to question his hero, including a Venezuelan at the debate who pointed out how Gott and many others on the left fell for Stalin and the Soviet communists in exactly the same way. The discussion was centred around the [closure](#) by Chavez of opposition TV station RCTV which is owned by an unpleasant right-winger who joined in with a coup attempt against Chavez five years ago. Venezuelan journalist Yolande Valery pointed out that journalists have always had to duck and dive to avoid censure or pressure from the authorities in Venezuela. But as she also said, there is no reason why they should have to accept that, and if Chavez wants to claim moral superiority then he should allow journalists to do what they do best: criticise those in power.

But I am afraid that Gott and his friends in the Orwellian-sounding [Venezuelan Information Service](#) are not interested in defending journalists, they are too busy with promoting the latest pin-up of the far left. It sends a chill down my spine when they talk about 'democratising' the media. It strikes me that Chavez is a hugely able communicator who would thrive in an open debate. I only wish he and (some of) his supporters really wanted one.

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