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Venezuelans Challenge Censorship

Some journalists are bringing independent news in person to the country's beleaguered bus riders

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CARACAS -- Journalist Laura Castillo and a group of six writers and artists in Venezuela are fighting censorship here by delivering the news personally to their compatriots.

Last month they started riding public buses around the capital city and reading three-minute news broadcasts from behind a square cardboard frame meant to evoke a television set. El Bus TV updates its viewers on the country's economic and social crisis in a way other news sources don't under President Nicolas Maduro -- a former bus driver, incidentally.

"We want to hit at that wall of government censorship and we thought the bus is a medium that brings together the diverse population we want to inform," Ms. Castillo said.

She and her colleagues launched volunteer-run El Bus TV in part to mark a troubling anniversary. Ten years ago last month, Venezuela's late strongman Hugo Chavez shut down what was then the country's most popular private media outlet, Radio Caracas Television. RCTV was overtly critical of Mr. Chavez, who blasted the media as an enemy of the people.

Since then, 111 other radio stations, TV networks and newspapers in the country have had to close due to government sanctions, according to a tally maintained by the free-speech advocacy group Espacio Publico. The government denies accusations of censorship and says the media generates hysteria. It has blocked access to numerous foreign news websites and this year took CNN en Espanol off the air.

In recent years, pro-government investment groups have bought out Venezuela's national daily papers and major private TV channels, gutting personnel and avoiding any reports that reflect badly on the Maduro government.

El Bus TV has no shortage of national news to report. Widespread food shortages, sky-high inflation and Mr. Maduro's increasingly authoritarian rule have spawned more than two months of almost daily clashes between demonstrators calling for the president's ouster and state security forces, costing more than 60 lives.

The government routinely closes Caracas's subway lines to frustrate protesters, but buses privately run by driver cooperatives still ply the city's streets. Passengers regularly pass images that encapsulate the years of economic mismanagement and political unrest: families scrounging through

trash for food; long, snaking bread lines; rows of National Guard in riot gear.

"It's like watching the movie of our lives," said Claudia Lizardo, a 29-year-old writer working with El Bus TV. "People hear the news and associate it with what they see every day."

On a recent day, El Bus TV delivered news on the recent winning streak of Venezuela's under-20 national soccer team before discussing how state-subsidized food wasn't reaching large parts of the city, leaving people with little more than mangos to eat.

Ms. Castillo, El Bus TV's co-founder, emphasizes that it promotes no political party, makes no calls to join protests, and doesn't ask passengers for money, unlike the many musicians and beggars that hop on and off the buses.

Passengers sometimes look confused, being more used to hearing salsa music blaring from bus speakers than staged news reports. But the reporters say most of El Bus TV's trips so far have been received positively, with riders applauding and shouting thanks. Many bus drivers don't charge the journalists the 3 U.S. cents per person it costs to board.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is El Bus TV?

- A. a volunteer-run group of journalists, writers, and artists who deliver news to bus riders in Venezuela
- B. a volunteer-run group of journalists, writers, and artists who perform musical acts for bus riders in Venezuela
- C. a volunteer-run group of journalists, writers, and artists who deliver food and medicine to people in Venezuela
- D. a volunteer-run group of journalists, writers, and artists who organize protests throughout Venezuela

2. The text describes the problem of government censorship in Venezuela. This problem involves the government shutting down news and media outlets in the country.

How does El Bus TV fight this problem?

- A. El Bus TV invests money in news organizations that provide news about the country's economic and social crisis.
- B. El Bus TV runs a website where journalists post news stories about the country's economic and social crisis.
- C. El Bus TV shares news updates about the country's economic and social crisis directly with people riding buses.
- D. El Bus TV gives out scholarships to students throughout the country who want to study journalism.

3. Read the following sentences:

Since then, 111 other radio stations, TV networks and newspapers in the country have had to close due to government sanctions, according to a tally maintained by the free-speech advocacy group Espacio Publico. The government denies accusations of censorship and says the media generates hysteria. It has blocked access to numerous foreign news websites and this year took CNN en Espanol off the air.

In recent years, pro-government investment groups have bought out Venezuela's national daily papers and major private TV channels, gutting personnel and avoiding any reports that reflect badly on the Maduro government.

Based on this information, what can be concluded about the Venezuelan people's access to news?

- A. Their access to news is becoming greatly improved.
- B. Their access to news is greater than it has ever been.
- C. Their access to news is the same as it always has been.
- D. Their access to news is becoming increasingly limited.

4. Based on the text, what can be concluded about the economy in Venezuela?

- A. The economy is slowly improving.
- B. The economy is really struggling.
- C. The economy is incredibly strong.
- D. The economy is better than those of other countries in South America.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Pro-government investment groups have bought out Venezuela's national daily papers and major private TV channels to ensure negative reports about the government are not shared.
- B. Over a hundred radio stations, TV networks, and newspapers in Venezuela have had to close due to government sanctions.
- C. El Bus TV is fighting the Venezuelan government's censorship by delivering news reports on buses that inform riders of Venezuela's crises.
- D. Venezuela is experiencing a period of economic mismanagement, political unrest, and food shortages in certain areas.

6. Read the last paragraph of the article.

Why might the author have decided to end the article with this description?

- A. to emphasize that people in Venezuela are used to seeing performances on their daily bus rides
- B. to inspire outrage about the idea that Venezuelan bus drivers treat people differently depending on the work they do
- C. to leave readers with a greater sense of anxiety about what is going on in Venezuela
- D. to emphasize the appreciation people have for the work El Bus TV is doing to keep them informed about their country

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

The Venezuelan government has been closing down media and news outlets.

_____, a group of people decided to deliver the news personally to the Venezuelan people.

- A. Therefore
- B. Obviously
- C. Specifically
- D. As an illustration

8. How do members of El Bus TV deliver news about Venezuela's economic and social crisis to the Venezuelan people?

9. Based on the text, list at least three hardships Venezuelans may be facing.

10. The author states the following at the end of the article:

"But the reporters say most of El Bus TV's trips so far have been received positively, with riders applauding and shouting thanks."

Why might the bus riders applaud and shout thanks when El Bus TV reporters share the country's news on the bus? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
