

**Members of the Ontario Press Council  
Adjudication Hearing of 12 January 2006**

**Concerning a complaint regarding four erroneous,  
incomplete, unbalanced, and demeaning articles about  
Venezuela, published by the Toronto Star in May 2006**

**Complaint presented by:  
Maria Páez Victor, PhD  
Antonio Garcia Danglades, MA, (In absentia)**

**Response to a letter presented to us by the Toronto Star  
dated 10 January 2007**

**First of all I want to address an issue of process.**

48 hours before this hearing I received a letter, addressed to me, by the Star editor Mr Martin Regg Cohn. What was the reason for this letter and accompanying documents? There could have been several.

- It could have been an apology from the Star for its four erroneous, biased, unbalanced and demeaning articles on Venezuela. Clearly it was not.
- It could have been new evidence that the reporter actually tried to interview members of the Venezuelan government. Clearly it was not.
- And, why was this letter addressed to me, not the OPC Panel who asked for the telephone and email records in the first place, and why was it sent 48 hours before the hearing? It can't have taken 12 weeks to put it together.

All this follows in the same Star tradition. The Star took two months to answer our original complaint. It published a minimal correction just 4 days before the October 19 meeting, some 5 months after the complaint. Just when there's going to be a meeting with the OPC, the Star comes out with something. This is not respectful of me as a reader or this process.

**Secondly, I would like to address the issue of the content of the recent Star letter**

The letter and documentary evidence confirms the substance of our complaints.

**1) There was a failure to interview representatives of the Venezuelan government; and now we understand why. He did not try hard enough.**

- Interviews by Mr. Harper were recommended by the Venezuelan Communication Ministry, though not scheduled
- Emails and notes were mostly about his visa
- No calls or emails to Venezuela to set up meetings
- No calls or emails **in** Venezuela to set up meetings
- No evidence that Mr. Harper visited any government offices in Venezuela (even though he had a positive government recommendation for interviews).

Mr. Harper relied on 2 people at the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington to set up all his meetings with government people. They followed the formal process and recommended that he be granted an interview. There is no evidence provided that he did anything while in Venezuela to meet with government officials whom Mr. Regg Cohn describes as “people who declined to be interviewed” (p.3.) There is not one scrap of evidence provided that any Venezuelan official actually said “no” to him; there is no evidence that he asked any government official for a meeting when he was in Venezuela. He did not even contact any of the many political parties that support the government, but he did contact prominent leaders of the opposition parties.

There is nothing in this letter or notes that changes one iota the evidence that we presented. It is a fact that the Star articles were written without one single government source. Having interviewed prominent members of opposition parties, Mr. Harper, whom the Venezuelan government had recommended be given interviews, failed to interview not just the President –which may be

understandable due to his demanding schedule- but ANY member of the government, of the National Assembly, of the governing councils, governors, the president of the National Statistical Institute, or members of the dozen or so parties that support the government. We presented evidence to the Panel that the Venezuelan government gave to foreign correspondents over one hundred interview in an 18 month period demonstrating that government's openness and accessibility to the international press. If they could manage it why couldn't Mr. Harper?

Furthermore, the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington DC has informed me that

*"Mr. Tim Harper's request to interview the President was not rejected either by the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington nor by the International Media Directorate of the Ministry of Communications and Information in Caracas. It is important to point out that the responses to interview requests depend strictly on the presidential agenda, and in every case, when the president cannot give the interview, alternate interviewees are recommended." (Email of 10 January 2007 from Marielba Alvarez Assistant to the Press Attaché)*

Yesterday I enquired of the Office of the Prime Minister of Canada what was the likelihood of a foreign reporter obtaining an interview with the Prime Minister, *I was given the exact same response: that it would depend entirely on the Prime Minister's schedule.*

- 2) **The Star editor's letter persists in defending the Star's factual errors:** We have already documented for the Panel the numerous instances of unbalanced and inaccurate reporting in the articles. The few scattered comments in this letter are an inadequate response. Take poverty for example. The editor states ""there is general agreement about poverty numbers up to 2003, there has not been agreement since then." **Who says so?** The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the UN Development Program have no difficulty with the Venezuelan statistics on poverty and they continue to report the ongoing decline in poverty in Venezuela. For example,

- The **UN Economic Commission for Latin America** released a study entitled *The Social Panorama of Latin America 2006*, on 4 December 2006, which indicates decreases in rates of poverty and extreme poverty in numerous countries in the region, as compared to 2001 and 2002. **The most significant improvements occurred in Argentina (26% poverty rate in 2003-05, compared to 45.4% in 2000-02) and Venezuela (37.1% in 2003-05, compared to 48.6% in 2000-02).**
- **UN Development Program** released a Report on Human Development 2006 entitled “Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis” published on 9 November 2006, which states
  - That Venezuela’s Human Development Index increased from 0.772 to **0.784**, and the country’s ranking is now **72** out of a world list led by Norway with 0.965.
  - That there has been **a significant reduction in poverty** from 15.0% to **8.3 %** among the population that lives on one dollar a day, and a reduction from 32 % to **27.6 %** of the population that lives on two dollars a day.
  - **The UN has no reservations whatsoever in using statistics from the Venezuelan Statistical Institute.**

Even if the Star reporter could not have obtained interviews from the Venezuelan officials WHAT WAS THERE TO STOP HIM FROM CONSULTING THE VERY AVAILABLE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SOURCES ON THE TOPICS HE WAS WRITING ABOUT? SOURCES, WHICH WE PRESENTED TO THE PANEL. There are many ways of doing good journalism, not just interviews: there is analysis and research.

- 3) **The editor’s letter persists in defending the Star’s demeaning and discriminatory articles:** “We cannot understand how anyone could read this story and argue it was biased against the Chavez government.” (p.4). I ask the

Panel to consider the headlines given to the four articles and see if they detect a bias.

- a. Poor are Fed by Chavez's Vanity
- b. Cheap Gas Fuels Fracas in Caracas
- c. Latin America's Chavez factor. Buoyed by oil wealth and a cult-like following in the barrios, Venezuela's bombastic leader continues to vex the White House while attempting to build a leftist regional coalition.
- d. Mean streets of Caracas a black hole for Chavez. Abductions, slayings becoming all too familiar in capital. Critics say president is feeding crime rate with talk of oppression.

These headlines do give an adverse impression of what is happening in Venezuela and presumably the Star headline writer read the articles. **Indeed, the Star even apologised for one of them in their brief correction.**

I ask the Panel to review my presentation of 19 Oct 20-06 on pages 13-17 for a precise enunciation of all the demeaning and discriminatory assertions towards Venezuela contained in the four articles by Mr. Harper for which there has been no response from the Star.

**In conclusion:**

- To claim that Mr. Harper "made repeated attempts to arrange interviews with Chavez and his ministers..." is obviously an exaggeration when all he did was contact 2 people in the Embassy in Washington. It is unacceptable that a Chief Washington correspondent, a reporter with 25 years of experience can provide no evidence that he knocked on some –any- government doors while in Venezuela.
- To say that "the government had ample opportunity to comment but chose not to" sounds like a deliberate decision by the Venezuelan government to deny him access when the truth is that they approved of him for

interviews, and he simply didn't do his job. As a reader of The Star I am very disappointed. As his editor Mr Martin Regg Cohn should be too.

- We hold the Ontario Press Council to their word and standards as stated on its web page:
  - **“A newspaper has an inescapable obligation to vigorously pursue comment from any person about whom it plans to publish derogatory accusations and if possible to print it at the same time. It should check, preferably before publication, damaging statements one person attributes to another”**

**And**

**“A brief item in the usual location for corrections may not be adequate in cases where readers may be misled by the original error.”**

Thank you.