

The pandemic is also killing the truth



The Washington Post

Picture above: People are on their balconies, lighting candles and oil lamps in Ahmedabad, India, on April 5th, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked people to turn off their lights for nine minutes at 9pm to mark the fight against the coronavirus.

"The Spanish flu of 1918 killed so many because the populations were weak since World War I. The mode of war contributed directly to the destruction caused by that pandemic.

As has been taught in Portugal, using line by line, the Covid-19 pandemic is destructive, but the mode of war now also contributes directly to the destruction caused by that pandemic. The destruction of truth and democracy.

The above article gives us a window into the results of that destruction".

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The truth is the first victim of war, says the old saying; the corollary may be that journalists are often the collateral damage. This has probably never been more universally true than in the ongoing battle against the coronavirus. Around the world, autocratic and democratic governments have responded to the epidemic by restricting information, criminalizing independent reporting, and harassing reporters - verbally and sometimes physically.

"Call it secret repression at 19," says Joel Simon , executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists. His organization has compiled what he says is a partial list of 200 cases of arrests, threats and harassment related to media coverage of the pandemic. That includes the arrests of journalists in the Dominican Republic, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Iran, Liberia and Turkey.

No, no one has yet been arrested in the United States; President Trump has confined himself to insulting and defaming reporters who participate in the daily reality show he calls a press conference. But Trump has given governments around the world a model for suppressing independent journalism on the epidemic: the construction of "false news.

In a webinar organized by the Aspen Institute last week, Simon published a long list of countries that have adopted new regulations or laws that criminalize the reporting of "false" information about the epidemic - with governments the arbiters of what that constitutes. Some are the usual autocratic suspects: Vladimir Putin's Russia, Iran, Thailand and Zimbabwe. But a surprising number usually be seen as

democracies with freedom of expression: Hungary, South Africa and Bolivia, among others.

One of the most notable cases is India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a three-week blockade on 1.3 billion people, which was necessary - and made an extraordinary effort to gag journalists among them, which it was not. The government sought a Supreme Court decision in India requiring all media to publish only official accounts of the pandemic. Although the court did not go that far, Modi intimidated most of the media into behaving as if it had.

Meanwhile, it has reduced the flow of this official information to a drip. He has not yet held a press conference with coronavirus; nor has the minister of health. Instead, selected journalists are invited to make a briefing from a low-level official. "We all quote the junior bureaucrat," said Raksha Kumar, a freelance journalist. She told Aspen's webinar that only pro-Modi state media could ask questions at briefings.

Indian journalists who reject this regime run the risk of extraordinary harassment. Vidya Krishnan, a freelance health care reporter, has produced reports pointing to the government's failure to store protective equipment. Predictably, the authorities labelled them "false news" and she was subjected to vicious online trolling. "In my 17, almost 18 years of reporting on health, I have never seen anything like this," Krishnan said in an interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists. "I've been called an unpatriotic, traitor, people are asking me to be arrested immediately for spreading false news."

Krishnan's case is typical of the situation in many countries where harassment is directed at journalists who report a lack of doctors or question official figures on the number of infections or deaths. Case zero may have been Chen Qiushi, a Chinese video journalist who traveled to Wuhan in January and posted videos on YouTube reporting that hospitals were overloaded with patients and few supplies.

On February 6, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Chen disappeared after telling his family he was planning a report at a temporary hospital. He has not yet been heard.

Numerous similar cases followed. Three Algerian journalists who questioned the results of tests at a state laboratory are being prosecuted. An Iranian journalist was arrested after Twittering his government's failure to prepare for the pandemic. In Haiti, eight journalists who were investigating whether an office of the government was forcing people to pile up were assaulted by undercover bandits.

Foreign correspondents are not immune. Egypt expelled a correspondent from the British newspaper The Guardian, who questioned official figures on infections; Iraq suspended the Reuters office license in Baghdad for doing the same. The expulsion of

journalists from The Post, New York Times and Wall Street Journal from China last month was not nominally linked to the epidemic, but is having the effect of greatly reducing independent reporting at a time when the Xi Jinping regime is suspected. falsifying statistics.

Simon points out that China is openly pressing the notion that control of information is essential to stop the disease. "There is a serious risk," he said, that this argument "is occurring all over the world. If that happens, one of the main reasons will be that the world's leading democracy is not only doing nothing to prevent the "repression of the coveted 19th decade," its president is actively favoring it.

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