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Information Isolation: Censoring the COVID-19 Outbreak

20–25 minutes

Governments are using the pandemic as a pretext to crack down on free expression and access to information.

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Information can be the difference between life and death. The coronavirus pandemic has underscored how important internet access is to protecting one's own health, staying informed, and keeping in contact with family and friends. From the onset of COVID-19, however, political considerations clashed with concerns about public health and free expression. Authorities blocked legitimate websites, ordered the removal of unwanted content, and most egregiously, shut down internet service altogether. Officials have reinforced these controls by criminalizing more categories of online expression and arresting journalists, activists, and members of the public for speaking out about the government's performance.

Blocking websites and deleting unwanted

information

To suppress unfavorable health statistics, critical reporting, and other COVID-19 content, governments in at least 28 of the 65 countries assessed by *Freedom on the Net* blocked websites or forced users, social media platforms, or online outlets to delete information. Nowhere has censorship been more sophisticated and systematic than in [China](), whose authorities rushed to control the global narrative on their initial unwillingness and inability to contain the outbreak in Wuhan. Moderators censored millions of pieces of content containing over 2,000 keywords related to the pandemic on the leading communication platform WeChat and the live-streaming platform YY, affecting both criticism of the Chinese Communist Party and innocuous questions or observations about the virus. Online news outlets were also given strict orders about how to report on the virus: no publishing unofficial sources, no engaging in "independent reporting," and certainly no "sensationalizing" coverage on a range of topics, including physician Li Wenliang, one of the first whistleblowers from Wuhan, whose death from the virus in early February triggered a rare nationwide outcry calling for freedom of speech.

Following Beijing's lead, the government in nearby [Bangladesh]() blocked the BenarNews website and a mirror site of the Swedish-based investigative outlet Netra News after they reported on a leaked internal memo from the United Nations and the World Health Organization about the country's rising case numbers. The document warned of the collapse of the country's health system and predicted up to two million deaths. Bangladeshi authorities also turned to crude intimidation to silence reporting that

contradicted the government. Military intelligence officials warned the mother of Netra News's editor in chief against "tarnishing" Bangladesh's image. Politicians affiliated with the ruling party assaulted four journalists after a Facebook Live event in which it was alleged that there were irregularities in the government's distribution of aid during lockdowns.

Egypt's Supreme Council for Media Regulation ordered service providers to block several news outlets in March and April, accusing them of spreading false information. The outlet Darb, owned by the opposition Socialist Popular Movement Party, was blocked after it questioned human rights and health conditions in Egyptian prisons and called for the release of people who were incarcerated. The blocks were part of a broader crackdown on the information space. Officials revoked the credentials of a *Guardian* journalist who reported on medical research that estimated a higher number of cases than was acknowledged by government statistics. Separately, after an editor of a local newspaper challenged official COVID-19 data in a Facebook post, he was detained at a police station for a month before criminal charges were brought.

In Venezuela, a country already ravaged by an economic, political, and human rights crisis before the pandemic struck, de facto president Nicolás Maduro has coupled censorship with a series of false assertions, including claims that the virus is a "bioterrorist" weapon and that it can be prevented or treated with homemade lemongrass tea. Meanwhile, authorities blocked a website with information about the virus that was created by the opposition-controlled National Assembly and Juan Guaidó, who has struggled to gain recognition as the country's acting president. Police and

other officials loyal to Maduro have also temporarily detained journalists and forced them to delete online content about the virus' spread or conditions in hospitals.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus broadly dismissed the pandemic, referring to it as a "psychosis" and recommending vodka and other folk remedies to maintain health. The government largely sought to shout down contradictory information, though it periodically resorted to outright censorship. A web portal in the city of Bobruisk, for example, was forced to delete an interview in which a nurse discussed working conditions and problems with testing, while a regional state website removed COVID-19 statistics that contradicted those released by the Ministry of Health. Anger over Lukashenka's rigged August reelection bid, combined with frustration about the government's failure to take the pandemic seriously, galvanized mass protests in the country. The regime responded with even more repression, including violence against protestors, arbitrary detentions and torture, and several disruptions to internet connectivity.

Keeping populations in the dark

Governments have imposed internet shutdowns in at least 13 countries since January 2020, limiting people's ability to obtain timely information about the pandemic or use digital tools to access health care, education, and other necessary services. Long-term connectivity restrictions left some populations largely unaware of the virus as it spread rapidly around the globe in the first months of the outbreak. These shutdowns are notably concentrated in the home territories of historically marginalized groups. Access to the internet is an internationally recognized

human right, and this year's network disruptions constitute an especially cruel form of collective punishment against specific ethnic and religious populations.

The government of Ethiopia restricted internet and phone services in parts of the Oromia Region from January to April 2020, as the military clashed with an Oromo rebel group. The shutdown sharply restricted access to information about the pandemic for millions of Ethiopians in a region with poor health infrastructure, and where the country's first person confirmed to have the virus was reported to have traveled in March.

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In Myanmar, which alongside Kyrgyzstan suffered this year's largest score decline, mobile internet service has been cut off since June 2019 for over a million people living in villages in Rakhine and Chin States—areas where the military has committed atrocities against the Rohingya and other groups. Officials in March also blocked regional and ethnic news sites, further marginalizing and endangering populations that have long been on the receiving end of the regime's egregious human rights abuses. The service and access disruptions severely limited residents' ability to initially learn of the virus's existence and then to obtain information about its spread. Across the border in Bangladesh, the internet was shut off for 11 months in the densely populated Cox's Bazar refugee camp starting in September 2019. The camp's nearly one million Rohingya residents, who sought safety there from genocidal violence in Myanmar, are consequently unable to access basic news, including lifesaving information about the

pandemic.

High-speed internet service has been similarly suspended in parts of Jammu and Kashmir since August 2019, when India's central government embarked on a crackdown to enforce its revocation of the state's autonomy. Such restrictions have been disastrous for health care in the region. Doctors warned that the shutdown had isolated them from foreign colleagues and information about best practices in treating COVID-19. However, government abuses extended far beyond Kashmir, with health professionals across India facing intimidation and detention for speaking out online about unsafe working conditions.

Long-term shutdowns in Pakistan's border regions, including one that has lasted more than three years in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, also continued during the pandemic. A student petitioned the Islamabad High Court to restore mobile service, citing the shutdown's impact on online education. While the court sided with the petitioner, service was apparently not restored.

Banning criticism and arresting those who speak out

The pandemic has exacerbated a global clampdown on free expression. In at least 45 of the 65 countries covered by *Freedom on the Net*, activists, journalists, or ordinary members of the public were arrested or criminally charged for online speech related to COVID-19. Authorities justified the arrests through a myriad of laws that criminalize expression deemed to cause panic, instigate violence, spread hate, or insult officials, among other perceived

harms. In at least 20 countries, governments cited the pandemic emergency to impose additional vague or overly broad speech restrictions. The measures most often criminalized the spread of "false" information or content that could damage "public order." By passing new laws and arresting individuals for nonviolent speech, leaders attempted to control narratives about the virus's spread, the government's performance, and the negative social and economic implications of lockdowns.

In one of the world's harshest examples, [Zimbabwe's](#) emergency provisions have put internet users at risk of up to 20 years in prison for spreading false information about the pandemic. At least three people now face the draconian penalty after sharing allegedly false information about lockdowns on WhatsApp. In another arrest under a separate law, an investigative journalist in the country was charged and held in pretrial detention for six weeks after reporting on Facebook that the president's son was involved in corruption tied to health-related procurement contracts.

A government crackdown on free expression and "fake news" in [Thailand](#) has ramped up amid the pandemic. Implemented in February 2020, an emergency decree outlaws online speech that could threaten security, may instill fear, or is intentionally distorted to cause misunderstanding. Individuals accused of such offenses can be charged under the country's repressive Computer Crime Act, which has long been used to punish activists and journalists for their work, or under the emergency decree itself. In March 2020, an artist was arrested after stating on Facebook that he did not go through a screening process for the virus at an airport. A whistleblower also faces charges after posting on Facebook about shortages of medical supplies and related corruption.

The Philippines' emergency law has served as another tool for President Rodrigo Duterte to consolidate his power and intimidate critics. A last-minute addition to the law punishes the spread of "false information" with up to two months in prison and a fine of 1 million pesos ($19,600). Dozens of people have since been investigated, arrested, and charged, including two online journalists who simply shared a local mayor's social media posts about the virus. Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia has similarly repurposed the health crisis to continue arresting and charging members of the banned Cambodian National Rescue Party for their social media posts. Sovann Rithy, founder of an online news outlet, was separately charged for quoting a speech by the prime minister himself.

Azerbaijan's parliament expanded the legal definition of "prohibited information" in an effort to suppress more online speech in what was already a restrictive environment. The amended Law on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection now encompasses "false" information that threatens life or health, causes property damage, disrupts transport, or has "other socially dangerous consequences." One journalist was arrested and sentenced to 25 days in detention after police demanded that he remove social media posts on the social and economic impact of the pandemic.

Rather than passing new emergency measures to criminalize speech, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used his existing legal toolbox to reprimand individuals who challenged the government's tightly orchestrated propaganda campaign. Over 400 people, including journalists and doctors, were detained in March alone for their "provocative" and "abusive" social media posts

about the pandemic. After a city medical association posted on Twitter about the deaths of health workers and a lack of personal protective equipment, two doctors involved with the association were detained, interrogated, and barred from traveling abroad.

Authorities with a track record of quashing dissent are not alone in imposing such restrictions. Even governments that have historically protected online free expression have responded disproportionately to pandemic-related speech. South Africa rolled out state-of-disaster regulations that bar statements through "any medium, including social media" if they are intended to deceive someone about the virus, government actions, or a person's infection status. Celebrity entertainer Somizi Mhlongo was criminally charged after suggesting on Instagram that the country's transport minister planned to extend the country's lockdown.

In Hungary, where internet freedom had not yet been heavily affected by a precipitous decline in democracy over the past decade, the government introduced provisions as part of its "state of danger" legislation that prescribed a five-year prison term for publishing false or distorted information on the pandemic. One opposition-affiliated activist was taken into custody and accused of "obstructing efforts to combat the pandemic" by posting about a government policy to clear hospital beds for COVID-19 patients. Another man was accused of fearmongering and detained after he called Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a "cruel tyrant" on Facebook while discussing lockdown measures. Health workers and other professionals involved in the fight against COVID-19 have reported that they are less likely to speak publicly and openly for fear of retaliation.

Dealing with dangerous speech

In what has been described as an "infodemic," inaccurate and unscientific posts have contributed to the loss of life from COVID-19, either due to their flagrant disregard for the danger posed by the virus or because they promote dangerous or ineffective treatments. President Jair Bolsonaro in [Brazil](#) and President Donald Trump in the [United States](#) have both suggested at times that the pandemic is no more dangerous than common influenza, and they have recklessly promoted unsafe or untested treatments. Such efforts are consistent with their administrations' history of rejecting science in making public policy. Individuals from countries as varied as Nigeria, Vietnam, and Iran have died or been hospitalized after poisoning themselves with alcohol, bleach, hydroxychloroquine, and other substances that some have touted as miracle cures.

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State and nonstate actors are using the pandemic to promote conspiracy theories and pseudoscience that aligns with their nationalist and xenophobic political goals. High-ranking members of [India's](#) ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party made Islamophobic statements after the government linked a March meeting of a Muslim missionary group to a spike in coronavirus cases. The statements echoed anti-Muslim online news stories and Twitter hashtags like #CoronaJihad and #MuslimMeaningTerrorist that falsely accused Muslims of deliberately spreading the virus. Numerous Muslims have been

beaten in the country, and at least one boy lost his life, as a result of similar false rumors. After Cambodia's Ministry of Health published a Facebook post identifying adherents of "Khmer Islam" as one of the groups that had contracted the virus, social media trolls launched a barrage of hateful comments at the country's small Muslim community. In Sri Lanka, the government has restricted the religious freedom of Muslims by mandating the cremation of all those killed by COVID-19, despite evidence that burial does not spread the virus. As long as pandemic-related disinformation is being exploited for a government's political gain, it is likely to proliferate online, to the detriment of public health and safety.

Ensuring that the information environment remains open, safe, and free

Governments have a duty to foster a reliable and diverse information space, especially during major events—such as elections, protests, and pandemics—that can serve as catalysts for the spread of false and misleading content. The amplification of rumors and falsehoods by public officials and privately run platforms gives such material a shroud of legitimacy. At the same time, arresting those responsible or deleting their content can fuel conspiratorial claims that powerful interests have something to hide. States should only prevent access to information in limited cases, when the action can be defended as both necessary to serve a legitimate purpose and proportionate to the threat.

Similarly, tech platforms should protect free expression and access to information whenever possible, adopting a minimalist approach to interventions as outlined by international human rights

standards. Content moderation practices must be robustly transparent, apply consistently across issues and ideologies, include independent avenues of appeal and genuine opportunities for redress, and feature human oversight of any automated systems. Tech companies should also use their immense power over the information space to push out verifiable information from public health authorities.

Digital news media that are independent, diverse, and free are also essential to promoting a democratic information space. The media can conduct digital literacy campaigns, investigate propaganda offensives and their origins, and hold officials accountable for violating human rights. Journalists contributing to online outlets should be given full access to state officials and resources, a safe environment in which to work, and protection from online harassment and intimidation.

Restrictions to the digital environment can have far-reaching social, political, economic, and personal consequences. During the pandemic, digital tools have been essential for staying connected with loved ones, engaging with health care providers, and worshipping freely. As people continue to work remotely and more students come to rely on online learning, gaps in access will be a drag on the economy and exacerbate existing inequities in education and employment, especially when connectivity restrictions target regions where marginalized ethnic groups reside. A lack of internet access also affects people's ability to participate politically. Ahead of elections in the United States and around the world, for example, online resources play an important role in facilitating voter registration, requests for mail-in ballots, and public education about the candidates and issues at stake.

Protecting access to the free and open internet is fundamental for the future of democracy.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES: *Freedom on the Net identified and tracked five indicators relating to COVID-19 and censorship—internet shutdowns, website block- ing, content removal, emergency laws and policies, and arrests of internet users—in 65 countries around the world. Freedom House's analysts conducted thorough research of news websites, blogs, social media content, academic journals, and law and policy documents, often across multiple languages. Throughout the process, the analysts worked in close partnership with the activists, journalists, and lawyers who research and write the Freedom on the Net country reports. Our team also drew on the excellent work of other nongov- ernmental organizations, including resources related to COVID-19 that are maintained by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Center for Not- for-Profit Law, and the International Press Institute. Visit freedomonthenet.org to access and download other country- specific data and sources used in this essay.*