

The Censorship of COVID-19 Data Around the World

Times of crisis always bring out the best and worst of human nature. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different.

Communities around the world are rallying together to support vulnerable people, and healthcare workers are putting their health (and even their lives) at risk to fight the virus.

On the other hand, many governments are using the crisis [as an excuse](#) to increase censorship, [mass surveillance is spreading](#) alongside the disease, and the pandemic is exposing [the failure of economic policy](#) to deal with instability.

The Chinese government, in particular, has been accused of suppressing research into the disease, and of using the crisis as an excuse to further restrict the right to free speech in that country. In reality, governments around the world—from Iran to the United Kingdom to Spain to the United States—have been doing the same, albeit in less obvious ways.

In this article, we'll look at the scale of censorship in China, and how this has contributed to the spread of COVID-19. We'll then return our focus to the USA, and see how it compares to China.

China and Censorship

The scale of censorship in China is already huge during normal times, with more than [13,000 websites shut down](#) by the Chinese government since 2015. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has seen a rapid and worrying increase in the scale of suppression.

Some of this censorship [has been achieved](#) through keyword-based analysis of popular social media sites such as WeChat, where COVID-19 discussions that are critical of the government

have been blocked or removed.

More worrying is that the hashtag “We Want Freedom of Speech” [has also been suppressed](#). Some activists have attempted to get around these restrictions by using the Ethereum blockchain, where an interview with Dr. Ai Fen (a subject of attempted Chinese state censorship) was posted by journalist Sarah Zang.

Given [the growing scale of global internet censorship](#), such actions are not surprising. In the context of the current crisis, however, there are more worrying aspects of the Chinese government’s approach to censorship.

Several news outlets have reported that the government [appears to be censoring research](#) on the origins of the virus by requiring that scientists submit their studies to the Ministry of Science and Technology before publication.

The most famous case of this concerned ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, who raised early warnings about the virus and then [died of it himself](#), but there have been reports of many other pieces of research also being suppressed.

The Impact of Censorship

During normal times, this censorship would be concerning enough. During a global pandemic, suppression of key information has undoubtedly cost [many thousands of lives](#).

In Europe and the USA, governments have been widely criticized for [being slow to react to the crisis](#), and epidemiologists have pointed out that losing just a few days in the response to the pandemic can have a huge impact on the final death toll.

The impact of censorship [goes much further](#) than just limiting the information supplied to governments, though. Without the ability to freely express themselves online, citizens’ groups in China are finding it difficult to coordinate responses to

the virus: if you can't mention COVID-19, it's difficult to arrange a food collection for vulnerable people in the wake of the virus.

Even worse is the fact that governments appear to be censoring the wrong information. Posts criticizing the response of authorities to the virus have been blocked or removed in many countries, but those relating to conspiracy theories have not. This has allowed false—and often absurd—conspiracy theories to spread, most notably the belief that the ongoing rollout of 5G telecoms networks [has caused the virus](#).

At the broadest level, this censorship also points to a dark future. The scale of the pandemic has made it easy for governments around the world to claim emergency powers: powers that [they will be hesitant](#) to give up in the coming years.

Censorship in the United States

Though criticism over censorship has been mainly directed at China, it is far from the only country that has sought to suppress information about the virus. In Iran, the government has [launched attacks against VPN services](#) operating in the country, in order to make sure that citizens only have access to government-approved versions of websites.

In fact, a look at the [countries that banned VPNs](#) before the crisis—which includes China and Iran—is a fairly good guide to those countries that have put in place the most severe censorship in response to it.

The USA doesn't appear on that list, of course. But [there are concerns](#) that many local, state, and federal agencies across the country have dramatically slowed their responses to requests for access to public information in the past few months. Whilst some of these agencies face genuine difficulties in fulfilling these requests due to the way that their records are stored, others have put in place

restrictions that don't seem to be directly related to the pandemic.

For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has now totally [stopped processing electronic records requests](#), and now requires that all such requests be made by mail. The State Department has gone even further, [having suspended all requests](#) made under the Freedom of Information Act until further notice.

City governments have also responded in much the same way: the city of Philadelphia [has declared a state of emergency](#) in which “non-essential” city business, including FOI requests, have been suspended. Fresno, California has declared that all requests are on hold “until further notice”.

Some of these responses are undoubtedly a genuine response to the crisis. Government employees working from home might not have access to the records requested, and agencies across the country are stretched, even as [several waves of stimulus](#) come fresh off the printing press.

We should also not underestimate the role of incompetence in what may be instances of “accidental” censorship: we've previously noted that [decades of FDA misrule](#) have made the pandemic worse, and agencies' IT infrastructure is notoriously outdated. This has led to them becoming a [major target for cyberattacks](#).

Others have seen a more conscious intent behind these shifts, however. We should not forget that we are in an election year, and the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a huge impact on the way in which citizens vote in November.

The government also has form when it comes to suppressing information it doesn't like: one of the most frustrating aspects of the recent [Huawei scandal](#) was just how little information was released by the federal government, under the

auspices that 5G network infrastructure is a critical part of national defense.

The Future

The current situation in the USA can be read in many ways. Some have argued that the crisis, and the number of denied or delayed FOI requests that it has caused, has “merely” exposed the failings of the FOI system itself. “A lot of reporters would say the FOIA system is already broken, but this is just exposing the seams of it,” [says Colin Lecher](#), a reporter at The Markup.

Others worry that the problem runs deeper. At the moment, there is little to no clarity from the Federal or state governments as to how long their state of emergency is going to last. This could very well mean that we enter the next U.S. Presidential Election without clear information on how our government has responded to the worst crisis since the Second World War. Information on the functioning of public bodies is important during normal times, of course, but during times of crisis it becomes even more so.

It’s important to keep a sense of perspective, of course. The current suppression of FOI requests in the USA is on nowhere near the scale of [the press crackdown around the world](#), and it’s unlikely that social media posts about COVID-19 will be actively blocked or removed by the American government.

However, the steps taken in recent weeks may be the start of a slippery slope. The current crisis is undoubtedly important, but if we cannot [protect constitutional rights during the pandemic](#), we risk lasting damage to the country.

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