



DISINFORMATION BULLETIN

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HEROES WEAR MASKS, BUT CARRY NOTEPADS

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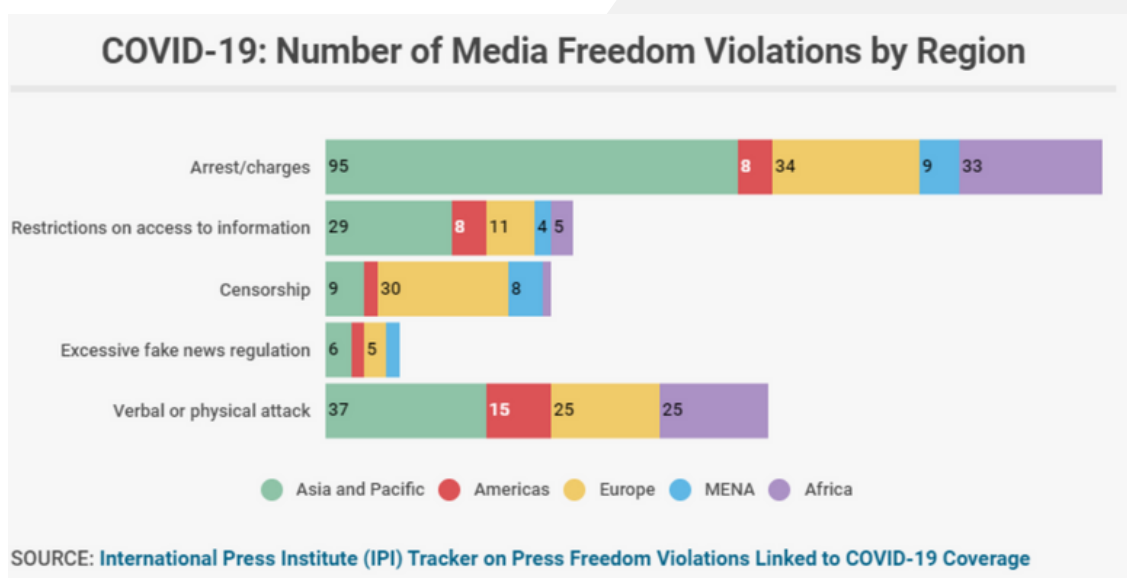
BY SOPHIE KENNEALLY



With the advent of the novel coronavirus and the accompanying disinformation boom, journalists have been heralded as the unexpected heroes of the crisis, the guardians of information and of lives. Yet the pandemic has had devastating effects on the media industry, destabilising its freedom and independence and, for some outlets, threatening their survival.

So how has COVID-19 affected the media sector and what does this mean for disinformation?

Bulletin 3 [1] introduced the rights restrictions that have been “justified” by governments under emergency measures on the grounds that they are both necessary and proportionate steps to minimise the spread of the coronavirus. Many of the resultant derogations have directly affected journalism by limiting rights to freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of the press. The International Press Institute (IPI) has recorded 410 instances of media freedom violations related to the COVID-19 pandemic (including arrests/charges, restrictions on access to information, censorship, excessive fake news regulation, and verbal or physical attacks).



What is worrying is not only the number of reported violations, but also the rate of involvement of authorities in carrying these out. Globally, just shy of 70 per cent of physical and verbal attacks or intimidation against journalists covering the pandemic are from authorities. While this figure is much lower for Europe (16 per cent), it is still a matter of considerable concern that, in combination with the other above-named violations, risks seriously undermining the very foundations on which journalism has been built in democratic states. What's more, the absence of a sunset clause for many of these emergency measures suggests their implications on the media sector could be long-lasting and could pave the way for the birth of a very different media eco-system.

[1] <https://www.agenformedia.com/publication/health-dictatorship/>

The troubling situation of the media has been aggravated by a funding crisis that has crippled the industry. Within 2020, the IMF forecasts the worst economic recession since the 1930's Great Depression[2], which the ILO predicts will lead to the loss of the equivalent of 195 million full-time jobs[3]. Our guardians of information are among those who have already fallen foul of this crisis. Despite an increase in readership, the global news media industry has been hard hit by the effects of the pandemic, due to a sudden fall in advertising revenue. The Global Forum on Media Development reported that this plummeting revenue has reached 70 per cent among some members, adding that local and regional media outlets tend to be the worst affected. This drop in crucial funding has led to redundancy, furloughing, and pay cuts.

As regards counter-disinformation efforts, this has two critical implications: firstly, it results in a reduction in human resources through lay-offs and furloughing which limits media outlets' capacity to carry out fact-checking activities and to cover a wide range of topics and stories.

[2] "IMF chief says pandemic will unleash worst recession since Great Depression", Reuters, 9 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-imf/imf-chief-says-pandemic-will-unleash-worst-recession-since-great-depression-idUSKCN21RISM>

[3] International Labour Organization "COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment" (7.4.2020) https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_740893/lang-en/index.htm.

It is also likely to dismantle networks of foreign correspondents, limiting access to first-hand, independent information. Secondly, the fall in revenue forces media agencies to seek alternative funding sources, which can lead to a dangerous over-dependency on government advertisements[4] and a subsequent increase in political influence on the media. And so, once more, the cornerstones that uphold the press in a democracy begin to crack.

...Yet Not All Who Carry Notepads Are Heroes: Propaganda and Influence Campaigns

The most familiar suspects seem to have raised the greatest concerns surrounding COVID-19 propaganda and influence campaigns, with long-standing inter-state tensions rising, (such as between NATO and Russia, China and the US, or even Germany and Italy (see Bulletin 2 [5])), and the most fought-over territories have again become a fragile target for these campaigns (Ukraine, the Balkan States, the US-Mexico border).

The Chinese government's framing of the coronavirus has generated opprobrium from the international community, facing wide-spread accusations of media manipulation. The government's response to the first warning of the outbreak was to silence the concerns of Dr Li Wenliang, (who later died of the virus) by forcing him to "confess" the falsity of his cautions. Complex modelling from population mapping group WorldPop indicates that "if interventions in [China] could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier, cases could have been reduced by 66 percent, 86 percent and 95 percent respectively -

significantly limiting the geographical spread of the disease." [6], highlighting the immediate public health threat that one government's involvement in the media can have on a global scale.

Yet, it is not only public health that is threatened by state meddling in the media. The Chinese state's domestic and foreign influence operations have exploited the media to glorify the government's response to the virus and criticise, humiliate even, the responses of governments abroad.

In late April, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua posted a video animation depicting an argument between Lego-style figures in the form of a terracotta warrior (China) and the Statue of Liberty (the U.S.), mocking U.S. President Trump's inconsistent responses to the virus. Since its posting on "New China TV", Xinhua's official YouTube channel, it has received over two million views and has been retweeted by several Chinese diplomats[7].

[6] University of Southampton "Early and combined interventions crucial in tackling Covid-19 spread in China" (11.03.20) <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/news/2020/03/covid-19-china.page>.

[7] "Once Upon a Virus": China mocks U.S. in Lego-like animation", Reuters, 2 May 2020, (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-usa/once-upon-a-virus-china-mocks-u-s-coronavirus-response-in-lego-like-animation-idUSKBN22E0C4>; 01.07.2020).

[4] UNESCO (2020) "Journalism, press freedom and COVID-19" https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_covid_brief_en.pdf.

[5] <https://www.agenformedia.com/publication/disinformation-europe-stability/>



Although, China is not alone in adopting such campaigns. According to EUvsDisinfo, their first case of COVID-19-related disinformation originated from the Russian state-funded Sputnik News on 22nd January. The article, claiming that the virus was a man-made weapon created by NATO[8], was one of many fabricated narratives to come, targeting audiences around the globe and sowing mistrust in their own states and in the institutions and organisations that govern them. The pro-Kremlin disinformation and influence campaigns swiftly adopted two main narrative foci: concerning the origins of the virus (it is a hoax or it is man-made) and concerning the consequences of the virus abroad (e.g. “due to the pandemic the Schengen system has collapsed, NATO will dissolve, the EU is paralysed, the Baltic states are doomed, there are no doctors in Lithuania, and Ukraine is in free fall”[9]). Both foci threaten to destabilise the EU, its neighbours and its allies.

Sputnik News and RT (Russia Today), whose journalists are known to be puppets of the Kremlin’s political agenda, present a particularly interesting case of foreign influence campaigns. While both outlets have strong ties to the Kremlin – Sputnik was created by a Presidential decree to “report on the state policy of Russia abroad”, while RT is fully financed by the Russian government – both target, at least partially, the international community, offering media (radio and online articles) in a range of languages. This tactic places them in a strong position to reach foreign audiences with alternative media narratives that propagate positive presentations of the Russian state and manipulate opinions of others.

Therefore, while journalists may well be heralded as heroes, the question arises of whose heroes. Journalists are heroes of public health and public security, protectors of information and against disinformation, and they risk their jobs and their lives to report contentious topics from precarious contexts. But they are also champions of aggressive, malign, and deceptive governments, and puppets for political agendas at home and abroad.

So, we may ask again, **how has COVID-19 affected the media sector and what does this mean for disinformation?** The media sector has been financially crippled by the effects of the pandemic, it has been restricted in its capacity and freedom to communicate verified news and perform fact-checking activities, and its journalists have been both abused and used as political pawns for domestic and foreign influence operations. This situation is likely to worsen as the economic crisis deepens and as state-driven influence campaigns become more advanced and more aggressive. If we do not protect the journalism industry from the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, we risk hampering efforts to communicate reliable and, as the pandemic has shown, life-saving information to the public (especially at a local level), thwarting critical counter-disinformation activities, and paving the way for a heavier state influence over the media.

[8] EUvsdisinfo “DISINFORMATION CAN KILL” (26.03.2020) <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-can-kill/>

[9] *ibid.*



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