INTERNET AND NEW MEDIA MEDIA CHINA

Protecting the Truth About the Coronavirus in China

Tens of thousands of us are working to save the articles and accounts of COVID-19 before Chinese censors can delete them forever.

By Shen Lu

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People attend a vigil to mourn for doctor Li Wenliang, a Chinese ophthalmologist who warned about the novel coronavirus. *(Athony Kwan / Getty Images)*

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Since February 3, censors have deleted eight posts that I've shared on Weibo—all of them about the COVID-19 outbreak. Gone is an analysis of China's governance written by high school students; a desperate message from a Wuhan resident to the rest of China: "Even if you don't care about politics, politics will come after you"; screenshots of diary entries from a Wuhan native on how her parents' health deteriorated and they eventually died from infection; and a plea from a rural Hubei health clinic for medical supplies.

As China clamps back down on speech, it saddens me that there are human stories about the crisis that might never be seen again. But I'm relieved to know that volunteers worked together to save so many accounts and so much of the courageous reporting. If the evidence always disappears, there can never be any accountability.

As of February 18, the pneumonia-causing virus that emerged in December in Wuhan, China, has killed more than 1,870 and sickened 72,528 in China. The World Health Organization reports 804 confirmed cases in 25 other countries. Getting around censorship on Weibo and Douban is a familiar cat-and-mouse game. But the outrage on these social media platforms is on a scale I've never seen before. The death of Li Wenliang, a doctor reprimanded for warning about a dangerous new virus that would later kill him, led to

an outpouring of grief and rage and sparked demands for freedom of speech. Authorities responded by increasing censorship and launching propaganda campaigns.

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For weeks, I have been glued to Chinese social media and Chinese-language media. Some nights, I can't sleep as I stay up to read the pleas of health care workers for medical supplies and sick residents for treatment. I've also been riveted by brave reporting: Chinese journalists uncovered the government's delayed response to the epidemic and the inability of the local Red Cross chapter to distribute donated products. After epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan confirmed human-to-human transmission on January 20 and before pervasive censorship began in early February, there was relative press freedom in China. During that window, I marveled at the depth and breadth of the coverage. Hard-hitting investigations revealed the extent of the crisis, and human-interest stories captured the range of emotions. Yet, as a journalist on the China beat and a Chinese social media user of over 10 years, I worried about the lifespan of the work; I knew that anything challenging the government's

narrative or questioning how authorities handled the epidemic could one day just vanish. Whenever I read a piece that I thought might be deleted, I saved it to the Internet Archive, a digital library that provides free access to collections of digitized materials.

I was not alone in this effort. Tens of thousands of us have come together to preserve what we read online. In late January, when I shared on Weibo how to save content to the Internet Archive, more than 1,500 users shared the simple instruction. (Mind you, I am not an influencer.) A few commented under my post that they had been taking screenshots "like crazy" in an effort to document pieces of information before they disappeared.

Around the same time, groups of volunteers in and outside of China started their own archival efforts. On January 28, reports began circulating: Government censors would start disappearing posts and gagging individual social media accounts on February 3. Almost immediately, a Chinese college student worked with others to publish a list of outstanding news coverage by outlets, such as *Caixin* and *Sanlian Life Week*, as well as features and critical op-eds published by personal accounts on WeChat and Weibo.

Knowing it would be valuable information for non-Chinese journalists and researchers monitoring or covering the crisis, I shared the list on Twitter. One friend immediately started translating the headlines of the articles, another began saving the articles as PDFs on her computer. Over the weekend, a few of us archived the more than 100 articles and translated the directory. The goal was to keep it for historical record

and amplify the work by Chinese journalists who risked their health and careers to report from the epicenter of a coronavirus outbreak.

Separately, another group began to save individual stories of those suffering from disease or injustice. A few academics pursuing advanced degrees in social sciences created a Telegram channel called Cyber Graveyard, which archives and broadcasts censored social media posts. Collections of Chinese news coverage, personal documentation, and English-language media reports and academic papers have also sprung up on GitHub, a platform that hosts open-source projects.

Other volunteers are working to debunk rumors, translate Chinese news and personal stories about the crisis into English, and count cases of people who displayed symptoms but never received an official COVID-19 diagnosis and are therefore not included in statistics. According to a project that aggregates open-source projects related to the outbreak, more than 10,000 people have contributed to efforts on GitHub to inform the public and document this period of history.

In the past, the Communist Party has succeeded in manipulating the collective memory by winnowing out evidence of sensitive events. This archival work is a collective effort to avoid another national amnesia; it's a decentralized battle of the Chinese people against the government's attempts to crush their rights and freedoms. I've not seen anything like it in my lifetime.

At the same time, some of the international press coverage and commentary of COVID-19 has been profoundly alienating. One *Wall Street Journal* op-ed headline called China "the Sick Man of Asia." *The New York Times* described China in a tweet (now deleted) as the "incubator of deadly diseases." An *Economist* cover depicted the globe wearing a face mask made of the Chinese national flag. One *Bloomberg* article read, "China Sacrifices a Province to Save the World." Other headlines started to call the Coronavirus just the "China Virus." Headlines and covers like these disregard the suffering of the Chinese people. For many outside China, the COVID-19 crisis is just another spectacle that sweeps into a country whose culture, ideology, governance are distinctively different. Such content reawakens racist tropes that Chinese people carry disease and are barbaric wild animal eaters, furthering the spread of xenophobic ideas on and offline.

I spend far less time on Twitter as a result, and reserve my clicks for on-the-ground news coverage. Worry, anger, sorrow, and dismay have consumed my daily emotions as I watch my people suffering from afar. There's little energy left to grapple with sensationalist headlines and articles that are lazy, insensitive, and dehumanizing, let alone to raise the underlying issue of a lack of diversity in the newsrooms of mainstream media outlets.

But there is hope. Tens of thousands of Chinese people—and I believe that number is likely much higher—are speaking up, exercising their civic duties, and bearing witness to a crisis that the Chinese government has sought to efface. It's the people living under the authoritarian rule who are protecting their collective memory of this tragedy and fighting for their own autonomy.

Shen Lu Shen Lu is a journalist based in Boston. Her writing has appeared in *ChinaFile*, *The New York Times*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *The South China Morning Post*, among others.

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