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China's Debt Has Become a Coronavirus Casualty

By muzzling scientists, inflating the success of containment efforts, and discrediting valid reporting, Citizens have to fight back.

NOSSEL | MARCH 8, 2020, 3:44 PM



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a White House press conference on the COVID-19 outbreak on Feb. 26. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

As the coronavirus spreads, another dangerous virus has followed closely behind: the scourge of government leaders and official authorities obfuscating data, suppressing information, and misinforming citizens about the outbreak. With the crisis likely to get worse before it gets better, many countries' citizens are increasingly unsure just whom or what to believe. This not only increases the threat to public health, but it also undermines trust in the very institutions on which we rely to fight the virus.

This new virus of disinformation also has its origin in China, has spread to other authoritarian states such as Iran and Russia, and has now infected the highest levels of government in the United States.

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The disease of disinformation first broke out in Wuhan. Its most prominent victim is a Wuhan doctor, [Li Wenliang](#), who first posted an alert about a mysterious illness to a group chat of medical colleagues in late December. Accused of spreading rumors, he was summoned by health authorities in the middle of the night and forced to confess to making "false comments." His warning went unheeded, and by early February he was dead from the virus.

As the epidemic began to take hold, Wuhan became a jarring tale of two different stories: a sanitized, government-approved version of events—and a very different reality on the ground. Private citizens posted cellphone videos as the quarantine was being imposed through brute force: neighbors and passersby being dragged kicking and screaming down corridors and into vans, or of workers hammering boards over the doors of apartment buildings. Meanwhile, state-controlled media posted a steady stream of cheery snippets showing what were allegedly virus patients, dancing beside their hospital beds, and happy health care workers shaving their hair to promote hygiene.

It got worse from there. At least three Chinese citizen journalists reporting on the virus have disappeared into detention, their whereabouts unknown. One, a former Chinese government television journalist, filmed his own arrest; his video has now been seen by more than 375,000 viewers on YouTube (though likely censored inside China). After criticizing Chinese President Xi Jinping's response to the virus, the essayist and activist Xu Zhiyong is being held in [secret detention](#) and faces a potential 15-year prison sentence for "subversion."

After several panicky weeks of lying low, Chinese President Xi Jinping has mounted a propaganda offensive aimed at burnishing China's image to both an increasingly angry populace and a skeptical world. Widely criticized for delaying and dissembling, Xi is aggressively pushing a counternarrative that touts his handling of the virus as exemplary and a testament to the virtues of the authoritarian system. Many in the West have fallen for this narrative, Xi will be happy to know. Despite still-rising numbers of cases and drastic lockdowns still in place, Xi's government is already planning to publish a book, translated from Mandarin into five languages, that trumpets his victory over the virus.

Shameless puffery coupled with ruthless suppression of dissent is nothing new in China. Nor is it any surprise that Iran, the worst-hit country outside East Asia, has its own government's suppression of information to blame for a rapid spread of the virus. The BBC [reports](#) that 24 Iranians have been arrested for "spreading rumors" while another 118 have received warnings. For reporting on the health crisis in Iran based on sources in the country's hospitals, Tehran has accused the BBC of spreading falsehoods. With no reliable information to be had, Iranian social media and messaging apps are rife with false information, as well as genuine leaks aimed to counter misleading government narratives.

China and Iran stand out for muzzling doctors who tried to warn about the coronavirus, downplaying the number of cases and deaths as the epidemic progressed, and inflating the success of their containment efforts. The predictable result was that the virus spread more quickly and widely than if these governments had been forthright from the start. Russia, whose government has weaponized disinformation at home and abroad, is up to its usual antics of [spreading](#) conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus (no, coronavirus was not bioengineered by the CIA).

That authoritarian states would engage in such practices is not exactly surprising. What's new and deeply disturbing is that the virus of disinformation has infected the highest levels of a Western government like the United States'. U.S. President Donald Trump's public downplaying of the outbreak—and his administration's muzzling of scientists, attacks on journalists, and lashing out at critics—have slowed and obstructed the U.S. response to the coronavirus, and risk undermining efforts to control the virus as it spreads. What's more, the administration's actions risk fatally undermining citizens' trust in public health authorities, scientists, and doctors—the very people on whose information and judgment any effective epidemic response depends.

As the first cases of the coronavirus showed up in the United States and Americans were thirsting for information, the administration treated legitimate questions about the country's public health response as personal or partisan attacks. Mick Mulvaney, then the acting White House chief of staff, [accused the media](#) of reporting on the virus in order to attack Trump. "The reason you're seeing so much attention to [the coronavirus] today is that they think this is going to be the thing that brings down the president," Mulvaney told a conservative conference audience. "That's what this is all about." More frighteningly, Trump is using the language of conspiracy theories to discredit criticism of his handling of the outbreak, claiming the coronavirus is the Democrats' "[new hoax](#)."

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The administration has endangered the health and lives of Americans by [spreading falsehoods](#) and encouraging complacency. On Feb. 26, when there were just 15 known cases of coronavirus disease in the United States, Trump predicted that the number of people infected "within a couple of days, is going to be down to close to zero." And he patted himself on the back for his administration's policies to stop the outbreak: "That's a pretty good job we've done." Trump's top economic advisor, Larry Kudlow, [said](#) in a television interview on Feb. 25, "We have contained this," adding that containment was "pretty close to airtight." As we know, the first death was reported later that week. Many more have followed, with over [500 confirmed cases and nearly two dozen deaths in the United States](#). The president's self-congratulatory narrative, his administration's attacks on journalists reporting the grim realities, and his treatment of critics as partisan all make it impossible to trust him or his top aides.

The designation of Vice President Mike Pence as the administration's coronavirus czar is troubling on many levels, including Pence's record mishandling an HIV epidemic when he was governor of Indiana. In this White House, czar seems to mean chief spin doctor, following a decree that scientists working at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health—leading experts in their fields—may no longer speak directly to the press or the public without first clearing their comments with Pence's office. While it makes sense for governments to want to coordinate messaging and avert confusion, this edict is alarming because of the White House's long track record of mendacity; the public must now ask whether a scientist's statement has been doctored or dressed up by White House officials. Case in point: It fell to a whistleblower, rather than a public health professional in their official capacity, to reveal that basic quarantine protocols were violated during the evacuation of American citizens from Asia, endangering the health of many more people.

This epidemic has brought the United States to a dangerous situation where citizens wonder if they can still trust their government. When freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not respected, truth erodes—and with it, other rights such as the right to health and to effective treatment. The responsibility for rebuilding trust lies with everyone. The White House should stop opining on matters of health and science and let those speak who have both professional expertise and a track record for trustworthiness (such as Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases). It is scientists who should be vetting the coronavirus statements by politicians, not the other way around. Political officials, including members of Congress, must hold the executive branch accountable and strongly stick up for scientists in the federal agencies, ensuring that their expert opinions see the light of day and prevail in policy debates. The news media have a duty, even more than usual, to make sure their audiences understand what is true, what is false, and what is unknown. Scientists and public health professionals must tell it like it is, whether by providing factual information to the public or by calling out government statements that mislead.

Most Americans are accustomed to the belief that, while the world's autocracies might mislead their people and international organizations are often inept, they can count on their own elected government to be trustworthy and truthful. Americans take comfort in having world-class scientists to whom their government can turn for advice, and in having professional news organizations that inform the public and hold officials accountable. As the coronavirus epidemic shows, however, these treasured attributes of America's democratic system have become feverish and wheezing.

In a pandemic, the truth matters. Political leaders, public health officials, and the media must put an urgent premium on candid, truthful, unvarnished facts so that this unprecedented global health crisis doesn't balloon into an irreversible destruction of trust in the institutions Americans count on to keep them healthy and safe.

Suzanne Nossel is the CEO of PEN America and was formerly deputy assistant secretary of state for international organizations at the U.S. State Department.

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