Books

How COVID-19 Infected Democracy

Some world leaders used the pandemic as an excuse to silence critics, roll back civil liberties, and consolidate power. Can the damage be undone?

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Joel Simon, a fellow at Columbia's Tow Center for Digital Journalism and the former executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, discusses his new book, *The Infodemic: How Censorship and Lies Made the World Sicker and Less Free.*

You contend that COVID-19 delivered a major blow to free speech and human rights around the world. Can you explain?

During the first few months of the pandemic, most governments were determined to downplay the threat of COVID-19. They did this because they hoped to limit the duration of economically costly lockdowns and because they wanted to cover up their own failures to contain the virus and to care for the huge number of people who were falling ill. Governments went to great lengths to suppress information about the extent of outbreaks. The leaders of some democracies, including the US, pumped out disinformation that undermined what scientists and public-health experts were saying about the situation. Other governments, such as those of Russia, Egypt, and Iran, employed more traditional means of censorship, suspending the distribution of newspapers, blocking websites, and arresting journalists and bloggers. Ironically, some autocrats, while claiming that their countries were largely insulated from the ravages of COVID-19, simultaneously claimed that they needed expansive new powers to fight the disease and enacted laws banning public demonstrations and a variety of other political activities.

These actions had catastrophic public-health consequences, causing untold numbers of deaths. But they also damaged societies in ways that could prove to be permanent. They eroded many people’s civil and political rights and gave governments more control over public discourse in general.

China in particular drew a lot of criticism for suppressing information about COVID-19 at the start of the pandemic. But China’s role in this story is, as you tell it, more complicated.

When the virus first emerged in Wuhan, the Chinese government tried hard to conceal news of the outbreak. But then, as the disease began to spread throughout the country in early 2020, Beijing adopted a different strategy: it stopped denying the danger posed by COVID-19 and instead mobilized a massive effort to combat it. China employed draconian tactics to this end. Officials barricaded some COVID-19 patients inside their homes without access to adequate food or medical care. But the government also succeeded in keeping infection and death rates quite low, and this gave China an improbable public-relations victory on the world stage. It enabled China to boast that its authoritarian governance model is ideally suited to confronting major crises like pandemics.

How have citizens of other authoritarian countries fared?

They've suffered terribly. For the most part, the leaders of authoritarian regimes have focused their energies not on protecting their citizens' health but on giving people a false sense of security and exploiting the pandemic to usurp more power. In *The Infodemic*, my coauthor, Robert Mahoney, and I examine the recent histories of Russia, Nicaragua, Iran, and Egypt and show that they've all followed the same basic playbook in dealing with COVID-19. Officials in these countries have discouraged coronavirus testing to conceal the number of infections; they've intentionally misattributed COVID-19 deaths to influenza and other medical conditions to keep pandemic death counts artificially low; they've relentlessly persecuted journalists, doctors, nurses, and ordinary citizens who've spoken out about the impact that COVID-19 is having on their communities; and they've enacted a raft of new laws restricting people's rights of free speech, expression, and assembly.

What are some examples of these new laws?

In Russia, government officials passed anti-assembly laws that are purportedly to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 but have been selectively enforced against the Kremlin's opponents. In Nicaragua and Egypt, journalists live under constant threat of imprisonment for running afoul of new broadly written anti-speech laws enacted as part of COVID-era emergency declarations. And some democratic nations have gotten in on the act, too. In India, the government of the Hindu nationalist leader Narendra Modi arrested journalists for criticizing its response to the pandemic and used anti-assembly laws to break up protests against its persecution of Muslims.

In total, at least ninety-one nations, including Hungary, Poland, El Salvador, Algeria, Indonesia, and the Philippines, restricted press freedom during the pandemic, according to research by Freedom House, a democracy watchdog group. And 75 percent of the world's population lives in countries that have rolled back human rights during the pandemic.

Of course, governments do need some new powers to fight pandemics.

That's right. They need certain emergency powers to restrict people's movements and to implement mask and vaccine mandates, for example. But many governments have used COVID-19 as an excuse to go further and to curb political dissent. They know that the pandemic gives their actions the patina of legitimacy. They've also

taken advantage of the fact that the guardrails that typically prevent governments from overreaching — pressure from the US and other democracies, for example — weren't really functioning during the pandemic, since most countries were preoccupied with dealing with their own COVID-19 breakouts. So it's been a free-for-all. The legacy of the pandemic is that autocracies are feeling emboldened and democracies are weakened, and this dynamic may well have been a factor in Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, as least as it relates to the timing.



Joel Simon (Rebecca Greenfield)

In *The Infodemic*, you express deep concerns about how governments have used surveillance technologies to fight COVID-19.

Many governments have deployed smartphone apps that track people's movements, both to identify individuals who might have been exposed to the virus and to make sure that those who test positive obey quarantine orders. The most problematic of these surveillance systems upload people's GPS location data to centralized

databases that also contain medical information the governments have accumulated. Autocracies like China, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as some democracies, including Israel, Norway, and India, have harvested people's private information using such technologies. And they've done so with too little independent oversight. Global privacy advocates have demanded to know: Are governments using surveillance technologies for unstated purposes, like investigating crimes? Are there mechanisms in place to prevent officials from using the tools to spy on political opponents? How long are governments storing people's data, and how are they safeguarding the data against hackers? In most countries, answers to these questions haven't been forthcoming.

The voluntary contact-tracing apps available in the US and most other Western countries don't upload your information to government or private servers but simply notify you when you've come in proximity to someone who is infected and also voluntarily using the app. So they carry fewer privacy and security risks. But I think the pandemic has shown that people throughout the free world need to be having a larger conversation about data privacy and digital security. In fighting COVID-19, our governments and their private partners, including diagnostic-testing companies and drug makers, have amassed unprecedented amounts of biomedical information, and I think real questions exist about how that information is being used, stored, and protected. We need to develop new privacy laws and regulatory frameworks to protect this data, because our political and legal institutions haven't kept pace with the technological change.

Among democratically elected leaders, former US president Donald Trump and the current leader of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, receive some of the harshest criticism in your book. Why?

Their responses to the pandemic, especially in the first few months of 2020, almost certainly contributed to the US and Brazil now having the highest COVID-19 death counts in the world. Trump and Bolsonaro both pandered to their right-wing political bases by resisting lockdowns, mask mandates, and other public-health measures. To justify their opposition to such policies, they systematically undercut scientists, public-health experts, and journalists who candidly described the danger posed by COVID-19. And since they couldn't silence independent voices outright, as dictators can, they employed a modern propaganda technique that's been called "censorship through noise," which involves spewing so many lies, distortions, and half-truths that people become hopelessly confused and don't know *what* to think about a topic. For

a government whose goal is to avoid taking aggressive policy action, it's a highly effective strategy, because you don't necessarily need to persuade the public that your stance is correct so much as sow doubt about what the other side is saying. Conservative political operative Steve Bannon once described it thus: "Flood the zone with shit."

Trump's actions, in addition to having disastrous public-health consequences, were bad for democracy. They eroded Americans' trust in science, medicine, and journalism — all institutions that citizens depend on to give them the information they need to hold governments accountable.

Did any democracies respond especially well to the pandemic — perhaps modeling what the US could have done?

I'd say that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Korea all did a pretty good job. Their governments talked about the science of COVID-19 with transparency and therefore were able to build consensus among their citizens about how to respond. Which isn't to say that the policies they ultimately chose would necessarily have been politically feasible in the United States. Some of the strategies they chose were quite aggressive, involving strict lockdowns and aggressive state surveillance, and there's always been a strong element of libertarianism in American culture. But the point is that these countries approached the situation in a democratic spirit: they facilitated reasoned and informed public debate about complex questions such as how to balance people's legitimate interests in individual liberty with their communities' interests in protecting public health.

Before the pandemic, what was the situation like for global free speech and democracy?

By most indexes, both free speech and democracy were already in decline around the world. Studies have shown that the number of countries classified as liberal democracies has declined from forty-one to thirty-two over the past decade and that overall levels of freedom around the world have plummeted for fifteen years straight. From my vantage point at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the global press-freedom advocacy organization that I led from 2006 to 2021, I certainly observed governments cracking down on independent news media more and more, with the number of journalists imprisoned or detained rising dramatically. The pandemic didn't start this global assault on human rights, but it accelerated the

trend.

Your book is filled with stories of reporters who have publicly called out their governments' COVID-19 missteps, often at great risk to their safety. It's a testament to the spirit of independent journalism.

I began my career as a reporter in Latin America in the 1990s, covering Guatemala's civil war, and as someone who grew up in a country where journalists don't typically take extraordinary risks to do their jobs, I've always been humbled and inspired by people who believe in the power of information so deeply that they are willing to go to jail, or even die, for the truth. I later joined CPJ, which provides advocacy and direct support services to persecuted journalists, because I wanted to help reporters all over the world who don't enjoy the same First Amendment protections that Americans do.

During the pandemic, as governments have restricted press freedom more than ever, lots of courageous people have stepped forward to shine a light on the truth, just as they always do. I'm thinking of the amateur Chinese bloggers, the local Tijuana newspaper reporters, and the Iranian doctors and nurses who have all risked the wrath of their governments to speak openly about COVID-19. I wanted to share their stories because I believe that their sacrifices are so noble and so essential.

What inspired you to join Columbia?

I spent twenty-five years at CPJ, starting out as its program coordinator for the Americas before becoming its executive director, and for decades my colleagues and I traveled around the world — everywhere from Argentina to Zimbabwe to Egypt to Pakistan — helping individual journalists. We visited them in jail. Hired lawyers for them. Drew international attention to their cases. Made sure their families had food to eat. The work was satisfying except for the fact that every year there was more of it to do — more arrests to respond to, more violent attacks, more murders. At a certain point, you wonder, why is the situation for journalists getting worse and worse? What are the structural forces driving this? What are the potential solutions?

I came to Columbia last year because I want to study the fundamental causes of the deterioration of global press freedom and hopefully find ways to reverse the trend.

So what are you working on right now?

My main project is to draw up plans for a new global press-freedom center, which could be hosted at a US university, and which would support research on how news organizations and press-freedom groups can be strengthened so that they're better able to defend journalists and push back against government censorship and intrusion. This would likely involve the development of experimental new business models for bankrolling journalism, perhaps involving government or philanthropic support, since the advertising revenues that once propped up newspapers have been whittled away by Google and Facebook. The center would also explore how the news industry's financial travails in recent decades have contributed to the rise of authoritarianism, hyper-partisan politics, and the deteriorating human-rights situation around the world. I'm working closely with Emily Bell, the director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, on this.

You argue in your book that revitalizing local newspapers in the US could help address many of our country's ills, including political polarization and the spread of misinformation.

The US has lost some 2,100 newspapers since 2005, leaving hundreds of communities without any local coverage, and many of the 6,700 titles that remain have been hollowed out by staff cuts. I believe that shoring up the news industry is essential to restoring the health of our information ecosystem. One of the key benefits of local newspapers and websites is that they tend to be less polarized than the national media, as their business demands that they maximize readership within their geographic region rather than target people who share a political outlook but are dispersed across the country. If we can find ways to create more robust local news coverage again, this would hopefully lure people back from less reliable sources of information like social-media sites, build consensus on political issues, and be good for democracy.

Of course, this will take a lot of money, perhaps in the form of direct government investments or tax incentives for purchasing subscriptions to local news publications. There are a lot of ideas out there worth exploring.

What else could be done to advance the cause of journalism in the US?

I'm also collaborating with Jameel Jaffer, the human-rights attorney and director of Columbia's Knight First Amendment Institute, on a project that looks at the alarming trend of journalists being assaulted and arrested by police officers at political

protests in American cities. This problem exploded into view during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, when 142 American reporters were arrested or detained, and it’s continued to be a problem, especially in Los Angeles County, where dozens of reporters were arrested last year.

Jameel and I are developing possible policy and legal responses. Preventing this kind of police abuse is an urgent concern not only for reporters here in the US but also for those in other countries, because when authoritarian rulers see our police forces beating up reporters, they’re able to justify their own repression, saying, “See, they do it in America. Why can’t we?”

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