

China: IFJ Urges Chinese Authorities to Ensure Free Flow of Information

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As the coronavirus outbreak continues to sweep the world, the Chinese authorities' response to the crisis is being closely monitored for undue censorship on critical information. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) urges China's authorities to give greater commitments to ensure the free flow of information around COVID-19, to allow its own citizens and the global community to remain informed.



Credit: ISAAC LAWRENCE / AFP An activist holds a placard of missing journalist Fang Bin outside the Chinese liaison office in Hong Kong.

The IFJ remains particularly concerned about the censoring of key reports on the coronavirus. One important report, based on an interview with the director of the Wuhan Central Hospital Emergency Rescue Unit, has been blocked in China and copies of the publication removed from sale. First published in China's People magazine (人物), Whistlemaker was published in the week beginning March 9 and documented Dr Ai Fen's account of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as the first doctor to identify the virus. She subsequently went on to share this report among medical doctors in Wuhan, including 'whistleblower' Dr Li Wenliang, who alerted other doctors about the potential danger of the virus on 30 December, 2019. Shortly after, the authorities accused Dr Li of spreading rumours. He was later exposed to the coronavirus while treating a patient and succumbed to the virus on February 7, 2020.

Netizens across China argue that the report exposed otherwise unknown aspects of the pandemic to the public. In a bid to counter China's censors, netizens created a variety of versions of the report including posting it in different languages, using Chinese internet slang as well as Chinese calligraphy. The various versions available in the Chinese online space were gradually all removed.

The authorities have tightened control over China's online space even further after the outbreak of coronavirus. This included an order put into effect from March 1 that all "content should be mainly positive, uplifting and devoid of rumours."

The crackdown on freedom of expression related to COVID-19 also includes the arrest and disappearances of activists and journalists reporting on the coronavirus pandemic in the epicentre of the outbreak in Wuhan province. These include Li Zehua, Chen Qiushi and Fangbin.

A breakthrough in China's transparency came on March 19 when the central government concluded local authorities in Wuhan had acted inappropriately in their treatment of the late Dr Li. The authorities noted Dr Li's positive influence in raising the alarm around the coronavirus and said two officers involved in the matter had been reprimanded.

The IFJ said: "*The control over information by the Chinese authorities at this time is highly concerning. The IFJ reaffirms that the access to public information is critical, particularly during the public health crisis we are currently facing. The IFJ urges the Chinese authorities to consider its country's place in the global community and the need for free flow of vital information at this unprecedented time.*"