

Committee: United Nations Development Programme

Issue: Assessing the role of the mass media during the COVID-19 outbreak

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Position: Deputy President

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear delegates,

My name is Zoe Papadopoulou and it is my honor to serve as a deputy president in this year's DSTMUN United Nations Development Programme Committee.

I would first like to congratulate all of you for choosing to participate in this year's DSTMUN Conference. I believe that you will greatly benefit from your participation, as you will not only get the chance to debate upon some of the world's most important issues, but you will also meet new people, expand your English knowledge and, most importantly, have fun!

I am sure that you are all aware of the criticality of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the effects it has not only on our daily lives, but also on politics, the economy and society in general. This study guide will provide you with all the necessary information on the first topic of the agenda, namely the assessment of the role of the mass media during the COVID-19 outbreak. Unreliable information being spread out by the media is a crucial matter, especially at the time of a pandemic, which is why putting it under control as well as coming up with consequences for those in charge is vital for the wellbeing of the world's citizens.

I would like to stress out the fact that this study guide is a brief introduction to the topic and that you are highly advised to conduct your own research in order to be able to fully understand your country's policy and actively participate in the debate.

Shall any questions arise, feel free to contact me through my email address, zoipap2101@gmail.com. I'm looking forward to meeting all of you in November!

Yours truly,

Zoe Papadopoulou

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Media coverage is one of the most crucial aspects of humanity's joint fight against COVID-19. The outbreak has been covered by media channels worldwide ever since it was first reported to the World Health Organization by China in December 2019. On the one hand, the media have played an important role in educating the public on the virus by forwarding information brought out by medical experts and government officials. On the other, cases of misinformation, disinformation and fake news have taken the internet and specifically social media and online newspapers by storm, spreading unreliable information on the causes, symptoms and cure of the virus.

What should be taken into account in the case of misinformation is that it was not always put out with the intent to harm anyone. If anything, it was in fact derived from authoritative sources, it just so happened that they were wrong at the time. This phenomenon was quite common at the beginning of the pandemic and eventually faded out. However, cases of misinformation being published on purpose in order to baffle citizens who were trying to get informed on the pandemic were also quite common. On the contrary, disinformation was put out by unreliable media channels and was then spread on social media platforms such as WhatsApp Messenger or Twitter in order to cause harm to individuals or groups of people. This is done either by the suggesting of someone of a non-verified cure to the virus or by enhancing stigma and xenophobia against a specific social group, in this case Chinese people, or even Asians in general.

Another important aspect of this topic is the lack of media coverage regarding the virus in specific countries. This is usually the result of an authoritarian government trespassing the rights of journalists and the press in order to prevent a possible insurrection. This act is not only a violation of the rights of journalists; it is also a violation of human rights. The aforementioned phenomena have resulted in an important number of civilian accidents or even deaths. This is why those accountable for spreading "fake news" should be confronted with legal consequences. Countries and organizations worldwide have come up with solutions that help put the spread of false information under control, cooperating with online platforms and seeking help from experts on all necessary fields.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Coronavirus

The coronaviruses are a family of viruses which can infect humans or animals. In recent years, coronaviruses have caused respiratory infections to humans and have turned into epidemics or even pandemics.¹

COVID-19

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 is a newly discovered case of Coronavirus which first appeared in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and later turned into a pandemic with millions of cases in every continent except Antarctica.²

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are technological instruments and facilities such as the Internet which are used in the digital age in order to properly handle already existing or even create new information. Over the past few decades governments and educational establishments have transferred many of their services to ICT tools in an effort to increase access to information among society.³

Mass Media

Information and news outlets such as the internet, television, newspapers, magazines and radio that drastically reach large numbers of people.⁴

Fake News

Misleading information brought out by mass media in order to a) influence political views by promoting or downgrading a political party or politician or b) joke about a specific topic.⁵

¹"Q&A On Coronaviruses (COVID-19)". *Who.Int*, 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>.

² "Q&A On Coronaviruses (COVID-19)". *Who.Int*, 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>.

³"Information And Communication Technologies (ICT) | UNESCO UIS". *Uis.Unesco.Org*, 2020, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/information-and-communication-technologies-ict>.

⁴THE MASS MEDIA | Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary". *Dictionary.Cambridge.Org*, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mass-media>.

⁵ "FAKE NEWS | Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary". *Dictionary.Cambridge.Org*, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news>.

Media Algorithms

Algorithms are used by social media platforms with the aim of delivering content which fits the user's interests. A media algorithm is based on specific criteria, such as users' latest activity and interactions, following or browsing history. Algorithms are not used by all media platforms; however, the 3 dominating social media platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram and Twitter all use different algorithms.⁶

Disinformation

False information which is put out with the intention of harming an individual, social group, organization or country.⁷

Misinformation

False information which is put out without the intention of harming anyone.⁸

Crackdown

Severe measures taken in order to decrease bad, undesirable or illegal behavior.⁹

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The mass media and the coronavirus pandemic

Mass media worldwide have actively covered the topic of the new Coronavirus ever since the World Health Organization first announced numerous cases of a "pneumonia type disease" in Chinese city Wuhan in early January 2020, just a few weeks after China reported the strange outbreak to the WHO. The coverage of the outbreak by the media has been one of the most important aspects of the pandemic which followed. It is estimated that about 85% of people with access to mass media consume news and entertainment for an average of approximately 24 hours a week¹⁰. This number has inevitably gone up as a result of

⁶ Agrawal, AJ. "What Do Social Media Algorithms Mean For You?". *Forbes*, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajagrawal/2016/04/20/what-do-social-media-algorithms-mean-for-you/>.

⁷ "Journalism, 'Fake News' And Disinformation: A Handbook For Journalism Education And Training". *UNESCO*, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>.

⁸ "Journalism, 'Fake News' And Disinformation: A Handbook For Journalism Education And Training". *UNESCO*, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>.

⁹ "CRACKDOWN | Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary". *Dictionary.Cambridge.Org*, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/crackdown>.

"Crackdown | Meaning Of Crackdown By Lexico". *Lexico Dictionaries | English*, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/crackdown>.

¹⁰ "What COVID-19 Reveals About The Value Of Media Globally". *World Economic Forum*, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-media-value/>.

many countries enacting quarantines. In fact, people's desperation to be informed on how the pandemic is proceeding has led to their trusting any source on news regarding the virus, whether that be reliable or unreliable, biased or unbiased.

Media Consumption amid COVID-19

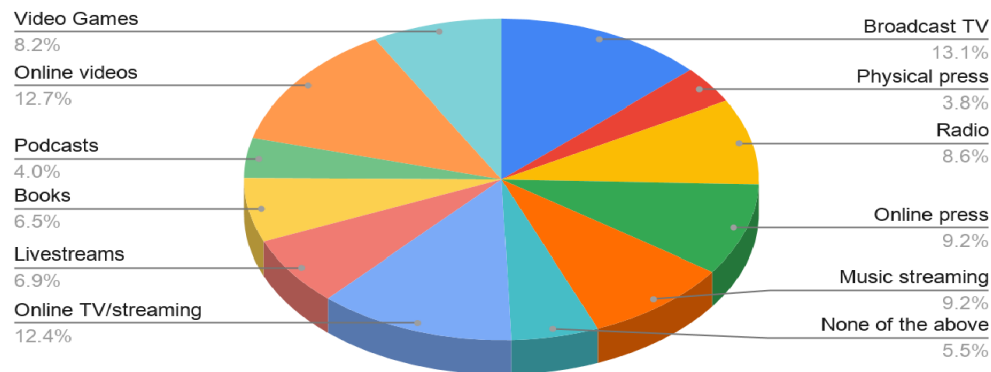


Figure 1: Pie chart showing media consumption in the UK and the US during COVID-19¹¹

Reliable sources

The media tremendously helped inform the public on the new Coronavirus at the beginning of the pandemic, forwarding information mainly deriving from the WHO and government websites. Such information included safety measures, government decisions on handling or preventing the further spread of the virus and the unfolding of the pandemic on a global level. The WHO website as well as the websites of countries with press freedom and internet accessibility remain reliable sources trusted by citizens, as they put medical experts in charge of reporting the outbreak. On the contrary, social media platforms and biased websites constantly report an important amount of fake news regarding the causes, symptoms and possible cure of the virus.

Misinformation

Journalists whose original focus was not the medical sector or crisis reporting suddenly found themselves responsible for informing the public on the unfolding of the pandemic as a result of the increased need for media coverage on the topic. Due to their inexperience in the sector and lack of training on reporting an event which is constantly evolving, they were unable to critically look at the information which they were given. Characterizations such as "the Chinese virus" or "the Wuhan virus"

¹¹ Jones, Katie. "How COVID-19 Has Impacted Media Consumption, By Generation". *Visual Capitalist*, 2020, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/media-consumption-covid-19/>.

caused stigma and enhanced xenophobia towards people of asian origin which led to them avoiding reporting syndromes or getting tested for the virus.

Eventually, the name “Coronavirus Disease 2019” was adopted. Misinformation regarding protective measures and how the virus is spread was also frequently reported. This information often came from authoritative sources, however not much was known about the virus in the beginning of the outbreak and facts would change day by day. This is why journalists should have emphasized the fact that the reported information was most likely not entirely correct and would change in the future. Of course, misinformation was not always spread accidentally: There were numerous cases where media channels and especially social media reported news or updates on the virus that had no validity or basis, often stating made-up facts that confused users instead of helping them understand the situation better. For instance, “expert” advice stating that washing one’s hands does not prevent one from catching the virus or that raw alcohol can be used as hand sanitizer was widely reported on social media platforms, contradicting expert opinions which stated the exact opposite.



Figure 2: South Korean citizens holding signs that state “No Entry [in Korea], asking for the ban on the entrance of chinese people in Korea, 2020¹²

Disinformation

Disinformation was mainly spread on social media, particularly on social messaging apps such as WhatsApp Messenger but also on platforms such as twitter. Media algorithms have little to no control over the validity of the content being posted and shared on each platform. Disinformation is by far the most dangerous consequence of increased media usage during this time. Not only has it led to stigma and discrimination against asian people and refugees living in Europe, it has also

¹² "Covid-19: Stop The Stigma And Stereotyping Of Coronavirus Sufferers". *The Star Online*, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/health/2020/03/17/fighting-against-the-stigma-of-covid-19>.

resulted in extreme consumer behavior and the deaths of hundreds of people who consumed a toxic substance which they thought would protect them from catching the virus. Such deaths were reported in many countries with limited press freedom, especially in Northern Africa and the Middle East, where people turned to social media in order to get informed. Other than that, disinformation on what or rather who initiated the virus was commonly reported in US, Chinese and Iranian media, who constantly put each other at fault for starting the virus and stated that it was in fact man-made and did not come about naturally.

Online platforms

An increased number of fake news, misinformation and disinformation were reported on online social media platforms at the beginning of the pandemic. Social media usage increased as a result of the lockdowns, since this was the quickest way for people to access new information. This is why many media platforms decided to work towards increasing the visibility of the WHO as well as other reliable sources such as medical experts online. Major platforms such as Facebook and twitter reconsidered their content policies with regard to COVID-19, blocking any posts which may have had the intent of discouraging medical treatment and precaution measures. Specifically, twitter decided to label and put warning signs on posts containing crucial information on the virus, such as its origins and cure. These labels provide users with more, certified and accurate information on the topic. This does not mean that the spread of inaccurate information on social media has stopped; it does however indicate that the media are willing to help prevent the further spread of such information and keep the situation under control.¹³ In spite of this, all online platforms should have reconsidered their policies during the unfolding of the pandemic, when their usage was at its peak, especially in countries with limited press freedom, where hundreds of millions of people relied specifically on them in order to get informed on any developments. With this in mind, online platforms that did not provide for the safety of their users and their protection from unreliable information should face consequences.

Politicization of the outbreak

Once the outbreak turned into a pandemic, what appeared to be a health matter turned into a political and economic crisis: Countries reacted to the media's reporting of local outbreaks in accordance with their economic and political situation and the strength of their health sector. It seems that those who were unable to properly handle the outbreak developed the tendency of controlling the media for their own benefit. For example, many countries turned public attention away from their struggling welfare programme by reporting numerous conspiracy theories

¹³"Updating Our Approach To Misleading Information". *Blog.Twitter.Com*, 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html.

regarding how the virus appeared, with the most common ones being that it was created in a lab or that the 5G-network is what caused the virus.

On the other hand, countries that fulfilled those criteria focused on keeping their citizens informed on the development of the pandemic and providing them with helpful medical advice. They were also quick to shut down any false information which may have spread online and cooperated with fact-checking networks and media platforms so as to ensure people's access to quality information.

Equality of access

Despite unreliable information being spread from people's access to the media, another problem was the fact that not all people had access to the same information. This is a result of information inequality, which means that those who are able and willing to pay for a news subscription package are more likely to have access to higher-quality information in comparison with those who choose to get informed by free media. Information inequality constitutes a violation of the right to equality of access to information. Another reason why many people were unable to access information regarding the pandemic was internet censorship, a phenomenon most commonly observed in countries with absolute governments who at the time of the pandemic deprived their citizens of access to basic information which can be found online. What connects technology and equality in this case are Information Communication Technologies (ICTs); in the digital age, they enable political, social and economic forces within a society. In recent years, governments in developing and developed countries have established their services as well as educational resources and information online, in order to encourage social, economic and democratic participation and inclusion. Contrasting this approach, news subscription packages are accessible for a limited number of people and can vastly enhance inequality in a society. Other than that, internet censorship violates people's right to information, making them fall victims of misinformation. During an event as crucial as a pandemic, equality for all should be ensured and factors that contribute to the formation of inequality within a society should be avoided.

Press freedom

Countries with absolute or populist governments with limited press freedom censored their outbreaks and discouraged public media from reporting anything that had to do with the pandemic by threatening journalists with arrests and initiating crackdowns. Free media was perceived by governments as an opponent of state rather than a basic aspect of society. This constitutes a violation not only of the rights of journalists, but also of the basic human right to freedom of speech and information, whilst it enhances information inequality. Despite all this, the

phenomenon went unnoticed for some time, as political affairs were put on hold at the beginning of the pandemic.

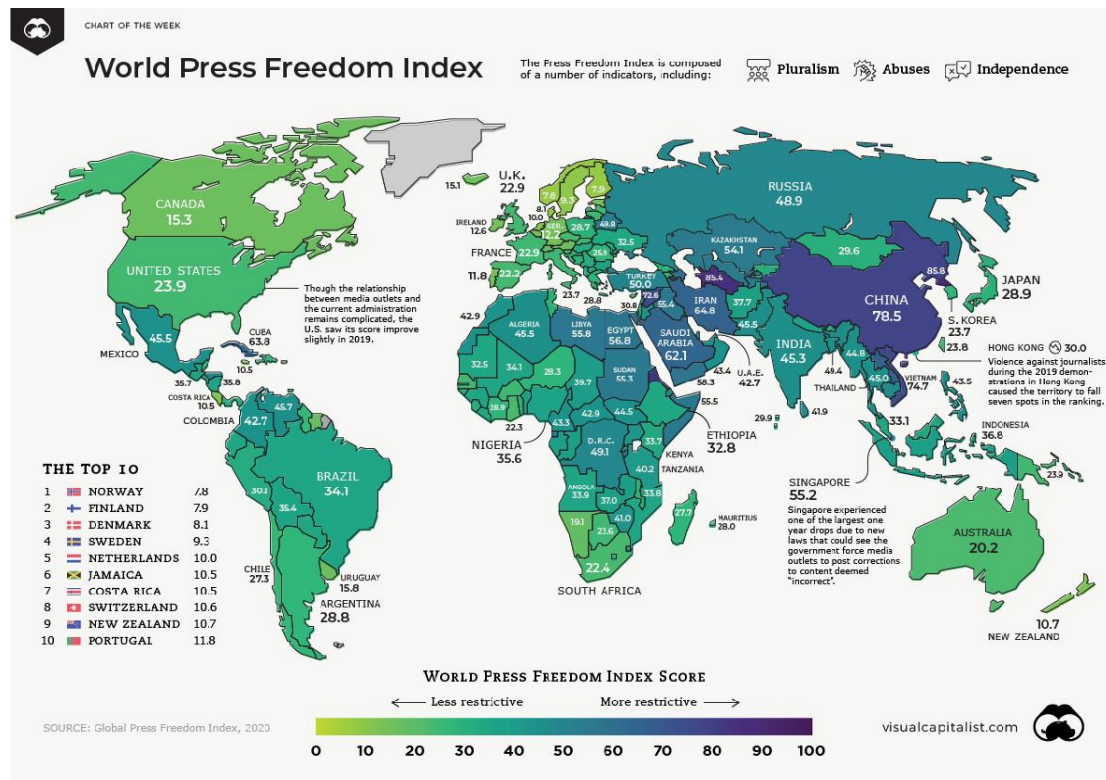


Figure 3: Map chart showing the results of the 2020 World Press Freedom Index according to Reporters without Borders¹⁴

News on the outbreak were only reported by state-run and state-owned media, which are not trusted by the majority of people living in such countries. The information which was put out was invalid and it focused on blaming outside factors for local outbreaks; other than that, the politicization of the outbreak was mostly observed in such countries, at last leaving their citizens uneducated on the matter and in a state of confusion. As a result, they often fell victims of misinformation and disinformation on social media, which in many cases was their only way of getting informed on the virus.

¹⁴ Routley, Nick. "Mapped: The State Of Press Freedom Around The World". *Visual Capitalist*, 2020, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/map-press-freedom-around-the-world/>.

COVID-19: Number of Media Freedom Violations by Region

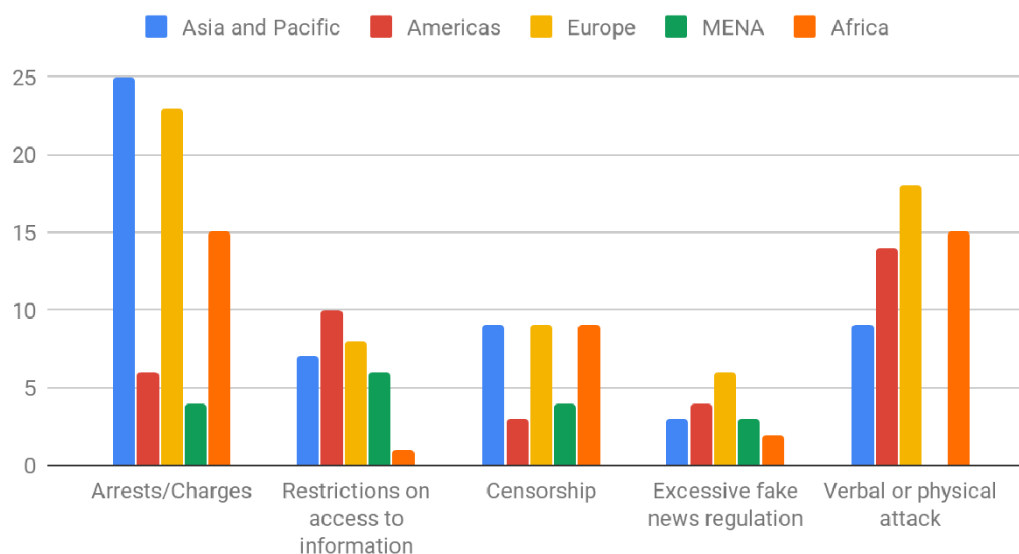


Figure 4: Bar chart showing the number of media freedom violations by region during COVID-19¹⁵

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

China

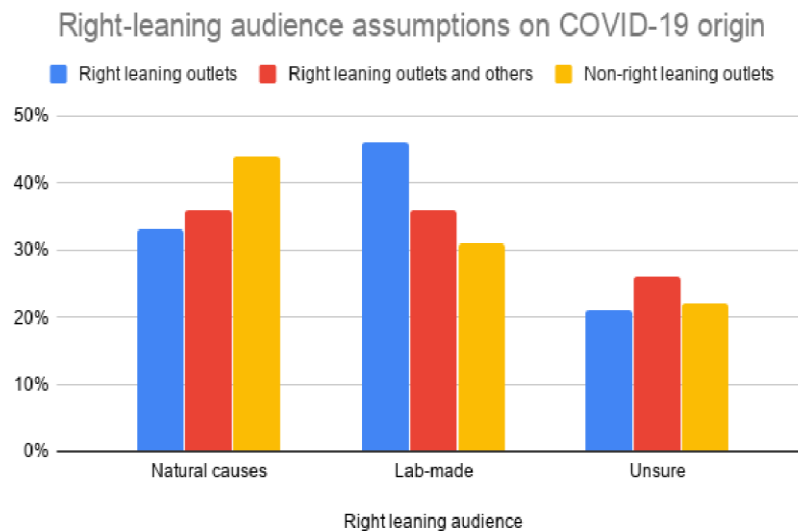
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index ranked China 177th out of 180 countries. Chinese media are state-run and, according to RSF "controlled and censored"¹⁶, which resulted in the late information of the public on the outbreak. Internet censorship in the region has also been increased and media control has tightened since January 2020. Ever since the virus first broke out China has used its media as a means to create a better image on its handling of the outbreak and so that social stability is maintained on a local level by restricting the access of foreign journalists to the country, thus decreasing the number of independent information available to the public. Any mentions of Wuhan as the place where the outbreak found place have been restricted, whilst domestic restrictions on publishing coronavirus-related research have also been established. The opinion that the Chinese handling of the outbreak is superior both to the European and the US ones has also been reported by state-owned media factors. What's more, China has supported a number of conspiracy theories regarding the outbreak, with the most popular one being that the virus is a US manufactured bio weapon which was brought to Wuhan by the US military. Lastly, traditional Chinese medical treatments have been promoted by state-actors as a cure for the virus.

¹⁵Jones, Katie. "How COVID-19 Has Impacted Media Consumption, By Generation". *Visual Capitalist*, 2020, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/media-consumption-covid-19/>.

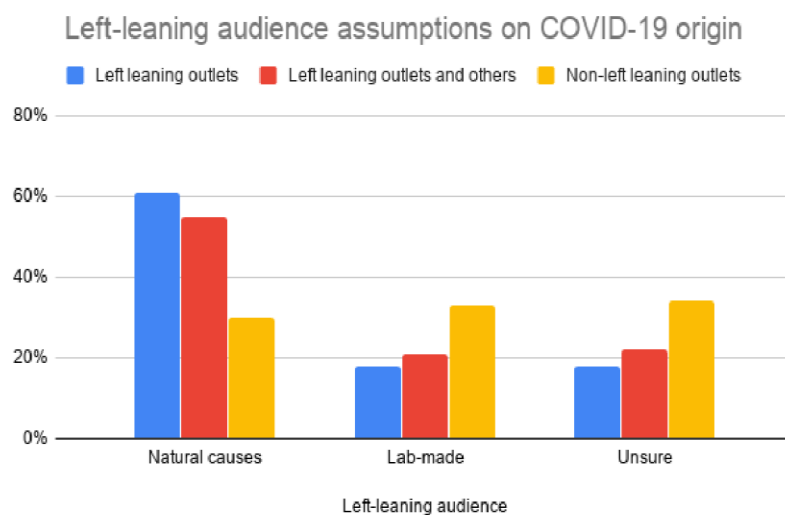
¹⁶"China : Even Tighter Control | Reporters Without Borders". *RSF*, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/china>.

USA

In the case of the US the media is divided into government-oriented and opposition media: This is why opinions on the origin and the causes of the virus vary. It is also important to state that a big percentage of Americans get their news from social media platforms, meaning that misinformation is spread very quickly. This has led to extreme consumer behavior such as the shortage of toilet paper around the country in March 2020.



Figures 5, 6: Graphs depicting US citizens' beliefs on what initiated the Coronavirus according to their media preferences¹⁷



¹⁷"Within Political Party, Media Diet Makes A Difference In Thoughts And Perceptions About COVID-19". *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, 2020, <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/18/within-party-media-diet-makes-a-difference-in-thoughts-and-perceptions-about-covid-19/>.

Iran

The vast majority of media outlets in Iran are state-run, while private channels require government support and permission in order to operate. Iran was one of the first countries outside of China to experience an outbreak in February 2020. The media channels which were previously mentioned were quick to report the virus as a “US-produced bioweapon”¹⁸ and the pandemic which followed as a bad influence to the turnout of Iran’s legislative elections. Citizens have little trust in local media platforms and they prefer getting their information regarding the virus from social media platforms. As a result, disinformation is spread very quickly, sometimes even leading to death. For example, hundreds were found dead after consuming methanol, which was broadcasted on social media as a possible cure for the virus.

Russian Federation

Similar to China, Russia has been trying to improve its international image through its reporting of the outbreak: Its aid to Italy has constantly been highlighted in state-run media, comparing itself to the EU, who was often accused of neglecting Italy. However, the Russian outbreak was in fact reported at a pretty late stage. In an attempt to control Coronavirus-related content and “remove any COVID-19 related fake news” from being shared online, the Russian government ordered new internet platforms. This way, it managed to shut down any independent internet sites that tried to cover the outbreak.

Turkey

All Turkish media are government-operated. The Turkish government is known for its constant crackdown on the media for some years now, while violations of the rights of journalists and journalist imprisonments are a common phenomenon in the country. Inevitably, the media did not promote reliable information neither on the pandemic and the virus in general nor on the outbreak. As a result, false information was quickly spread by self-proclaimed “medical experts” on national television. Other than that, conspiracy theories, misinformation and discrimination against foreign countries have been spreading on social media platforms. Almost all officially reported information on the unfolding of the epidemic comes from the Health Minister.

¹⁸ Kalbasi, Khosro, and Khosro Kalbasi. "Iran: Coronavirus And The Media | European Journalism Observatory - EJO". *European Journalism Observatory - EJO*, 2020, <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/iran-coronavirus-and-the-media>.

Morocco

False information regarding the virus has been rapidly spreading in Morocco as a result of increased social media usage during the pandemic. Media outlets are state-operated and what used to be independent press is now also controlled by the government. Citizens' desperation to get informed on the pandemic led to increased misinformation and disinformation cases online. Moroccan authorities responded to the spread of unreliable information in the media by initiating a crackdown and arresting journalists and people who were believed to have spread such information. The government also approved a bill which has the aim of regulating the media, in an attempt to further restrict the freedom of expression in the area.

European Union (EU)

The EU is in constant cooperation with organizations such as the WHO and the ECDC, as well as national health authorities, making sure that its citizens are provided with information from trustworthy and adequate sources. Other than that, it partners up with social media platforms such as twitter and approved fact checking networks in order to decrease the spread of disinformation and to spread awareness on the seriousness of the issue. The European Commission also launched a web page on fighting disinformation at the time of the pandemic. Despite its actions many still believe that the rest of the EU neglected Italy, especially at the beginning of its outbreak.

European External Action Service (EEAS)

The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the diplomatic service of the EU. The EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division has reported the course of the pandemic since early January 2020, partnering with the European Commission on the activation and the endorsement of the EUvsDISINFO website, as well as with Member States of the EU and other, non-governmental actors. Its Special Report updates the public on chronicles and disinformation about COVID-19, as well as countries' policies regarding the media and the rights of journalists during the pandemic and any actions being taken in order to prevent the spread of fake news.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a UN specialized agency whose focus is global public health. The WHO has been the most reliable source when it comes to information on COVID-19: Their website is constantly being updated and it is divided into sections which cover all aspects of the topic, with the most important ones being a "Frequently Asked Questions" section and their "Myth Buster" section, which was introduced with the aim to shut down fake news. Other than that, they

are always quick to deny any false claim regarding the virus broadcasted by governments or media outlets. Lastly, they frequently hold Press Conferences that they later upload to their website, where they analyze the latest updates regarding the virus and answer journalists' questions.

BLOCS EXPECTED

The committee could be divided according to the amount of press freedom in each member state. Member states with press freedom who did not try to stop the media from reporting the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperated with the WHO in broadcasting valid and useful information as a response to fake news will make one bloc and member states with limited press freedom who blocked media coverage of the outbreak or violated journalists' rights in order to control the spread information regarding the virus will make the other one.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
31 December 2019	Wuhan reports "pneumonia type disease" to the WHO
4 January 2020	WHO announces pneumonia cases in China via twitter, but reports no deaths
5 January 2020	WHO publishes first "Disease outbreak news" ¹⁹ on the novel Coronavirus
10 January 2020	WHO issues comprehensive package of technical guidance online for governments to follow
11 January 2020	Chinese state media report first death as a result of the Coronavirus
13 January 2020	First case reported outside of China (Thailand)
30 January 2020	WHO declares global health emergency
2 February 2020	First death reported outside of China (Philippines)

¹⁹ "Pneumonia Of Unknown Cause – China". *World Health Organization*, 2020, <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unkown-cause-china/en/>.

11 March 2020	WHO officially declares the outbreak as a pandemic
March 2020	Fake cures circulate the web, causing confusion and leading to hundreds of deaths
March 2020	Coronavirus conspiracy theories spread on US and European media
24 April 2020	The EU attenuates report on disinformation about the pandemic
24 April 2020	Trump proposes the consumption of bleach or isopropyl alcohol as a way to protect oneself from catching the virus, gets shut down by experts
27 April 2020	700 dead in Iran after consuming methanol as a way to protect themselves from the virus
1 May 2020	WHO extends declaration of global health emergency
3 May 2020	China receives backlash for its handling of the virus, conspiracy theories rise
11 May 2020	Twitter update their content policy in response to Coronavirus-related misinformation

RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

WHO Webinar for Journalists

On March 11, 2020 the Federation of the Red Cross along with Red Crescent societies, BBC Media Action and the WHO held a webinar which was attended by 170 Journalists from around the world. The journalists were advised on how to make their audiences more understanding of response efforts and prevention measures such as but not limited to self-isolation and quarantine during the outbreak, as well as how to prevent the further transmission of the virus. Another focus was the importance of handling disinformation as well as avoiding the stigmatization of infected people or people of Asian origin.

Action Plan against Disinformation

The Action Plan against Disinformation was adopted by the Commissioner and the High Representative in December 2018 with the aim of fighting the dangers which disinformation can cause not only within the EU but also in its adjacent countries. It is comprised of four main actions which are to be implemented in order to put off attacks and bring attention to disinformation attempts. The Commission cooperates with journalists, fact checking networks, online media platforms, governments of Member States, national authorities, researchers and the world community in order to achieve its goals.²⁰

International Declaration on the Protection of Journalists

The International Press Institute (IPI), the Al Jazeera Media Network, the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and the Africa Media Initiative (AMI) cooperated in 2016 in a joined effort to achieve more safety in the media industry by a) raising awareness on the rights of journalists and b) pointing out safety-enhancing steps media organizations and journalists could take. The Declaration relies on already existing principles and established human rights along with humanitarian laws and mechanisms related to the topic which were adopted by international organizations.

Freedom of Information

Resolution 59 of the UN General Assembly (1946) and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)²¹ recognize the freedom of information as an inherent part of the fundamental human right of freedom of expression.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

European Union (EU)

The EU has taken a number of actions ever since the beginning of the outbreak: First of all, it launched a coronavirus response website, which provides the public with information on the virus and the response of the EU. Other than that, it cooperates with all social media platforms, promoting authoritative content and

²⁰*Ec.Europa.Eu*, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet_disinfo_elex_140619_final.pdf.

²¹"Freedom Of Information | United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization". *Unesco.Org*, 2020, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/freedom-of-information/>.

removing content which is invalid. Its special page on fighting disinformation²² with regard to the topic of the coronavirus debunks myths often shared on social media. It also used the Rapid Alert System, an important part of its Action Plan against Disinformation, in order to shut any disinformation campaigns. Lastly, the Commission closely cooperates with Member States, the EEAS and international partners such as the G7 and NATO on the EUvsDISINFO website in order to stop online scams which promote extreme consumer behavior and lead to consumer fraud.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO launched a “Myth busters” section which can be found on their website with the intent of shutting down any fake news which may have spread on social media platforms. It is also in close cooperation with the EU and its Member States to ensure that citizens are getting adequate and valid information.

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO, in cooperation with the EU and twitter, launched a campaign with the hashtags #ThinkBeforeSharing, #ThinkBeforeClicking and #ShareKnowledge. These hashtags promote information and media literacy. The hashtag #ThinkBeforeSharing helps media users in their attempt to tell valid facts and unreliable opinions apart.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Training of all journalists on reporting a crisis

Crisis reporting should be taught in university courses such as but not limited to: journalism, medicine, sociology and political science. Particularly, all journalists should be trained and tested on crisis reporting before getting their university degree and license. That means that they should not only be aware of which sources are reliable and unbiased, they should also be in the position to fact check information and cross sources, as well as write in a specific tone which gains their audience’s trust and does not cause panic.

Verification of reliable news sources on the matter

At the beginning of a health crisis sources should officially be divided into reliable and unreliable by the country’s government in collaboration with medical experts. All sources which will be reporting reliable, trustworthy information should

²²"Fighting Disinformation". *European Commission - European Commission*, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en.

be verified by the government and be easily accessible to all citizens so that they can be provided with adequate information and know how to protect themselves.

Legal consequences for fake news/ disinformation spreaders

Media users or journalists whose allegations regarding a possible cure for COVID-19 were spread on media platforms and resulted in civilian deaths or casualties should be faced with legal consequences. Those who spread inadequate information regarding the cause of the virus with the intention of enhancing stigma or discrimination against a specific group of people should also be legally punished.

Education on cross examining sources

Civilians should be able to know how to cross exam news sources in order to be independent and safe at the time of a crisis. This skill should be a coherent part of one's education as it contributes to the right to information; it needs to be taught in school and thus, be considered basic knowledge which can be proven to be very useful both academically and in emergencies such as a pandemic. Other than that, all citizens should develop Media and Information Literacy skills in order to handle the overwhelming amount of information which one comes across in the digital age. Schools, universities and NGOs can help in the implementation of this solution.

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