



LESSONS FROM HISTORY

The Pandemic and a Free Press

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History shows that for the world's autocrats, some control over the media is never enough—and COVID-19 offers dangerous new pretexts for consolidating their power.

The evidence is fast accumulating that autocrats and aspiring strongmen regard the coronavirus as a unique opportunity to expand their political control. Even before the pandemic, leaders like Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, India's Narendra Modi, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan were systematically dismantling the infrastructure of democracy—by threatening independent judiciaries and anti-corruption agencies, stamping on minority rights and civil liberties, and putting term limits in the crosshairs. In

anointing Xi Jinping as potential leader for life, the Chinese Communist Party cast aside the lessons of the Mao era, a mistake the Kremlin is poised to emulate in its scheme to extend Putin's rule until 2036.

In the modern autocrat's playbook, though, Chapter One is invariably devoted to eroding the freedom of the press. Among Putin's first moves in power was to destroy media pluralism by seizing control of the major national television stations. In China, Xi has strangled burgeoning investigative journalism and reinforced the Communist Party's control over the internet and social media, fervently seeking to prevent sensitive ideas, especially any that cast democracy in a positive light, from raising doubts about Xi Jinping Thought. Other illiberal leaders, in countries that have yet to become full-blown autocracies, have also made media freedom a central target. Thus Orbán has gained a strong grip over the media during his ten years in power while avoiding the outright censorship of China or the journalist assassinations that have marked Putin's rule.

In the social media era, complete regime dominance of political messaging is regarded as neither healthy nor feasible. Strongmen tolerate the appearance of media pluralism by permitting a few outlets with limited audiences in the capital cities, along with some critical voices on social media. Even in this domain, though, regimes have increasingly been passing laws that threaten fines and jail time for online critics. Hungary has recently joined this disreputable group by threatening to imprison anyone guilty of "spreading false information about the epidemic."

Barring broader political reform, such restrictions are never relaxed, only strengthened, as autocrats act on the theory that some media control is never enough. With COVID-19 offering the world's autocrats new pretexts to expand that control, it is worth considering how they have done so in the past—and what lessons that history might hold for us today.

The prospect that press freedom will further erode due to the pandemic is especially painful for post-Communist societies. Total control over information was a pillar of the Soviet system, whose censorship extended well beyond the events of the day and the private lives of the leadership. Only one interpretation of history was permitted, and only one set of aesthetic standards.

The United States and other democracies were able to puncture the information curtain through short-wave radio broadcasts, especially the government-sponsored Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. These broadcasters became known as surrogate stations, assuming the role of an opposition media within the broadcast target country. Radio Free Europe boasted substantial audiences throughout Eastern Europe; its Polish and Romanian broadcasts were thought to have more listeners than the state-run Communist propaganda machine.

In the Soviet Union, censorship was more effective. The leadership imposed something akin to a total information blackout on both natural and man-made disasters. In one notable case, a toxic spill at the Mayak nuclear reprocessing site in 1957, thought to have killed several hundred, went unreported. Likewise, no mention was made in the Soviet press of the 1962 massacre of unarmed workers in Novocherkassk by Red Army troops and KGB officers. In another unreported incident in present-day Yekaterinburg in 1979, an outbreak of anthrax resulting from nearby military activity killed 64 people. And of course, there was the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which, for a critical initial period, the Soviets tried to hide from the world and their own people.

With Mikhail Gorbachev's introduction of *glasnost*, that censorship quickly unraveled. Gorbachev never received due credit from the West for having freed the Soviet Union from its suffocating information controls. Autocrats despised the father of *glasnost* and *perestroika* as a weakling. To this day, cadres of the Chinese Communist Party devote extensive study to the Gorbachev period with an eye to avoiding the mistakes that brought down the USSR. Putin, who has described the Soviet collapse as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," likewise regards Gorbachev with contempt. When Putin oversaw a school history curriculum revision early in his rule, he made sure that Gorbachev was depicted as ushering in a period of fragility, chaos, and geostrategic decline. *Glasnost* destroyed the Soviet Union, and today's autocrats are determined that this monumental mistake will not be repeated.

At the same time, China and Russia recognized that a return to full-blown totalitarianism was not an option. In the new post-Soviet world, repression would be carefully calibrated, and the need to suppress inconvenient ideas would be balanced against the need to participate fully in the global economy.

Putin, Erdogan, and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez all exploited past crises to justify the suppression of a critical press. For Putin the final straw was the 2004

Beslan school massacre, which took more than 300 lives; for Erdogan and Chavez, botched coup attempts. To replace media pluralism, Putin pioneered a system that has been embraced by other strongmen, combining a measure of censorship, a carefully rationed opposition media, and a regime-favorable “media” apparatus that is unabashedly propagandistic. The propaganda is much more sophisticated, modern, and strategic than the old *Pravda* format, with more emphasis on demonizing adversaries at home and abroad and, increasingly, heavily concentrated on the failures of democracy rather than on extolling the Putin model.

On the theory of never letting a good crisis go to waste, the world’s strongman leaders can be expected to exploit the pandemic to achieve an even tighter grip on the media. Here are several possible developments to watch for:

First, we can expect China to accentuate a trend towards the extension of its global propaganda and social media disinformation. This could serve multiple purposes, most notably the promotion of Beijing’s explanation of the virus’s origins. In the past, the objective has been to convince foreign countries to refrain from publicly criticizing Beijing’s domestic repression and aggressive foreign policy, including bullying of Hong Kong, interference in Taiwan, or claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea.

At the same time, the Communist regime also needs to keep an eye on the response of its own citizens to such a crackdown. Chinese authorities’ efforts to silence early warnings by reporters, doctors, and others to alert the public about the impending epidemic turned Li Wenliang, a whistleblower doctor in Wuhan who died from COVID-19, into a hero and martyr. Authorities have detained others who have shared information about the virus.

China has also encountered growing pushback from prominent political figures in the United States, Australia, Canada, and other democracies over a series of domestic and foreign policy issues. A member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Representative Jim Banks (R-IN), has urged the State Department to call on China to investigate the disappearance of three Chinese citizen journalists who sought to expose the impact of the coronavirus on Wuhan. This follows on a series of punitive actions by Beijing toward American

journalists, including China's recent expulsion of American reporters from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*.

Second, America and other democracies should pay special attention to developments in countries like India, Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, and Brazil, where democratic norms are currently under assault by strongmen. In these countries, the ruling parties still confront an active opposition at the polls, a press that has not yet been completely extinguished, protests (albeit not under current virus constraints) and competition, sometimes vigorous, at the local level. Orbán, Modi, and Duterte have already cited the fight against COVID-19 as reason to threaten the press, and new legislation and decrees have opened the door to prison sentences for reporting that raises questions about the government's pandemic strategy. Preventing the total obliteration of an independent press in such countries is a critical goal.

Third, we should expect an assertive campaign from autocrats to persuade their populations—and the world—that censorship is a prudent step not only while the pandemic rages but even after the disease is conquered. Until recently, autocrats were content to argue that restrictions on freedom were in keeping with the preferences of domestic constituencies and in line with local cultures. Democracy may be an ideal system for the United States, their argument went, but Russia (or China or Iran) has chosen a different path. More recently, both Russia and China have begun making a case that their autocratic systems are more efficient and nimble and deliver for the people. And yet in Russia, a recent poll by the Levada Center found that 24 percent of Russians completely distrust the official information about the coronavirus situation that is disseminated in the state media, and 35 percent only partially trust it. The mounting toll in Russia, despite Putin's efforts to control the narrative, may well accelerate growing distrust in the regime.

Finally, what might coronavirus portend for the press in the United States? Certainly President Trump's steady attacks over the years on the "mainstream media"—calling them "fake news" and "enemy of the people"—have taken a toll at a time when Americans should be relying more than ever on professional journalism. A recent CBS News poll said 13 percent of Republicans trusted the news media for information about the virus, versus 72 percent of

Democrats. While some media errors have contributed to that deficit, the President's browbeating has only exacerbated the problem.

But Trump's strategy to undermine the media's credibility and to put forward his own spin may have its limits. Particularly notable is the steady increase in viewership for network news during the crisis, with millions turning to CBS, ABC, and NBC to stay abreast of the latest developments.

The end of the public health crisis will leave the world facing major economic problems. There will be arguments for dispensing with elections and parliaments. In some countries, an outspoken press may become treated as a luxury that can no longer be tolerated; even in ours, many news outlets will struggle to survive. In these unprecedented times, it is worth recalling the famous words of Thomas Jefferson: "[W]ere it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." During a crisis like this one, and for whatever comes after it, we actually need both.

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