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Covid-19: Silencing health workers, researchers, and journalists caused unnecessary deaths, says Amnesty

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Governments are causing unnecessary covid-19 deaths by trying to silence healthcare workers, journalists, and researchers, Amnesty International has said

By clamping down on freedom of expression they have damaged peoples' ability to access accurate and timely information to help them respond to the global health crisis, the human rights group said in a report *Silenced and Misinformed: Freedom of Expression in Danger During Covid-19*.¹ Simultaneously, big tech has amplified the reach of inaccurate and dangerous information.

"Communication channels have been targeted, social media has been censored, and media outlets have been closed down—having a dire impact on the public's ability to access vital information about how to deal with covid-19," said Rajat Khosla, Amnesty International's senior director for research advocacy and policy.

Authoritarian governments like China, Nicaragua, and Russia have enacted new information laws during the pandemic, ostensibly to prevent the spread of "fake news." In practice, legislation like Nicaragua's Special Law on Cybercrimes has deterred people from holding governments to account and reporting public health concerns like lack of personal protective equipment in hospitals.

Governments in Egypt and Venezuela have actively targeted healthcare professionals. At least seven doctors were arbitrarily detained between March and June 2020 by Egypt's National Security Agency for expressing health related concerns in social media posts, Amnesty said. And national security forces barred members of the Doctors' Syndicate from organising a press conference after the prime minister blamed doctors for the country's growing covid-19 death toll.

Lisa Maracani, author of the report and Amnesty International's researcher on human rights defenders, said, "This is concerning as doctors and primary care health workers are usually more trusted than governments. Their role is fundamental in getting people to understand how to protect themselves from the virus."

Perhaps the most egregious act of pandemic censorship was China's silencing of citizen journalists like Zhang Zhan, who travelled to Wuhan in February 2020 to report on the covid-19 outbreak and was sentenced to four years' imprisonment. By February 2020, China had opened 5511 criminal investigations against people who published information about the outbreak for "fabricating and deliberately disseminating false and harmful information," Amnesty said.

"China had systems in place to share the necessary information to ensure that people inside and outside its borders can keep themselves safe, but the decision was made to contain that information," said Maracani. "Had they decided to share it with other countries we might have been able to avert this disaster."

Government attacks on journalists and healthcare workers have damaged trust in public health authorities, lowering compliance with recommendations such as mask wearing and fuelling the consumption of dangerous purported covid-19 cures, like bleach, the report said.

Governments have also failed to tackle social media's role in driving what the World Health Organization's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has labelled the "infodemic."²

Non-governmental organisations, state leaders, and ex-employees have accused social platforms—Facebook in particular—of killing people by promoting incendiary and inaccurate posts in order to get more user engagement.³ Rumours and conspiracy theories are fuelling a wave of violence and harassment against doctors during the pandemic, *The BMJ* has reported.⁴

Facebook said that it is removing posts and blocking users to halt the spread of pandemic untruths.³

"We're asking that states demand that social media companies regulate themselves in a way that their business model is no longer based on algorithms that promote misinformation by design," Maracani said. "There's no point censoring individual messaging or individual users, they need to overhaul their business model."

She added, "Misinformation impairs the ability to form an independent opinion based on the best available scientific facts. If you're overwhelmed by misinformation, you are as a result denied the right to health."

- 1 Amnesty International. Silenced and misinformed: freedom of expression in danger during covid-19. October 2021. www.amnesty.org/en.
- 2 The Lancet Infectious Diseases. The covid-19 infodemic. *Lancet Infect Dis* 2020;20:875. doi: 10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30565-X pmid: 32687807
- 3 Covid misinformation on Facebook is killing people – Biden. BBC News. www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57870778.
- 4 Taylor L. Covid-19 misinformation sparks threats and violence against doctors in Latin America. *BMJ* 2020;370:m3088. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m3088 pmid: 32784200

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