

The Coronavirus and Freedom of Expression in China: Not so Fast

by Francesca Ghiretti

The coronavirus crisis has reignited longstanding debates on the lack of freedom of speech in China. Following the death of doctor whistle-blower Li Wenliang, whose early warnings were ignored and repressed by the authorities, many believe the outbreak could have been better contained if it were not for Chinese restrictions on freedom of expression. Such reasoning has sparked criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and triggered renewed campaigns to pressure authorities into granting increased freedoms in China.

One example is an article published by *The Guardian*: the author blames the CCP for the delayed public recognition of the virus and for its treatment of doctor Li, contending that the lack of free speech in China facilitated the spread of the virus.¹ Such claims

¹ Verna Yu, "If China Valued Free Speech, There Would Be No Coronavirus Crisis", in *The Guardian*, 8 February 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d8tfh>.

are in principle correct, as early recognition and a freer circulation of information could have triggered earlier reaction times, both nationally and internationally.

Undoubtedly, if China had freedom of expression, people would have known about the risks early on, and during the crisis, they would have received more reliable and updated information. However, it is somewhat farfetched to argue that freedom of speech would have prevented the coronavirus outbreak and its spread. Other factors such as slow and complex bureaucratic processes as well as the high contagion rate also played a role.

Nevertheless, following the death of doctor Li Wenliang, Chinese nationals have begun a series of online campaigns demanding freedom of speech in China, criticising the authorities for hiding vital information that could have saved lives. Some of the trends borrowed rhetoric previously adopted

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by the protesters in Hong Kong, others proposed new trends, including the hashtag #言论自由 [free speech].²

Remarkably, in the first weeks of the outbreak, Chinese authorities actually relaxed certain restrictions, both online and in the traditional media. Online criticism increased, and journalists were allowed to publish relatively freely, criticising the handling of the crisis and exposing stories.³

Of course, Chinese authorities also employed the media to promote the official version of the story, and the usual interference in published articles and online discussions never ceased. Yet, compared to recent trends in Chinese media, overall censorship was relaxed. At least momentarily.

These initial developments brought many to question whether the current health crisis and the anger it generated among ordinary Chinese might lead to cracks in the legitimacy of the CCP, perhaps prompting more serious campaigns for free speech.

² The song "Do you hear the people sing" from the musical *Les Misérables* was used during the Hong Kong protests and has now been shared by people in mainland China in relation to the coronavirus outbreak. New trends regard references to the TV show *Chernobyl*; the hashtag #言论自由 appeared for the first time on the night of doctor Li Wenliang's death on 6 February at 1 am. The hashtag was subsequently shut down the same night at around 4 am.

³ Gao Yu et al., "In Depth: How Wuhan Lost the Fight to Contain the Coronavirus", in *Nikkei Asian Review*, 6 February 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Caixin/In-Depth-How-Wuhan-lost-the-fight-to-contain-the-coronavirus>.

Some even wondered whether a change of leadership at the top of the CCP might be in sight.⁴ While such prospects appear unlikely, it is undoubtedly true that the death of Li Wenliang, the mismanagement of the early phases of the outbreak and the draconian measures adopted to contain its spread have spurred criticisms towards the administration. Indeed, not only has the government been condemned for its lack of action at the beginning of the crisis, but its subsequent decision to put entire areas with millions of inhabitants under quarantine has also come under fire.

Public opinion, within China and beyond, however, is split and not everyone is criticising China's handling of the crisis. Indeed, many international voices have also praised China for its ability to implement such large-scaled containment measures.⁵

This acknowledgement, however, is often followed by a not so veiled reference to China's authoritarian nature, a feature that allowed Beijing to implement such strict top-down measures. Moreover, a growing number of voices have also argued that such a monumental reaction by the

⁴ Yuen Yuen Ang, "Is Political Change Coming to China?", in *Project Syndicate*, 14 February 2020, <https://prosyn.org/312CkbS>.

⁵ Drew Armstrong, "China Is About to Find Out Whether Its Mass Quarantine Worked", in *Bloomberg*, 4 February 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-04/will-china-s-coronavirus-quarantine-halt-the-virus>; Gerry Shihi, Alex Horton and Marisa Iati, "Coronavirus Deaths Climb As China Corrals Sick in Quarantine Facilities in Outbreak Epicenter", in *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2020, <https://wapo.st/2w39Qe9>.

authorities – which included building an entire new hospital in the record time of ten days – is nothing more than an attempt to overcompensate for the initially slow response to the crisis.

Overall, it is unlikely that the coronavirus (now called COVID-19) will lead to significant changes in the CCP's approach to free expression. The initial relaxation of censorship was in fact short lived. Additionally, this is not the first instance in which the Chinese government allows citizens to protest online. In the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake which hit Sichuan, Beijing adopted the same approach.⁶ Such tactics might even be calculated as low risk by the authorities, given that, particularly in the present case of the coronavirus outbreak, people are less likely to demonstrate in the streets given fears of contagion in crowded areas.

Censorship and repression have indeed returned to China. Reporters are lamenting increased difficulties in gaining access to information and areas of interest, while others have seen their licences revoked by the authorities or disappeared altogether.⁷ Meanwhile, the hashtag #言论自由, which appeared

in the aftermath of the death of doctor Li Wenliang, was shut down in a matter of hours.⁸

Moreover, while it is true that many in China are angry at the handling of the crisis, to whom this anger is directed is a matter of debate. While accusations targeting the central government are no doubt present, particularly in the areas most hit by the virus, this is not necessarily the case throughout the whole of mainland China, where fear of the virus, rather than anger at the government, appears more widespread. Beijing, meanwhile, has lost no time in discharging blame for the outbreak to local authorities, a tactic also employed during the SARS outbreak back in 2003.⁹

Thus, whether this anger will be transformed into something more focused and subsequently turn into concrete political demands for freedom of speech, largely depends by the length and spread of the current crisis and its future management by the CCP. Increased protests, however, would not necessarily lead to a relaxation of censorship. As often happens in crises, security is prioritised over freedoms. More severe crackdowns on Chinese citizens and critics could thus materialise, resulting in even stricter controls and censorship by the authorities.

⁶ US Congressional Executive Commission on China, *China's Earthquake Coverage More Open But Not Uncensored*, 30 July 2008, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/chinas-earthquake-coverage-more-open-but-not-uncensored>.

⁷ Huizhong Wu, "China Revokes Three Wall Street Journal Reporters' Credentials", in *Reuters*, 19 February 2020, <https://reuters/37F12Iw>; "Coronavirus: Why Have Two Reporters in Wuhan Disappeared?", in *BBC News*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51486106>.

⁸ If one looks for the hashtag #言论自由 the following message appears: 抱歉·未找到"#要言论自由#"相关结果 [sorry, no result found for #want free speech], <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%23%E8%A6%81%E8%A8%80%E8%AE%BA%E8%87%AA%E7%94%B1%23>.

⁹ Li Yuan, "Coronavirus Crisis Shows China's Governance Failure", in *The New York Times*, 4 February 2020, <https://nyti.ms/394h7so>.

Ultimately, predictions that have linked the coronavirus to the possibility of increased freedom of expression in China, or a weakening of the CCP's control, are manifestations of liberal wishful thinking rather than the product of pragmatic analyses. There are multiple examples of similar manifestations, with international commentators forecasting an imminent triumph of liberalism in the wake of a crisis occurring in authoritarian contexts. A first mistake is to view every crisis as the harbinger of systemic changes; a second is to assume that such changes must be positive.

In the case of China, however, trends do not point in the direction of more freedom. Much the opposite. Spontaneous online campaigns are being heavily censored, the media is closely scrutinised and critical journalists undermined. Freedom of expression in China is no closer today than before the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis.

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