CORONAVIRUS “INFORMATION HEROES” – JOURNALISM THAT SAVES LIVES
Andjouza ABOUHEIR
COMOROS

Mystery of zero coronavirus cases explained

The Indian Ocean archipelago of Comoros seemed to have been spared when the coronavirus epidemic began spreading in Africa in early April. Then a report by Andjouza Abouheir, a journalist with La Gazette des Comores, explained why: the samples taken from the first suspected cases were never sent for analysis. In response to the ensuing outcry, the authorities tried to identify her source and threatened to prosecute journalists who published information "without going through official channels."

Mahmood AL-JAZEERI
BAHRAIN

Solitary confinement for contradicting the government

In the Bahraini prison where he has been detained arbitrarily for the past five years and is serving the 15-year sentence he received in 2015, journalist Mahmood Al-Jazeeri recorded a statement in April denying the health minister's claims to have taken measures to prevent prison inmates from being infected by Covid-19. In reprisal for his statement, which was circulated by the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), the authorities placed him in solitary confinement and suspended his weekly phone calls with his family.
Salim AKASH
JORDAN / BANGLADESH

Jailed for covering migrant workers

Salim Akash, a Bangladeshi journalist based in Amman, investigated the fate of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Jordan who were no longer able to work because of the lockdown and had been left to their fate by the Jordanian authorities. After a TV station back in Bangladesh broadcast a news item based on his reporting in early April, three plainclothes Jordanian policemen arrested him at his home on 14 April. After initially being taken to the immigration department, Akash was transferred to Al-Salt prison, where he was simply told he had “broken an important law.”

Chris BUCKLEY
CHINA

The tough job of foreign correspondent in China

Chris Buckley, a Beijing-based reporter for the New York Times who spent 76 days in Wuhan at the height of the outbreak, was forced to leave China on 8 May after the authorities refused to renew his visa. An Australian based in China for the past 24 years, Buckley had been subjected to personal attacks in the Chinese state media about his reporting from Wuhan, which included coverage of censorship and public anger.
This is one of Equatorial Guinea's most popular TV programmes and one of the few spaces where a degree of free speech is tolerated. However, "Buenos días Guinea" was suspended on 1 May after it criticized the beatings that people in the street received from soldiers enforcing the coronavirus lockdown. The programme's seven journalists were ordered to stay at home until further notice.


An English and Chinese-language media outlet based in Beijing that has a reputation for audacity, Caixin has defied harassment and censorship by the authorities in order to publish reports questioning their handling of the coronavirus crisis. It even sent four reporters to Wuhan who covered the 77-day lockdown, moving around the city when they could in head-to-toe protective gear.
CHEN Qiushi
CHINA

Lawyer turned citizen-journalist

A lawyer from the far northeast province of Heilongjiang, Chen Qiushi made a name for himself in the Chinese blogosphere by shooting videos of last year's pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong. After catching a train to Wuhan on 23 January, he went around the city's hospitals interviewing the families of victims and covering the chaos in videos that were viewed by hundreds of thousands of people online. On 7 February, his parents were told that he had been placed “in quarantine.” They have received no news of him since then.

Eugene DUBE
ESWATINI

Forced to flee abroad

After Covid-19 reached Eswatini (the former Swaziland), the authorities warned journalists that criticism of King Mswati would be treated as “high treason,” which is punishable by death. When Swati Newsweek website editor Eugene Dube nonetheless published an article criticizing the kingdom’s handling of the health crisis, the authorities raided his home and subjected him to such a lengthy, heavy-handed interrogation that he fled to neighbouring South Africa.
The well-known Chinese writer Fang Fang is a Wuhan resident who, throughout the city’s lockdown, kept a diary on her Weibo social media account providing insights into the censorship and the hospital system’s collapse. The 65-year-old author’s diary entries have been turned into a book that was published in English on 15 May under the title of “Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City.” A French-language version was published on 4 June and it is due to be published in German on 9 September. Because of the diary, she has been harassed by trolls on the government’s payroll.

Three alternative media outlets – Papo Reto, Voz das Comunidades and Mulheres em Ação – joined forces to create a “Gabinete de Crise” (crisis unit) in Complexo do Alemão, a Rio de Janeiro district comprising several favelas. The aim is to facilitate informing favela residents about the spread of the virus and the preventive measures they should adopt, and to inform the rest of the country about the pandemic’s impact on the favelas, which for the most part have been abandoned by the authorities. There have been similar initiatives in other major Brazilian cities.
Ahmed KABIR KISHORE
BANGLADESH

Cartooning in the coronavirus era

The famous cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was keeping a cartoon journal on Facebook about politics in Bangladesh during the coronavirus crisis. Entitled “Life in the Time of Corona,” the journal alluded, inter alia, to corruption. For this he was arrested of 5 May and is facing a possible life sentence under Bangladesh’s Kafkaesque Digital Security Act on a charge of “spreading rumours and misinformation on Facebook about the coronavirus situation.”

Ana LALIĆ
SERBIA

Imposing her truth

Ana Lalic, a reporter for the Serbian news website Nova.rs, was arrested on 1 April, the same day that a law took effect making the authorities the sole legal source of information about the coronavirus in Serbia. She was arrested late in the evening and was held overnight for a story that reported complaints by medical personnel about the lack of personal protective equipment. The authorities ended up recognizing the accuracy of her story and dropped all charges against her. They also repealed the law. However, Lalić continues to be the target of a hate campaign and threats on social media.
Li Wenliang
CHINA

Doctor and whistleblower

It was Wenliang Li, a 34-year-old eye doctor at Wuhan Central Hospital, who first sounded the alarm about a possible coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan in a private WeChat discussion group on 30 December 2019. Within days, he and seven other doctors were being questioned for “spreading false rumours.” His death from the coronavirus in the early hours of 7 February triggered an outcry in China and the hashtag “We want freedom of expression” was used in 2 million posts before being censored.

PAJHWOK AFGHAN NEWS
AFGHANISTAN

Locked down in the newsroom

In order to be able to keep reporting at the height of the Covid-19 outbreak, part of the staff of Afghanistan’s biggest independent news agency, Pajhwok Afghan News, spent nearly a month under lockdown at the agency’s headquarters. Founder and director Danish Karokhel stayed there with 15 of his employees in order to keep the news service going and, despite a shortage of funds resulting from the effects of the pandemic, he managed to provide personal protective equipment to all reporters going into the field.
GUAYAQUIL'S LOCAL MEDIA
ECUADOR

Frontline reporters

In Guayaquil, Ecuador’s economic capital, the authorities were completely unprepared for the speed with which Covid-19 swept through the city, to the point that they were unable to collect the bodies of many of the victims. Despite their own lack of preparation, including a lack of personal protective equipment, the city's journalists kept working and continued to report in locations with a high infection rate. And they paid a high price. By the end of April, 13 of them had died of the virus and another 25 had been diagnosed as infected, according to a tally by the press freedom group Fundamedios.

RADIO CORONA INTERNATIONALE
ALGERIA/USA

A pirate radio created by the virus

The coronavirus gave him back “the radio virus.” Radio and TV broadcaster Abdallah Benadouda, who was forced to leave Algeria in 2014 after a broadcast that annoyed senior government officials, launched Radio Corona Internationale (RCI) in late March from the United States, where he now lives. The humour and irreverence of its reporters and commentators provide an antidote to the persecution and censorship to which the independent media are subjected in Algeria. The "end of the world radio," as it dubs itself, is broadcast on Facebook and SoundCloud and now has thousands of listeners.
Venezuelan freelance journalist Darvinson Rojas was arrested at his home on 21 March and was held for 12 days just for questioning the reliability of the government’s coronavirus figures in a tweet. His first court appearance was marred by irregularities including a failure to tell him what exactly he was alleged to have done. He was just told that he charged with “inciting hatred” and “public provocation.” Arbitrary arrests of journalists who criticize the Maduro government have increased since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

In a report from the heart of a low-income neighbourhood in Amman in April, Roya TV asked residents what they thought of the government-ordered lockdown that was preventing employees in most sectors of the economy from working. “What am I going to do now, sell drugs?” one of the residents responded. The reference to illicit substances in his cry of distress was too much for the authorities. Roya TV general manager Fares Sayegh and news director Mohamed Al-Khalidi were immediately arrested and were held for several days.
Serguei SATSOUK
BELARUS

Health specialist who dared to criticize the president

Serguei Satsouk, who edits the online newspaper Yezhednevnik and is well known for his investigative reporting on Belarus’ healthcare system, is facing up to ten years in prison for an editorial casting doubt on the official Covid-19 statistics and criticizing an order issued by President Alexander Lukashenko to “deal with” media outlets that are “sowing panic” about the epidemic. The government’s already constant harassment of bloggers and reporters for independent media outlets has been stepped up as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Anisseh SHAHID
AFGHANISTAN

Courageous reporter

Kabul-based journalist Anisseh Shahid began her career as a political reporter, went on to become head of news at the independent TV channel Tolonews, and finally decided to return to reporting in the field. Although many Afghan media workers have caught Covid-19, this courageous journalist is still out reporting every day. Her coverage of such stories as a shooting attack on a Kabul hospital in mid-May, the government’s mishandling of the pandemic, and the many fellow journalists who have fallen victim to the virus all exhibit the highest professional standards.
Mahmud SHARIARI
IRAN

Jailed for a video

A former national radio and TV presenter now very active on social media, Mahmud Shariari was arrested on 14 April on a charge “publishing false information about the coronavirus” after he criticized the government’s handling of the coronavirus crisis and, in particular, posted a video seen by hundreds of thousands of Iranians that referred to a cover-up of information about the spread of the virus. According to his family, he was transferred in early May from Tehran’s Evin prison to a section in Madaien Hospital that is reserved for Covid-19 patients.

Tashny SUKUMARAN
MALAYSIA

Prosecuted for reporting in a “red zone”

The Kuala Lumpur correspondent of the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post, Tashny Sukumaran wrote an article on 1 May about the arrests of hundreds of migrant workers and refugees in Kuala Lumpur’s so-called Covid-19 “red zones” where the infection rate is said to be high. She is now facing a possible two-year jail sentence on a charge of “insult with intent to provoke a breach of the peace.”
SYNDICATE-100
RUSSIA

Independent media serving medical whistleblowers

Created at the initiative of the Moscow tri-weekly Novaya Gazeta, Syndicate-100 is a coalition of 25 independent Russian media outlets that facilitate whistleblowing by medical personnel who want to draw the media’s attention when they lack the necessary personal protective equipment to handle Covid-19 patients. An online form allows doctors and nurses to report PPE shortages anonymously and thereby avoid being dismissed or harassed. If the management of the hospital or health centre concerned denies the existence of any shortage, a reporter is sent to interview personnel and verify the report.

TOGOCHECK
TOGO

Anti-fake-news videos in local languages

Created by the Togolese journalist Noël Tadegnon, the TogoCheck website has distinguished itself during the coronavirus pandemic by producing videos containing reliable information designed to throttle the many misplaced beliefs and rumours about Covid-19 – such as the claim that intense athletic activity prevents infection. The use of local languages increases the site’s audience in a country where more than 45% of the population over 15 are illiterate.
Siddharth Varadarajan
INDIA

Victim of «repression pandemic»

Siddharth Varadarajan, the co-founder and editor of The Wire, an independent Indian news website, was summoned for questioning by the police in response to a complaint by the chief minister of Utter Pradesh, in northern India, for reporting that he attended a religious gathering that did not respect social distancing two days after the start of a nationwide lockdown. Varadarajan told the New York Times at the end of April that the Indian media were the victims of a “pandemic of repression.”

Vijay Vineet
INDIA

The price of truth

A reporter for the Hindi-language newspaper Jansandesh Times, Vijay Vineet reported that children from a “Dalit” (Untouchable) community in northern India were going hungry as a result of the lockdown and had been reduced to eating grass usually given to cattle. Harassed by the authorities and told to publish a correction, he stuck by his story and additionally provided an analysis of the nutritional deficiencies resulting from a grass-based diet. He is facing a possible six-month jail sentences on a charge of “fake news.”
WA FM It was with the dual aim of combating fake news and amplifying public information messages designed to limit Covid-19’s spread that Israël Guébo, a journalist and founder of the African Media Institute, launched the web radio WA FM in late March, so-called in reference to WhatsApp, which is increasingly popular in Côte d’Ivoire and which WA FM mostly uses to transmit its messages. It also uses Facebook and Twitter.

Rede WAYURI BRAZIL

A voice for the Amazon’s indigenous peoples

Based near the Colombian border in a town that can only be reached by boat or plane, Rede Wayuri (Wayuri Network) consists of 17 enterprising and resourceful journalists from eight Amazonian ethnic groups working together to investigate Covid-19’s spread in the region and provide information to more than 750 indigenous communities. They produce news bulletins in several languages which they not only broadcast by radio but also disseminate via WhatsApp, audio streaming platforms and even loudspeakers on cars.
Targeted by the authorities

When Blaž Zgaga, an investigative reporter and RSF’s correspondent in Slovenia, asked about the creation of a new Covid-19 crisis unit, the authorities reacted by unleashing a major campaign of insults and threats against him. The harassment of outspoken journalists in Slovenia in such that the European Commission has reminded the government that they are meant to be protected, not attacked. Europe also voiced concern at the possibility that the online violence could become real.