



COVID-19 And the Media

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How does viewing COVID-19 through a media lens shape our understanding of governmental and societal responses?

Thinking about COVID-19 through the frame of media raises questions such as state control of information and how today's emergency measures will impact future media conditions. These issues are intimately connected to public trust in leaders, media, expertise and science, institutions, and democracy. Across the world, government and media approaches to COVID-19 illustrate varying levels of public trust in experts. For example, in the United States, President Trump has directly contradicted and sidelined medical experts. In Turkey, where the purges of civil society and higher education following the 2016 coup attempt removed many academics and closed civil society organizations, religious authorities' directions for COVID-19 receive welcome media platforms. In countries with low levels of confidence in the government and media, such as Turkey, there is a danger of the public disregarding public health recommendations. This distrust can have particularly devastating effects in regions that are already experiencing economic, social, and/or political crises, such as in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and refugee camps throughout the region.

Does regime type impacts media responses to the pandemic? If yes, in which ways?

We have seen a wide variety of civil and political liberty restrictions in COVID-19 responses. Governments always face a tradeoff between the free flow of information and control over the narratives, and this is heightened during crises such as the current pandemic. With free media, governments can more effectively share vital public health information, such as symptoms, emergency assistance, and protection measures. Bureaucrats also have better access to information essential to emergency policymaking, such as economic indicators. A free flow of information also provides platforms for criticism and misleading or false information. Increasing state control over mainstream media can possibly prevent the spread of dangerous fake news and preempt social panic or fearmongering. Yet in societies with a long history of media control, audiences may already be distrusting of information shared by the government and more likely to discount government-authored content.

You are a scholar of Turkey. Is the US media handling of COVID-19 similar to or different from the Turkish media coverage? If yes, how do you explain these differences?

Leaders see the crisis as directly linked to their political futures, and especially their success in upcoming electoral challenges. Media do the same. In the U.S., media across the political spectrum weigh President Trump's actions against 2020 election predictions. The relatively positive coverage in Turkish media reflects the dominance of pro-government voices in mainstream outlets. The next election (presidential and parliamentary) is scheduled for 2023, leaving a small buffer between this year's COVID-19 and the next vote. Yet Turkey faces particularly damaging economic consequences as a result of the pandemic, which is already straining an economy weakened by the 2018 currency crisis and persistent unemployment problems.

COVID-19 threatens to further weaken Turkey's already embattled independent press. In the early weeks of March 2020, watchdog organizations reported a total of 9 journalists allegedly detained by police for reporting on the government's lack of transparency regarding the number of cases. The state broadcast regulator (RTÜK) has criticized several mainstream television channels for their COVID-19 reporting. The 47 journalists imprisoned as of March 2020 are increasingly concerned about the high possibility of an outbreak in prisons. The economic fallout of the pandemic will hit small media outlets, especially print media, particularly hard. An economic recession will likely force the closing of cash-strapped independent media outlets, which are often barred from lucrative public advertising revenue.

Does Turkey's regime type and the government's relations with the media help or hinder effective response to the pandemic? Are there any generalizable lessons and insights that can be applied to other semi-authoritarian/hybrid regimes?

Media monitoring NGOs have documented threats to media during COVID-19 in Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Honduras, Hungary, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Venezuela. Many of these restrictions have been justified as necessary in order to successfully respond to the crisis. China is already arguing that state control over information during the pandemic has been a key aspect of their response. Looking forward, the question is how these changes will impact media conditions in the future. Many of these governments are defending media restrictions by pointing to expanded executive powers under state of emergency declarations. Will leaders roll back these powers after the pandemic?

Leaders in countries with greater media freedom and leaders with wider censorship powers alike are turning to familiar tactics of blaming an external foe for the crisis. President Trump's insistence on referring to COVID-19 as the "China virus" seeks to clearly place the blame on China. This rhetoric directly contradicts WHO virus naming procedures, which name viruses based on their genetic makeup rather than geographic origin in an attempt to prevent discrimination against affected populations. China has responded by criticizing the US response to COVID-19 and launching a public relations campaign championing the Chinese response to the pandemic. Columnists in pro-government Turkish media have blamed COVID-19 disinformation, particularly accounts that cite a much

wider spread of the virus than the official data recognizes, on the Gülen movement, the PKK, and Western media.

History tells us this much about blaming someone else for an epidemic: such claims are often factually inaccurate. The 1918 flu epidemic, widely known as the Spanish flu, did not originate in Spain. The virus had already spread in

the U.S. and France, both of which quickly used war powers to censor reporting of the growing epidemic in military and civilian populations. The Spanish press, operating without war censors, published the story and became the first association with the flu for many, and ultimately, the name for the pandemic. ●

