

Coronavirus and Free speech

Adapted from Greg Lukianoff, "[Coronavirus and the failure of the 'Marketplace of Ideas'](#)"

As the United States deals with the coronavirus pandemic, many of us look back and wonder if there were things we could have done to stop the virus from going global. The most obvious place to start is in Wuhan itself, the epicenter of the disease. What now seems clear is that Chinese attempts to clamp down on the free flow of information and freedom of speech played a disastrous role in the spread of the virus. The arrest and death of doctor [Li Wenliang](#) helped alert the rest of the world to the censorship coronavirus whistle blowers faced in China. Fewer people may be aware of the widespread restrictions faced by all Chinese citizens.

Since at least January 1, the Chinese Communist Party enforced severe [social media censorship](#) of hundreds of terms relating to the virus, many of which concerned the failures of China's leadership in controlling the outbreak. Because China's citizens did not have access to information about the virus, they were unable to take extra precautions. This in turn allowed the virus to spread faster, all the while preventing the world from preparing its response during the crucial first weeks of the outbreak.

In closed societies like China, government officials have the power to stop the free flow of information if they believe it poses a threat of any kind, real or imagined; and in authoritarian regimes, like China, political leaders often see anything that might embarrass the country's global reputation as a threat.

By contrast, if the initial outbreak had happened in the United States, where the government has comparatively little legitimate [power](#) to control what citizens say, it is doubtful that information about the disease would have been suppressed. Instead, it is a virtual certainty that individuals suffering from the disease, doctors concerned about it, newspaper reporters, and even sleuthing hobbyists would have sounded the alarm almost immediately and spread the word through every possible channel. It might have been chaotic; it might have led to a small-scale, localized panic; there might have been some inaccurate information; but in all likelihood, the new disease would have been recognized much faster, possibly even in time to contain it.

When it comes to misinformation, people have a hard time distinguishing the veracity of the factual statements people make from the importance of knowing what people really think. Take, for example, people who argue that the coronavirus is just like the flu. While all available data indicates that the coronavirus is more lethal than the flu, the value in someone expressing the opinion that the new virus is comparable to the flu is not the objective truth of the argument, but rather the ability to know what opinion an individual



holds. This is not of small importance. Yes, arguments about facts are essential, but knowing that, say, 30% of your population holds misconceptions is also of extraordinary importance.

Knowing that the inaccurate opinion exists has tremendous value, especially if it is widely held. This is one reason that free speech advocates argue that we must tolerate beliefs that are later proved to be false — it often takes a great deal of time to learn that a belief is false, and sometimes you never know for sure.

Both for scientific reasons and for our success as a democratic republic, we need to know more, not less about the ideas our citizens hold. It is always important to know what people really believe, especially when the belief is perplexing or troubling. In the overwhelming majority of scenarios you are not safer or better off for knowing less about what people really think.

We cannot make “false” or ill-informed speech punishable by law. For example, people who believe that vaccines cause autism can have detrimental effects on a population’s immunity, but prohibiting people from saying that they believe that vaccines cause autism would prevent us from understanding why entire communities refuse to have their children vaccinated.

Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party was foolish to silence early whistleblowers for “rumormongering.” The Chinese government chilled speech that may be both true and useful, and they also inhibited speech that provides information about human psychology in general and individual credibility in particular.

I have always been a history buff and have read stories about plagues in the past caused by diseases that nobody understood. While some came up with useless medical solutions, a subset wanted to know as much about the disease as possible in hopes that maybe, if they set aside their preconceptions and systematically investigated it, there might be a way to defeat the malady. This open-minded curiosity and resolve to simply and humbly learn more led to unparalleled innovation and, yes, progress in human history.

We are faced with a threat that makes us feel small, helpless, and insignificant. We should take it as a reminder that there is still so much we do not yet know about the natural world, biology, human nature, and group psychology. We will answer these questions and many more if we are willing to enter the laboratory with open minds and open ears and see ourselves as we really are.

To do that requires a kind of radical openness rooted in an expanded understanding of the societal role of freedom of speech. *Freedom of speech gives you a fighting chance to know the world as it really is.*

