CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Emoji interview

This image, combining emojis and Chinese characters, conveys the opening paragraph of a March 10 interview by China's *People* magazine with Wuhan doctor Ai Fen, relaying how early indicators of a SARS-like viral pneumonia spreading in the city were suppressed. It was one of many creative solutions adopted by Chinese netizens to circulate the article as censors rapidly moved to delete it. Ai herself has reportedly disappeared, although versions of the full interview survive in archives outside China.

Credit: *Fan Wenxin*

ANALYSIS

Beijing Covered Up COVID-19 Once. It Could Happen Again

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is a senior research analyst for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House, as well as director of its *China Media Bulletin*.

··

THIS ARTICLE WAS ALSO PUBLISHED BY *THE DIPLOMAT* ON APRIL 13, 2020.

The political system is designed to cover up failure and exaggerate success.

China appears to have gained the upper hand in its struggle against COVID-19. The epicenter in Wuhan is cautiously emerging from a [months-long lockdown](#). But with the disease sweeping through the rest of the world, a second wave of infections in the country remains a very real possibility, and there are lingering doubts over the accuracy of official data.

In fact, new information about the initial weeks of the contagion and recent actions by Chinese officials—including hundreds of detentions and the disappearance of an outspoken doctor—point to a more extensive campaign of deception and disinformation than was previously recognized.

It is therefore critical to fully understand what went wrong in December and January, how Beijing's information control efforts have evolved since then, and whether the very same factors that caused the initial damage remain in place—or may have become even stronger.

What went wrong

Various [timelines](#), [academic analyses](#), and [investigative reports](#) on China's initial response to the outbreak have been published since early February, in some cases at great risk to the sources and authors. Two conclusions from these examinations are especially relevant today.

First, the silencing of medical professionals and suppression of critical scientific data extended far beyond the well-known reprisals in early January against eight doctors in Wuhan who tried to alert colleagues via WeChat. [Labs](#) analyzing the pathogen were instructed to destroy [samples](#), a [health center](#) that had published the virus's genome sequence was temporarily shut down the following day, and doctors were [prevented from submitting case information](#) to the country's infectious disease tracking network. Reports of [health care workers falling ill](#), an early indicator of human-to-human transmission, were [suppressed](#). More indirectly, state media coverage of doctors being penalized reportedly had a [chilling effect](#) on other medical professionals who might have sounded the alarm.

Second, although local officials in Wuhan are certainly worthy of blame, culpability also applies to other provinces, China's central authorities, and international health agencies. The health center that was shuttered after sharing the virus's genome was located in [Shanghai](#). Offers from the United States to send [medical experts](#) to Wuhan in early January were rejected by the central government. Wuhan officials claim that their own foot-dragging was due in part to the need for [approvals](#) from Beijing, a reflection of Xi Jinping's concentration of decision-making power over the past eight years.

Importantly, Taiwan tried to alert the World Health Organization (WHO) to the threat of human-to-human transmission on December 31, based on reports its doctors were hearing from colleagues on the mainland, but it was ignored because of Beijing's policy of forcing international organizations to shun the democratic island. Two weeks later, the WHO issued a statement saying that Chinese authorities had found no evidence of human-to-human transmission.

Ai Fen, a doctor from Wuhan, who has disappeared after speaking to Chinese media about the early days of the coronavirus outbreak in the city. *Credit: Renwu*

Ongoing obfuscation

In late January, the Chinese authorities decided to take strong action against the virus, locking down Wuhan and numerous other cities in Hubei Province. By then, large numbers of residents were already infected, and millions of people had passed through or left the epicenter. At the height of the crisis, censorship tightened, and data from hospitals remained sketchy, hiding the full picture of the suffering and courage of Chinese civilians and medical professionals.

But even over the past month, as the number of cases in China appears to have dropped, the government has continued to muzzle unofficial sources of information and provide incomplete data to the international community. On March 10, a Chinese magazine published an interview with Dr. Ai Fen of Wuhan about the early days of the outbreak; online censors intervened to suppress the article, but users still found ways to share it. Ai has subsequently disappeared. According to Chinese Human Rights Defenders, the number of internet users known to have been arrested for sharing information related to the coronavirus nearly doubled between March 2 and April 1—increasing from 452 to 897. Three of the most prominent citizen journalists working from Wuhan itself have yet to reappear after being taken into custody.

Meanwhile, questions remain about China's official tally of cases and deaths. Data on illness among health professionals was only released on February 14, via a research paper rather than official channels. A set of leaked documents from Shandong Province in late February indicated deliberate data fraud and downplaying of case numbers by provincial health authorities. And as Wuhan emerges from lockdown, new estimates based on details from funeral homes and local residents indicate that the city's death toll may have been 10 times greater than officially reported.

The day-to-day functioning of China's repressive political system has certainly not changed. Journalists and medical professionals continue to face punishment for trying to share information outside of official channels. The propaganda narrative that the Communist Party and the Chinese people have won the "battle" with the virus under Xi's leadership—even as countries like the United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom struggle—places remarkable pressure on local officials to avoid admitting a second

wave of cases in their jurisdictions. And Xi's efforts to purge political enemies and critics from the party have reduced the likelihood of dissent or course correction from within the ruling elite. The recent arrest and investigation for "serious violations of law and discipline" of real-estate mogul and Communist Party member Ren Zhiqiang, over an open letter that was critical of Xi's handling of the crisis, is a case in point.

Looking ahead

All of these factors suggest that China's response to any second wave of infections could suffer from some of the same problems as its reaction to the initial outbreak. This is enormously important given the country's position, some three months ahead of the rest of the world. The data it provides on issues like immunity, asymptomatic transmission, and the nature of the disease itself will inform other states' strategies for allocating precious resources and eventually rolling back social-distancing rules.

The credibility of such data is not helped by Beijing's dishonesty on other matters. Chinese diplomats have in recent weeks amplified false conspiracy theories that the virus originated in the United States, Italy, or elsewhere. A March 26 investigation by Propublica found a network of fake Twitter accounts and hijacked real ones that were covertly spreading Chinese government propaganda about the virus to global audiences. Parts of the network were linked to a Beijing company with ties to the CCP's United Front Work Department.

Given this context, foreign governments, intelligence agencies, health experts, and journalists should continue to seek out independent and unofficial sources of information about emerging and past cases in China, including by discretely consulting with medical professionals in different parts of China about the situation at their hospitals.

In addition, health professionals and political leaders would do well to work with Taiwan, as India appears to be doing already. Taiwan's rapid and effective response to the virus, boosted by a healthy skepticism of the Chinese Communist Party, has proven to be one of the world's best, reinforcing the need for its engagement with the WHO.

There should also be an effort to continue monitoring, exposing, and counteracting foreign-facing disinformation, including on social media. News outlets, foreign officials, and ordinary users should take greater care not to promote false narratives or use Beijing's propaganda to score domestic political points. As one China watcher suggested, reports of China's official data could be accompanied by an asterisk addressing the concerns over their accuracy and potential manipulation, which cannot be written off as a matter of inadequate testing capacity or overwhelmed health systems. At the very least, foreign news outlets should consider discontinuing paid supplements and other content-sharing agreements with Chinese state media, as Britain's *Telegraph* has apparently done.

Beijing will likely characterize such precautions as examples of "anti-China" hostility, ingratitude, or geopolitical gamesmanship. But in light of its experiences with the coronavirus to date, people in China and worldwide have good reason to maintain a clear-

eyed view of the Chinese Communist Party-led regime and the information it provides. The international community must cooperate with Chinese health officials and medical professionals as humanity's fight against COVID-19 continues. That does not mean we should forget what we know about the country's political leadership.

IN THE NEWS
Domestic propaganda echoes external efforts to deflect blame, claim victory for CCP

As the rate of coronavirus cases in China drop and Wuhan emerges from lockdown, Chinese state media, diplomats, and Twitter bots have mobilized to praise the handling of the crisis by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and spread disinformation about the virus among global audiences (see Beyond China section). Some of this content, which reinforces two main narratives, has circulated within China as well:

Virus not originating from China: Throughout March, state-backed, Chinese-language media outlets and prominent government figures have promoted the idea that COVID-19 emerged outside of China, and not in Wuhan. On March 21, the Shanghai Observer repeated claims made by a prominent Italian scientist that medical practitioners in Italy reported cases of a "very strange pneumonia" as early as last November, suggesting that the virus had originated in Italy, rather than that it had been brought there earlier than widely realized, as the Italian expert seemed to indicate. A few days later, on March 24, the popular Chinese news platform Toutiao published an article spuriously linking the coronavirus outbreak to a "mysterious pneumonia" that emerged among young e-cigarette users in 2019 in the United States. And on March 25, an article appeared in Global Times promoting the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was brought to China by a US military athlete who participated in the World Military Games in Wuhan last October.

State media reaching Chinese audiences have also expressed support for Chinese government figures who have promoted these fringe ideas on global social media platforms. In response to a March 12 tweet by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lijian Zhao accusing the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) of covering up cases of COVID-19 in late 2019, an article published by the official Xinhua news agency encouraged Li to "keep asking questions." While Twitter is blocked in China, Zhao's views nevertheless quickly spread on Chinese social media platforms. Screenshots of the tweets circulated on the Sina Weibo microblogging platform under the hashtag "Zhao Lijian sent out five consecutive tweets questioning the US," and have been viewed millions of times. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such anti-US narratives have been taking hold in segments of the Chinese public.

Notably, while these narratives have been permitted to circulate widely, government censors have moved quickly to silence other online discussions about the coronavirus. For example, Chinese censors have deleted Weibo users' expressions of support for the United States as it struggles to confront COVID-19.

Xi returns to center stage, CCP declares victory: As the epidemic in China is slowly brought under control, state media have worked to reaffirm the leadership of the CCP and co-opt the sacrifices made by medical professionals and residents of Wuhan. Key to these efforts has been the presentation of CCP head Xi Jinping as a "hero" in the struggle against the coronavirus. On March 10, Xi made his first visit to Wuhan since the beginning of the outbreak. State media showed Xi visiting healthcare workers at a local hospital and waving to local residents, who were shown cheering "Greetings, General Secretary" in response. The same day, the party journal *Qiushi* published a speech by Xi in which he emphasized that victory over the epidemic could only be achieved under the CCP's leadership.

State media have also begun rewriting the record of authorities' initial attempts to cover up the outbreak. A March 19 report by China's National Supervisory Commission into the death of doctor and whistleblower Li Wenliang posthumously decorated him as an "advanced individual," and presented him as a loyal Communist Party member, not the "anti-institutional" folk hero many in China have come to see him as. Like earlier propaganda efforts, some of these narratives have run into pushback from the public. A March 7 call by Wuhan Party Secretary Wang Zhonglin for the city's residents to express "gratitude" to the CCP and Xi Jinping was greeted with widespread derision and anger by citizens still struggling with the impact of the virus and city-wide lockdown. The local government then removed the remarks from its website, and Xi made a point during his visit of saying that the party thanks the people of Wuhan.

However, for many in China, the government's narratives appear to be convincing. Even where there is anger at the early handling of the outbreak, it is often directed at local officials in Wuhan rather than toward the central government or CCP-controlled political system. The poor response of the United States and other democratic states to the outbreak of COVID-19—of which there is no shortage of state media coverage—has also helped bolster CCP claims that it responded correctly to the crisis.

Censorship updates: US media, coronavirus mourning, Cantonese-speaking live-streamers

- **Crackdown on US media in China:** On March 17, the Chinese government announced that it would revoke the press passes of US citizens working for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* whose credentials are set to expire in 2020. The affected journalists, which included some of the most prominent foreign correspondents working in China, were forced to leave the country, and banned from reporting from Hong Kong and Macao. The three media organizations, along with *Time* and Voice of America (VOA), will also be required to disclose information on their staff, finances, property, and operations in China. Days after the announcement, the foreign ministry also forced several Chinese citizens to quit their jobs at the *Times* and VOA. The moves came in response to both the US government's earlier designation of Chinese state media organizations operating

in the United States as foreign missions, and US government demands that these organizations cut their domestic staff. In response to the Chinese government's moves, some in the US government are considering revoking the press credentials of Chinese intelligence operatives believed to be working in the United States for Chinese state media. In the meantime, expressions of support for US efforts to fight the coronavirus have been censored on Weibo.

- **Social media censorship targets post-lockdown grieving in Wuhan:** Questions have emerged about the scale of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, suggesting that the death toll may be significantly higher than the officially reported figure of 2,548. Pictures posted on Weibo of long lines of people waiting to collect the cremated remains of family members were later censored, while photos from commercial outlet *Caixin* show 2,500 funeral urns being unloaded at just one of eight local crematories in the city. Based on these types of data points, Radio Free Asia reported on March 27 that some locals estimated the death toll was as high as 46,000. Locals report being assigned government minders when picking up the remains of family members, while others claim that hush money in the form of "funeral allowances" is being handed out in exchange for the silence of the families of the dead. According to a report in Time, one woman whose husband died was told by the police to stop posting online.

- **"Internet police" ramp up arrests:** Repression of netizens is increasing, as Chinese government officials attempt to shape the narrative of the official response to the coronavirus outbreak. Across China, police have visited the homes of people known to have criticized the government's response to the outbreak, and in some cases have detained them. As of April 1, China Human Rights Defenders has identified 897 arrests for online posts related to the coronavirus outbreak, 206 of which were for material published on WeChat. Among those detained is property tycoon and CCP member Ren Zhiqiang, who had published a now-censored essay blaming the Chinese government for silencing whistleblowers and covering up the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan. On April 7, Beijing authorities announced that Ren had been placed under investigation for "serious violations of discipline and the law," charges used in the past to punish Xi critics. Earlier, in March, Australia's "60 Minutes" television program reported that Ai Fen, the director of the emergency department at Wuhan Central Hospital, went missing after speaking to media about local authorities' efforts to silence whistleblowers in the early days of the outbreak. Since the program aired, a number of cryptic posts on the doctor's Weibo account have appeared, though her current whereabouts and condition remain unknown.

- **Cantonese live-streamers penalized on Douyin:** Live-streamers on the Chinese social media app Douyin have been given temporary bans for speaking in Cantonese, rather than in Mandarin. While Douyin has not publicly commented on the bans, the belief is that censors may find it more difficult to monitor online content that is not in Mandarin.

Netizen pushback: Sharing information, circumventing censorship, organizing help, mourning

State media and censors continue their efforts to dictate what Chinese people can learn and say about the government's response to the spread of COVID-19, as well as about daily life during this extraordinary time. Yet over the past two months ordinary citizens, displaying remarkable ingenuity and courage, have sought out and shared information about the outbreak, organized help for fellow citizens in Wuhan, and mourned those lost to the epidemic. The following are a few notable examples:

- **Daily diary from Wuhan:** The online diary of noted Wuhan-based writer Fang Fang has provided a window into life in the city during the two-month lockdown. Despite the entries on her *Caixin* blog and WeChat account being repeatedly deleted by censors, often within hours, her posts have been shared by millions on social media. They have also been preserved via archival projects like a GitHub repository as well as *China Digital Times*, and will be published as a book in English by HarperCollins in June.

- **Public anger:** Frustration at the Wuhan government's response to the outbreak of COVID-19 was captured in a March 5 video shot during a tour of the city by vice premier and politburo member Sun Chunlan. In the amateur video, numerous people can be heard yelling "Fake! Fake! Everything is fake!" from their apartments as Sun and her entourage inspect a residential community below.

- **Sharing censored content:** On the day of Xi Jinping's own "frontline" visit to Wuhan on March 10, a profile in China's *People* magazine of the director of the emergency department at Wuhan Central Hospital laid bare how local doctors had been pressured to suppress early signs of the virus. While the interview with Ai Fen was quickly deleted by censors, netizens immediately found numerous ways to share the article, including reproducing the text using emojis, pinyin, Korean, QR codes, and Ethereum blockchain.

- **Volunteers coordinating supplies:** Amidst the lockdown in Wuhan, which ended April 8, average Chinese citizens organized to provide vital assistance to frontline responders and those in need. Wine importers transitioned to distributing medical supplies to local hospitals, bar owners turned to cooking meals for medical workers, while others staffed phone lines to provide information and help to desperate local residents. Many of these efforts were coordinated via social media applications like WeChat.

- **Online memorials for the deceased:** On Tomb Sweeping Day, April 4, the final Weibo message posted by doctor and coronavirus whistleblower Li Wenliang prior to his death on February 7 became a public memorial to him and other victims of the epidemic. In hundreds of thousands of moving comments, netizens offered thanks to the doctor, while others asked him to greet in the afterlife those they had lost to COVID-19.

HONG KONG
Pressure on media freedom, data privacy increases amid virus outbreak

New restrictions on media freedom and data privacy have emerged in Hong Kong, raising further concerns about the territory's autonomy and local authorities' respect for civil liberties enshrined in the Basic Law and international human rights commitments.

- **More police assaults on journalists covering protests:** In two open letters to Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) voiced anger at police violence against local journalists. In a March 10 letter, the HKJA noted that a reporter had been knocked to the ground by riot police, and that several television camera operators were pepper sprayed. In a March 22 letter, HKJA accused police of pepper spraying reporters during a march marking eight months since a violent mob attack on protesters at the Yuen Long MTR station, in July 2019.

- **Public broadcaster censured over WHO interview:** The Hong Kong government has accused public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) of violating the "One China" policy during an interview it conducted with an official from the World Health Organization (WHO). In the March 27 interview, Bruce Aylward, a senior advisor at the WHO, appeared to hang up on a RTHK journalist after being repeatedly questioned about Taiwan's exclusion from the World Health Assembly. Hong Kong commerce secretary Edward Yau later claimed that the broadcaster had breached its mission of providing a public service by inquiring about Taiwan's membership. Critics, however, saw Yau's comments as an attempt to restrict media freedom and the activities of RTHK. In February, the broadcaster had been criticized by pro-Beijing groups for airing material satirizing local police.

- **District councilor charged with 'sedition' over Facebook post:** Hong Kong authorities have used a colonial-era anti sedition law to arrest a district councilor after she revealed on Facebook the identity of a local police officer. On March 26 Cheng Lai-king was arrested at her home, days after she had reposted a message detailing the identity of the officer responsible for firing a projectile at Indonesian reporter Veby Mega last September, which had left her blind in one eye. The law has been seldom used since the 1967 anticolonial riots, and Human Rights Watched termed Cheng's detention "dubious." While Cheng was later released on bail, the officer responsible for the journalist's injury remains on duty.

- **Police win broader powers to search detainees' phones:** Police have been granted expanded powers by the city's High Court to search detainees' phones without a warrant. The April 2 ruling overturned a 2017 decision that had permitted warrantless searches of mobile devices only in "exigent circumstances." Since the beginning of the protest movement last spring, more than 7,700 people have been arrested.

- **High-tech bracelets used to supervise new arrivals placed under quarantine:** As governments around the world struggle to respond to the spread of COVID-19, the government of Hong Kong has implemented [new surveillance measures](#) targeting recent arrivals. Since March 19, all those arriving in the territory must undergo two weeks of self-quarantine and wear an electronic wristband connected to a [location-tracking cellphone app](#). If the person's location changes, local health authorities are immediately alerted. Critics have expressed concern that the app [could be used to increase government surveillance](#) and infringe on civil liberties.

BEYOND CHINA
Global dissemination channels mobilized to spread coronavirus disinformation, pro-Beijing narratives

As countries around the world grapple with the spread of COVID-19, Chinese state propaganda organs are attempting to influence the global conversation on the epidemic. Over the last month, CCP-backed media, in an effort to [downplay criticism of the party's mishandling of the outbreak](#) in its early stages, have pushed [three narratives for a global audience](#): first, China's response to the crisis is a model for other countries to follow; second, China is a global leader in the fight against COVID-19 and is providing aid to grateful nations; and finally, that the outbreak may actually have originated outside of China.

While there is some truth to a few of these claims, others—like [the assertion that COVID-19 began in the United States](#) or [Italy](#)—suggest that Chinese state media and other state-backed actors are deliberately promoting disinformation abroad, mimicking Russian tactics. In some cases, the Chinese messaging has been shared on existing disinformation networks established on social media platforms by [Iran and Russia](#). Over the last month, a number of tactics have been deployed:

- **Leveraging existing channels to embed state media content in mainstream foreign media:** Foreign news outlets have continued to accept funds from Chinese state media to disseminate party propaganda on China's response to COVID-19 to their audiences. Over the past two months, *the Economist*, *the Wall Street Journal*, and the Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper are among foreign media that have published such articles as paid advertorials, although the *Telegraph* appears to have subsequently discontinued its partnership with the *People's Daily*, the official paper of the Communist Party, and *China Daily*, a state-run English-language outlet. The Xinhua news agency has also used [content-sharing partnerships](#) with African news websites like *News Ghana* to highlight Chinese assistance in combatting COVID-19 in various countries.

- **Foreign ministry spokespeople and diplomats spreading disinformation:** Throughout March, fringe conspiracy theories concerning the origins of COVID-19 and other proven [falsehoods](#) have been amplified by senior Chinese diplomats. On March 12,

Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao tweeted a link to an article falsely claiming that the virus had originated in the United States, which was later retweeted by the official account of China's embassy in South Africa. It has also been reported that Chinese officials in Tokyo have been ordered to refer to COVID-19 as the "Japanese coronavirus." The effort was reaping the fruits of a 2019 initiative to set up Twitter accounts for dozens of Chinese officials, even as the platform remains blocked in China.

• **State media ads online:** Chinese state media have been purchasing political advertisements on foreign social media sites in an effort to cover up the Chinese state's botched early response to the spread of the coronavirus, and instead place blame for the pandemic on the United States. Appearing on Facebook and Instagram, the undisclosed ads promote content on China's handling of COVID-19 produced by Chinese state media outfits including Xinhua, China Central Television, and the *Global Times*.

• **Twitter bots:** A March 26 investigation by ProPublica found a network of fake and hijacked Twitter accounts that were covertly spreading Chinese government propaganda about the virus to global audiences. While some of these accounts have tweeted messages expressing support for the Chinese government's handling of the epidemic, others have promoted disinformation or attacked political opponents in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong. Parts of the network were linked to a Beijing-based company that had previously been contracted by the China News Service, part of the CCP's United Front Work Department, to increase its Twitter following. China has also made use of Twitter bots to amplify Italian hashtags praising China's medical assistance to Italy, which has been hard-hit by the coronavirus.

FEATURED PUSHBACK
Exposing Beijing's global disinformation about coronavirus

As the coronavirus outbreak has spread across the world, so too have efforts by Chinese state media, government diplomats, and Twitter bots to muddy the waters, promote pro-Beijing messages, and share proven falsehoods. While some such activities are overt—such as a Chinese diplomat tweeting, a *China Daily* advertorial appearing in a foreign paper, or a Xinhua news article published on a partner website—others are covert. And given the scale of activity, even the overt efforts are difficult to track. However, over the past month, various journalistic and research initiatives have shed critical light on these media influence campaigns, and in some cases, have triggered change.

Examples of these exposés include an extensive March 27 ProPublica investigation that detailed a network of fake and hijacked Twitter accounts—including one clearly intended to impersonate the US-funded Radio Free Asia (pictured above)—as well as efforts by apparent Chinese operatives to pay overseas Chinese individuals with large followings to promote official propaganda. In another instance, Italian journalists partnered with social media data analysts to reveal that large proportions of tweets published with hashtags celebrating Chinese aid to the country had come from bots.

On April 5, the Telegraph revealed that Chinese state media were using undisclosed Facebook and Instagram ads to extol China's response to the pandemic, and blame the United States for its spread. Interestingly, it was around that time that the same website apparently discontinued its own publication of paid advertorials from Chinese state media outlets, following an April 1 Buzzfeed article highlighting problematic content in *People's Daily* advertorials. And on March 30, the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund launched a China-focused expansion of its Hamilton 2.0 dashboard, which previously only tracked social media activity and disinformation from Russian sources. The platform follows dozens of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts, organizes data resulting from its monitoring, and offers search functionality.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **New suppression of information regarding COVID-19 infections:** As China emerges from the most stringent forms of lockdown triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, watch for additional evidence that sheds light on the actual case and death toll in Hubei and other provinces. Also watch for any indications of new rounds of censorship, reprisals, or data manipulation to suppress news of a second wave.

- **Status of political and religious detainees:** Watch for news about high-profile detainees who spoke out about early cover-ups, or criticized the government's response to the coronavirus, including the missing Wuhan doctor Ai Fen and real-estate tycoon Ren Zheqiang, as well as the 897 citizens documented by Chinese Human Rights Defenders who were punished for sharing information about the coronavirus. Also watch for updates on political and religious prisoners more broadly, including whether the virus is spreading among Uighur detainees in Xinjiang, the whereabouts of 282 Falun Gong practitioners reportedly detained in February, and whether rights lawyer Wang Quangzhang (released from prison on April 5 and sent to immediate quarantine in Shandong Province) is able to be reunited with his wife and son in Beijing.

- **New revelations of overseas disinformation:** As state-backed disinformation and overseas propaganda efforts regarding the coronavirus outbreak in China and globally continue, watch for new revelations about their scale, tactics, and content. Specifically, watch for examples and studies of content manipulation on WeChat (and possibly TikTok) outside China, account takedowns on Facebook and Twitter, and new instances of coordination between Chinese, Russian, and Iranian networks.

TAKE ACTION

- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit here or e-mail cmb@freedomhouse.org.

- **Share the China Media Bulletin:** Help friends and colleagues better understand China's changing media and censorship landscape.

- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, here or here. Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security here.

- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin,* here.

- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policymakers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a new resource section on the Freedom House website.