

# Tolerating COVID Misinformation Is Better Than the Alternative | The Atlantic

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On december 30, 2019, Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital in Hubei, China, began to warn friends and colleagues about the outbreak of a novel respiratory illness. Four days later, he was summoned to appear before local authorities, who reprimanded him for “making false comments” that “severely disturbed the social order.”

In hindsight, Li was the first person accused of disseminating medical misinformation during the coronavirus pandemic, despite the fact that he was telling the truth. And as the virus spread, many other countries decided that the emergence of a deadly new disease warranted new restrictions on what people say. Human Rights Watch reports that at least 83 governments used the pandemic “to justify violating the exercise of free speech.”

The United States has avoided the worst excesses of this global authoritarian turn. The First Amendment constrains its government from infringing on freedom of speech. And many Americans reliably object to nongovernmental attempts to suppress ideas, favoring the liberal notion that “the remedy for speech that is false is speech that is true,” as Justice Anthony Kennedy once put it.

[...]

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