

CORONAVIRUS “**INFORMATION HEROES**” – JOURNALISM THAT SAVES LIVES



Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has compiled a list of 30 coronavirus “information heroes” – 30 journalists, whistleblowers and media outlets whose courage, perseverance or capacity to innovate has helped to circulate reliable and vital information during the Covid-19 pandemic

Every crisis produces its heroes. Around the world there are journalists, whistleblowers and media outlets that have managed to overcome the barriers to information created since the start of the pandemic. Through their reporting or by means of initiatives that have needed courage, audacity and determination, they have provided access to trustworthy and quality information, helped to resist censorship, and combatted the runaway disinformation that threatens public health.

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“Some people have taken such big risks to report the reality of the pandemic that they have died as a result, while others have disappeared or have been jailed,” RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. “Prosecuted, attacked, insulted – many have paid a high price for defending the right to information and for combatting the rumours and disinformation that aggravate the consequences of this public health crisis. These new heroes remind us that journalism can save lives. They deserve our attention and admiration.”

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By naming these heroes, RSF is firstly paying tribute to the journalists, whistleblowers and media that have distinguished themselves in the fight for press freedom during an exceptional crisis. RSF is also aiming to demonstrate that the information chaos, which has grown during the pandemic, is not inevitable and that those named by RSF can be seen as models at a time when defending reliable reporting and combatting disinformation has become urgent.

The list compiled by RSF, which is not intended to be exhaustive, includes both well-known media figures and people the public have not heard of. Although they come from all five main continents, nearly a third of these 30 heroes are from Asia, where the pandemic originated. Six are from Europe and Central Asia, and the others are from Africa, the Americas and the Middle East.

What most of these heroes have in common is the fact that they revealed information highlighting the pandemic’s gravity or their government’s mismanagement of the crisis. Some are veteran reporters like **Ana Lalić** in Serbia or combative investigators like **Blaž Zgaga** in Slovenia, **Andjouza Abouheir** in Comoros and **Sergei Satsuk** in Belarus. However, others are ordinary citizens who, in response to the urgency and gravity of the public health crisis, decided to blow the whistle with the aim of saving as many lives as possible. It was an eye doctor, **Li Wenliang**, who first alerted the world to the existence of a fast-spreading disease in December 2019. And it was a lawyer, **Chen Qiushi**, who posted videos on his blog revealing the chaos in the hospitals in Wuhan, the site of the initial Covid-19 outbreak. Li died of the virus while Chen was forcibly quarantined and never reappeared.

You often pay dearly for the truth. In Venezuela, freelance journalist **Darvinson Rojas** spent 12 days in prison for a tweet questioning official pandemic figures. In India, newspaper reporter **Vijay Vineet** is facing a possible six-month jail sentence for reporting that lockdown restrictions forced hungry kids to eat cattle fodder. In Bangladesh, the well-known cartoonist **Ahmed Kabir Kishore** is facing a possible life sentence for posting cartoons on Facebook about politics during the Covid-19 crisis that alluded, inter alia, to corruption.

Others have avoided prison but can no longer work. After a lengthy and violent police interrogation over an article questioning the Kingdom of Eswatini's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, Swati Newsweek website editor **Eugene Dube** had to flee to neighbouring South Africa. **Chris Buckley**, a Beijing-based reporter for the New York Times, was forced to leave China after 24 years. He had spent 78 days in Wuhan at the height of the outbreak and his visa, expiring in February, was not renewed.

Many of these heroes displayed courage in resisting pressure and censorship. They include **Caixin**, an independent English and Chinese-language media outlet in Beijing whose reporting has questioned the Chinese government's narrative. For some, such as Afghan reporter **Anisseh Shahid**, it took courage to simply keep reporting in the field with the threat of infection compounding the threat of a Taliban attack. In the United States, several **White House correspondents** have distinguished themselves by their perseverance in adversity. Despite constant attacks by President Trump and his aides, they continue week after week to question his handling of the pandemic.

This exceptional crisis has also produced innovative initiatives that have helped to get the facts out and combat disinformation. In Africa, the Ivorian web radio **WA FM** and the Togolese news site **TogoCheck** were created to combat rumours and fake news and disseminate trustworthy information that the public can use to protect themselves and their health. In Brazil, alternative media outlets pooled resources to form a "**Gabinete de crise**" to inform the abandoned inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, while the **Wayuri Network**'s journalists have risen to the challenge of informing more than 750 indigenous communities in the Amazon. In Russia, 25 media outlets formed **Syndicate-100** to make it easier for medical personnel, who have been hit hard by the epidemic, to report problems and alert the public.

Finally, RSF pays a special tribute to journalists in **Guayaquil**, Ecuador's business capital and the site of Latin America's biggest Covid-19 outbreak. The photos of bodies in Guayaquil's streets have gone around the world. Despite being unprepared and lacking personal protective equipment, the city's journalists have continued to work and to report in locations with a high infection rate. And this has taken a heavy toll. Thirteen of them have died of the virus.



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-Jazeera [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 78 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.



BUENOS DIAS GUINEA **EQUATORIAL GUINEA**

Broadcast suspended

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.

Photo:

A «Buenos días Guinea» broadcast on Asonga TV in September 2018. Equatorial Guinea.



CAIXIN **CHINA**

Chinese media outlet that defies censorship

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.



Qiushi CHEN
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.



Fang FANG

CHINA

Chronicler of daily life in Wuhan

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.



GABINETE DE CRISE

BRAZIL

Media crisis unit in Rio's favelas

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 Lalić, 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.](#)



Wenliang Li

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 [Fundamentos](#).



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



Darvinson ROJAS
VENEZUELA

Detained over a tweet

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.



ROYA TV
JORDAN

Indesirable street interviews

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](#).



Sergei SATSUK
BÉLARUS

Health specialist who dared to criticize the president

Sergei Satsuk, 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 after publishing 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 Tadeignon, 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 Uttar 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

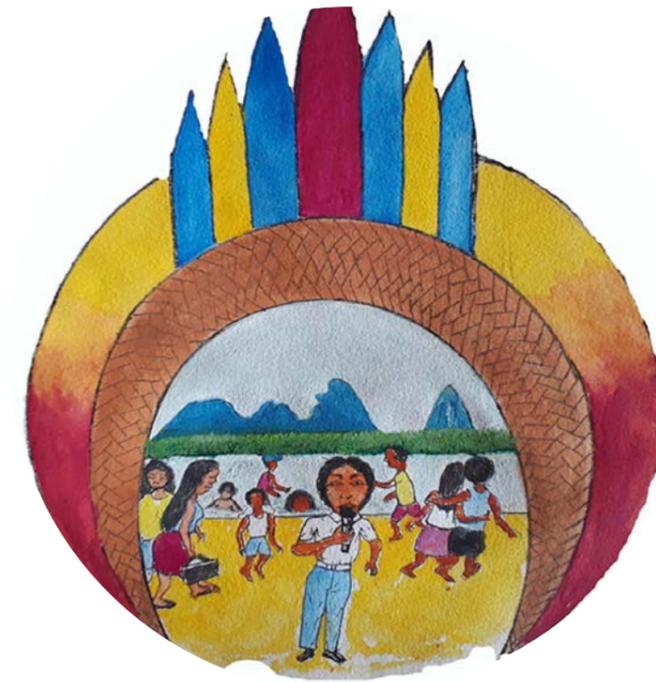
A reporter for the Hindi-language newspaper [Jansandesh Times](#), Vijay Vineet reported that children from a “*Dalit*” (Untouchable) community in northern India were going hungry as a result of the lockdown and had been reduced to eating grass usually given to cattle. Harassed by the authorities and 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 **CÔTE D'IVOIRE**

Combatting disinformation

It was with [the dual aim](#) of combatting 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 indigeneous 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.

WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS' ASSOCIATION

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USA

Trump Administration scapegoats

Their integrity and competence are systematically questioned. Any pertinent questions earn them sarcasm and scorn from Donald Trump or his aides, and even insults, as has been the case with [Weija Jiang](#) and [Paula Reid](#) of CBS, [Peter Alexander](#) of NBC and [Kristin Fisher](#) of Fox News. Despite the constant attacks, the White House correspondents have continued week after week to question the way the president and his administration are handling the pandemic.



Blaž ZGAGA

SLOVENIA

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 is 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.