How the Chinese government suppressed the real story of the country's coronavirus catastrophe

The news was spreading quickly that Li Wenliang, a doctor who had warned about a strange new viral outbreak only to be threatened by the police and accused of peddling rumors, had died of COVID-19. Grief and fury coursed through social media. To people at home and abroad, Li's death showed the terrible cost of the Chinese government's instinct to suppress inconvenient information.

Yet China's censors decided to double down.

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China's curbs on information about the outbreak started in early January, before the novel coronavirus had even been identified definitively, [leaked] documents show. When infections started spreading rapidly a few weeks later, the authorities clamped down on anything that cast China's response in too "negative" a light.

The United States and other countries have for months accused China of trying to hide the extent of the outbreak in its early stages. It may never be clear whether a freer flow of information from China would have prevented the outbreak from morphing into a raging global health calamity. But the documents indicate that Chinese officials tried to steer the narrative not only to prevent panic and debunk damaging falsehoods domestically. They also wanted to make the virus look less severe — and the authorities more capable — as the rest of the world was watching.

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