



## Amid Pandemic and Infodemic

### **Do not use COVID-19 as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression and opinion**

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Together with the COVID-19 outbreak; there has been increased focus on disinformation and fake news about the virus, its effects and the actions taken by respective government authorities. Even, the World Health Organization indicated that the fight is not against the pandemic only but together with coronavirus it is against this “infodemic”. At the same time, the crisis made us recognize the importance of transparency, access to accurate, up-to-date information, data availability and the critical role independent media can play for information dissemination and for ensuring accountability.

However, many Governments worldwide, as well as those in the Arab region<sup>1</sup>, are taking measures to restrict freedom of expression, opinion and access to information.<sup>2</sup> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 19 (3) states that the freedom of expression may be subject to certain restrictions, but requiring that *any limitation be provided by law and be necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others, or for the protection of national security or public order, or of public health or morals*. In this respect, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression [refers](#) to various violations occurring including, police intimidation of journalists, political attacks on journalists, lack of an enabling environment for media work, lack of protection of access for foreign journalists as well as restricting access to the internet.

The picture in the Arab region is no different. Even before COVID-19, with global monitors identifying the region as one of the most dangerous for journalists<sup>3</sup> and one of the least free<sup>4</sup>; Arab states failed extensively for their obligations to promote, protect and ensure full enjoyment of human rights. Actually, concerning freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, none of the countries in the region are in the ‘open’ or ‘narrowed’ categories.<sup>5</sup>

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation only exacerbated. For instance, in Jordan Roya TV's General Manager Fares Sayegh and News Director Mohammad Alkhalidi were [arrested](#) after interrogation by the Public Prosecution on 9th April 2020 in relation to a news report which was aired on Roya TV, published on the Roya News website and social media pages. The news report dealt with the economic impact of a lockdown in Jordan. The two journalists were later released on bail. In Egypt, The Guardian correspondent [was expelled](#) in March following his article on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-monitoring/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/COVID19/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/middle-east-north-africa>

<sup>4</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>

<sup>5</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/MENA.PeoplePowerUnderAttack.2019/>

coronavirus. Egyptian repressed as well. For Attalah, editor in chief



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journalists continue to be instance, on May 19<sup>th</sup>, Lina of [Mada Masr](#) was arrested

while interviewing with the mother of jailed activist, Alaa Abdel Fattah. The human rights activist Fattah was on hunger strike protesting the ban on family visits amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Attalah was released shortly after. In Algeria, the news websites *Interlignes*, *Maghreb Emergent*, and *Radiom* [were blocked](#). In Morocco printing and distribution of newsletters are [suspended](#) by a statement issued by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports since March 22. In Lebanon, the Minister of Information [announced](#) plans for regulation of media; which create caution taken into consideration that regulations imposed during COVID-19 have been mostly restrictive in other countries; and the virus has been used as a pretext to muzzle critical opinion.

With current lockdown measures implemented in several countries worldwide, access to information is rather a significant preventive tool that governments should consider. This requires promoting and protecting freedom of opinion and expression and taking measures to strengthen the role of media for informing people and awareness-raising. This would trigger civic engagement and accountability, vital for democratic governance.

In this context, the Arab NGO Network for Development calls the Governments in the region to:

- Protect and promote the freedom of expression while addressing the pandemic; and ensure that the standards of legality, necessity and proportionality are met for any restriction imposed.
- Halt arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists and human rights defenders; ensure their immediate release and access to remedies.
- Enhance an enabling environment for media, respecting, protecting, and promoting their independence and diversity. Refrain from blocking websites, Internet shutdowns as online access to information is key during the lockdown.
- Ensure that any regulatory measure on media is proposed following an inclusive, transparent and participatory process engaging all relevant stakeholders, including civil society groups and media organizations promptly.
- Intensify efforts to address infodemic, enhancing measures for access to information, data availability and working collaboratively with other stakeholders including civil society to designing and implementing awareness-raising activities.