



Government Accountability Is Being Tested in the Age of Coronavirus

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,591, June 1, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Social distancing measures have had a great impact on the conduct of parliaments and politicians, who now give speeches to empty rooms and without challenge by journalists. The new social construct being formed between governments and populations in the coronavirus era is testing government accountability and transparency.

The closure of *The Canadian Jewish News* and last-minute rescue of *The Jewish Chronicle*, the world's oldest Jewish newspaper, show how abruptly and severely coronavirus is affecting the media. This problem is multidimensional, and its impact goes beyond economic considerations.

Serious journalism—already struggling for years to survive in the internet era—is facing a new hurdle. Government subsidies to save the press might provide it with temporary relief but will weaken its watchdog mission.

Fake news, by contrast, continues to gain ground. It is easy and cheap to spread stories online via social media. Now that people are spending so much more time at home, they are using their computers, tablets, and smartphones even more extensively than usual and are enthusiastically consuming and redistributing rumors and inventions. Uncertainty rules the day, and good journalists are left to walk the line between survival—both physical and economic—and a work routine that has been badly disrupted as they attempt to cover the pandemic.

A rise in discrimination and hatred has been clearly visible online over the past few weeks, with antisemitic messages spreading with the velocity of the virus. Hatred of Jews, as both individuals and as a collective entity, is being disseminated in the form of conspiracy theories about the origins of the crisis

and the profits it is allegedly generating. Physical violence and online hate speech are occurring in tandem, a development that should alarm the international community.

How should this problem be addressed in the coronavirus era? A typical response under more normal circumstances would be collaboration among states, agencies, and Jewish communities and discussions in committees at relevant European Parliament working groups. But the new reliance on email and digital campaigns, as well as the replacement of face-to-face meetings with virtual ones, changes these dynamics.

Concern over how to handle the rapid rise in coronavirus-related antisemitic hate speech and violence resides within the wider debate on how democracies are coping with the pandemic. Coronavirus is dramatically influencing the modus operandi of Western countries and societies. In view of the necessity to practice social-distancing measures, parliamentary debates rarely take place and politicians give speeches to empty rooms free of journalists who might otherwise ask them hard questions.

Accountability and transparency are being tested. Procurement of goods and services for disease management can fall into corrupt practices, and the Council of Europe has published guidelines to prevent risks.

Parliaments are intensifying the push to employ virtual settings. Although this depends on the legal framework of each country and raises questions about efficiency, some countries, including Australia and the UK, are determined to proceed online. Cybersecurity is a critical concern, especially when representatives have to vote.

Consider, for example, the European Parliament, whose members receive electronic ballot forms at their official email addresses during remote sessions to be completed and returned with signatures. The opportunity for mayhem this structure implies will surely whet the appetite of hackers.

Additionally, citizens have fewer opportunities to protest. A recent demonstration in Tel Aviv, in which participants kept two meters apart, was a rare recent case. People are, of course, able to express their views openly on social media. However, the use of smartphones to trace patients and quarantined individuals during the crisis is causing unease about government use of personal data.

Nostalgia for the pre-coronavirus era leads nowhere. Democracies must respond to the unprecedented challenges by improving digital instruments to

build public trust. As no vaccine has yet been found, delay will jeopardize liberal values.

Technological creativity and continuous learning can pave the way for active democratic participation, more inclusion, and crowdsourcing. Opportunities will sideline risks should policy and decision-makers invest time in an online participatory process, including question and answer sessions.

In the fight against antisemitism, a toxic element to democracy both on- and offline, smart education should be added to the arsenal.

This is a probationary period for Western countries, and the new social contract being constructed between governments and citizens will play out largely on the internet. The success of those governments' adjustment to this new reality could determine their fate.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on May 21, 2020.

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