

# The politics behind how governments control coronavirus data

June 5 2020, by Anton Oleinik

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Image of the ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Credit: CDC

COVID-19 has affected almost every country around the globe. The World Health Organization has [confirmed cases in 216 countries and territories](#), a total that represents more than 85 percent of 251 entities recognized by the United Nations. Yet each government has responded differently to the coronavirus pandemic—including how data on the disease have been shared with each country's citizens.

The selectiveness with which governments release information about the number of confirmed cases and the deaths caused by the coronavirus suggest [techniques of "bio-power" may be at play](#).

French philosopher Michel Foucault invented the concept of bio-power [in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1977-78](#). He defined bio-power as a "set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."

Foucault found [an early example of bio-power in the smallpox vaccine developed by the end of the 18th century](#)—one of the first attempts to manage populations in terms of the calculus of probabilities under the banner of public health. While a COVID-19 vaccine is still in the making, the concept of bio-power may help make better sense of how we see governments deal with the ongoing pandemic.

Our perception of the probability of contracting the virus and the chances to recover is shaped by the relevant statistical figures released by our respective governments. Those figures feed the entire spectrum of our own reactions to COVID-19—including fear and negligence.

A balanced take on COVID-19 and a proper course of action to deal with the pandemic means the information provided by governments must

be complete, valid and reliable. Unfortunately, that is not happening in many cases.

When examining how some countries have responded to the pandemic, bio-political factors should be taken into account. This includes how governments are collecting and sharing data about the coronavirus. Let's look at three countries in particular.

## **The United States**

In the U.S., COVID-19 information is disseminated by [government agencies](#), [universities](#), [the media](#) and even [search engines](#). Various levels of governments remain the ultimate source of the reported figures, but how accurate are those figures?

The U.S. now has the most confirmed cases and deaths caused by COVID-19. While this can be explained by [a late response to the pandemic](#) and the lack of universal health care coverage, the political stakes in the COVID-19 crisis are also very high for the U.S.

The social and economic crisis caused by the pandemic will be a major factor in this year's elections. In an effort to shift attention from his administration's response, U.S. President Donald Trump has indicated [China should be blamed for the crisis](#). The high number of infections and deaths contribute to a feeling of fear and insecurity—which from a bio-power perspective may actually help Trump sell his message.

## **Russia**

In addition to being the only source of information about COVID-19, the Russian government also makes every effort to protect its monopoly on the production and dissemination of the relevant data. Anyone who

attempts to collect and disseminate COVID-19 figures without having a "licence to inform" may face criminal charges for being an agent provocateur.

A group of medical doctors in Chechnya, the previously rebel region in the Caucasus now under the tight control of the central government, [attempted to complain about the lack of preparedness to COVID-19](#). They were promptly accused of "provocations" and forced to deliver public apologies.

According to government data, [Russia has one of the lowest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world, less than one percent](#). (The U.S. reports a six percent mortality rate; Italy, France and the U.K. are in the range of 14-15 percent). Either the Russians have an exceptionally strong immune system or something is wrong with the way the government counts the deaths.

As well, the regular monthly statistics of deaths released by some regions [shows an anomalous hike in April](#) —numbers that are out of line with the officially approved figures of COVID-19-related deaths.

The gap between the number of officially acknowledged COVID-19 cases and deaths may have political explanations.

Similar to the U.S., the pandemic interferes with the political agenda in Russia. The constitutional referendum engineered to extend Vladimir Putin's term as Russia's president was originally scheduled on April 22, [but was eventually postponed until July 1](#).

Putin is trying to make the gambit of accepting high (but not necessarily accurate) figures of COVID-19 infections and simultaneously doing everything possible to under-report the true number of COVID-19-related deaths. If successful, he would be able to claim credit

for handling the crisis better than other world leaders.

## Canada

Canada's figures do not look controversial at first sight. The country has neither an exceptionally high number of COVID-19 cases nor an exceptionally high mortality rate (7.5 percent). But that doesn't mean there aren't potentially some elements of bio-power at play.

Canada's [government](#) chose to complicate the task of comparing the COVID-19 figures across its provinces and territories. [The federal government's website dedicated to COVID-19](#) reports the aggregate data only. No death statistics are included. Comparing the responses of each province requires an examination of 13 different provincial websites, which have various formats of reporting the relevant figures.

Access-to-information requests are not of great help here either, despite the fact that there are access-to-information acts both at the federal and provincial levels. It takes an average of one month to get a response to an access-to-information request under normal times. [But now governments have full discretion in deciding what information on COVID-19 to release](#), as well as when and how to do it.

This means that in Canada, bio-politics manifests itself through the fuzziness of information and, in the absence of clear information, the public is expected to uncritically accept the actions of their governments.

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