

The Constitution Isn't Suspended Because of Coronavirus



(Pixabay)

The city of Newark is cracking down on “coronavirus disinformation,” warning that any “false reporting” — which includes misleading “allegations” on social media — will lead to criminal prosecution. What exactly makes Newark think it has the authority to threaten speech?

And how exactly is this kind of speech code going to be enforced? How will Newark police know if the person spreading “disinformation” even lives in their city? Will they subpoena the IP address of @Goldilox5073540586732 to find out? Will they extradite people from other cities who are making false statements about Newark? What if someone on Facebook tells Newarkites — *Newarkians*? — that coronavirus isn’t that big of a deal? Or what if they have an unprovable theory? Will the city’s department of safety consider those illegal “allegations?”

It’s likely that the threat is simply meant to discourage despicable people and conspiracy theorists from spreading rumors. If so, I suspect it will likely have the

opposite effect. Threatening randos on Twitter reeks of panic.

To a lesser extent, I also find Washington governor Jay Inslee's decision to "ban" gatherings of over 250 people in the Seattle area concerning. Of course, it makes sense for government officials to implore citizens to stay away from large groups. And the governor has wide-ranging powers — hard to believe how wide-ranging, to be honest — to enact restrictions in times of emergency. But what if 250 individuals want to get together to protest Inslee's ban or the Trump administration's handling of coronavirus? What if 250 individuals want to get together to pray? What constitutional right does a governor have to stop them?

Obviously, most people aren't going to concern themselves with civil-liberty questions as the threat of a pandemic hangs over them, but they should. Because, as we've seen, while some threats are real, it's easy to scaremonger — think "climate emergency" or "gun-violence epidemic" — in an effort to chip away at our rights.

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