

United States Senate

May 14, 2020

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We are writing to you regarding the concerning findings published in a recent report by Avaaz titled “How Facebook can flatten the curve of the Coronavirus Infodemic.”¹ In its findings, the authors note that millions of people who are active on your platform have been exposed to some type of misinformation or disinformation regarding the COVID-19 and its treatments. While we commend and recognize that you have taken active steps to inform people about the dangers of COVID-19, we cannot ignore the fact that Facebook reaches nearly 2.5 billion monthly users on its platform² and that number does not include users on Facebook-owned platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram. Unfortunately, it continues to be far too easy for anyone to share false, misleading and potentially dangerous misinformation and disinformation about the virus in all of these mediums.

As the world grapples with COVID-19 by remaining at home, millions of Americans and billions of people around the world are turning to social media platforms like Facebook as a way to connect with their loved ones. This makes Facebook’s responsibility to combat misinformation and disinformation over COVID-19 on all of its platforms all the greater. Every action within your power must be taken.

We are particularly concerned about the amount of misinformation and disinformation being spread on your platforms in languages other than English. Avaaz’s findings suggest that non-English Facebook users may be more at risk of viewing misleading or false information about COVID-19. Specifically they found that “Italian and Spanish-speaking users may be at greater risk of misinformation exposure.” The researchers found that “Facebook had not yet issued warning labels on 68% of the Italian-language content and 70% of Spanish-language content compared to 29% of English-language content.”³ This is a significant gap exposing non-English speakers to the perils of misinformation and disinformation. We would also note that 49% of Latinos living

¹ Avaaz (2020) How Facebook can flatten the curve of the Coronavirus infodemic. Accessed online at https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook_coronavirus_misinformation/

² Constine, J. (2020) Facebook hits 2.5B users in Q4 but shares sink from slow profits. Accessed online at <https://techcrunch.com/2020/01/29/facebook-earnings-q4-2019/>

³ *Ibid*

in the United States report using WhatsApp,⁴ making them a substantial share of the Spanish speaking American community on your platforms. Given the fact that both Italy and Spain are among the top countries with the most COVID-19 cases behind the United States,⁵ it is not hard to draw a line between the language in which people consume information and the risk behaviors they expose themselves to with such limited information.

In the United States, more than 60 million people speak a language other than English of which more than 40% have limited English proficiency.⁶ Making matters worse, many non-English speakers in America have been historically marginalized people of color, which initial data suggests are being disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 virus.⁷ Making sure that people, especially our most vulnerable communities, in the United States and around the world receive the most accurate information about how to prevent and protect themselves from COVID-19 is not only a moral imperative, it's the only way we can beat this virus together.

To that end, please provide answers to the following questions by May 22, 2020:

- How is Facebook closing the gap for misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 in Spanish and other non-English languages across all its platforms?
- Please provide detailed descriptions of the policies and procedures Facebook has implemented to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19. Please provide examples of how such policies and procedures have been used to limit the misinformation and disinformation on your platform. Are those policies and procedures the same in the United States as in other countries? Are those policies and procedures uniform across other entities owned by Facebook, including Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp?
- How is Facebook specifically addressing “Groups” spreading COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation? What policies have your different platforms put in place to fact-check or shutdown these groups?
- How many people does Facebook and its platforms employ with the specific task of fact-checking information shared on its platforms regarding COVID-19? How many of them speak native-languages other than English?

⁴ Smith, A. & Anderson, M (2018) Social media use in 2018. Accessed online at <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

⁵ Duddu, P. (2020) COVID-19 coronavirus: Top 10 most-affected countries. Accessed online at <https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/features/covid-19-coronavirus-top-ten-most-affected-countries/>

⁶ Zong, J & Batalova, J. (2015) The limited English proficient population in the United States. Accessed online at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states>

⁷ Artiga, S., Orgera, K., Pham, O., & Corallo, B. (2020) Growing data underscore that communities of color are being harder hit by COVID-19. Kaiser Family Foundation. Accessed online at <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-policy-watch/growing-data-underscore-communities-color-harder-hit-covid-19/>

- How many civil-society, non-profit and/or non-governmental organizations has Facebook and its platforms partnered with to combat the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation around the world? Please provide a list of these trusted partners.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. We look forward to your responses.

Sincerely,



ROBERT MENENDEZ
UNITED STATES SENATOR



MAZIE K. HIRONO
UNITED STATES SENATOR



ELIZABETH WARREN
UNITED STATES SENATOR