

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 16, 2022

Brian Acton
Interim Chief Executive Officer
Signal Foundation
650 Castro St.
Suite 120-223
Mountain View, CO 94041

Dear Mr. Acton:

We write to express our serious concerns regarding the rise of Spanish-language misinformation and disinformation (“mis/disinformation”) targeted at Latino communities via group messaging apps. Mis/disinformation continues to disproportionately target Spanish-speaking communities across the United States, including campaigns during the 2020 presidential election¹ and the COVID-19 vaccination effort.² Mis/disinformation can spread rapidly in messaging apps with large group sizes such as Signal, which supports up to 1,000 users per group. By increasing access to reliable fact-checking across languages, hiring and adequately investing in staff who have necessary cultural-context, and implementing other tools to slow the spread of viral mis/disinformation, Signal can take preventive action to address this growing issue without compromising the integrity of private encrypted communication.

Spanish-language mis/disinformation played a significant and concerning role in the 2020 presidential election and COVID-19 vaccination effort. In the months leading up to the presidential election, disinformation campaigns targeted Latino communities in South Florida and across the U.S.³ In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, a study by First Draft, a project dedicated to fighting mis/disinformation online that includes organizations like Facebook and Twitter, found that encrypted messaging applications are used to foster and share mis/disinformation within groups and channels on these platforms, leading many Latino users into extreme and conspiratorial anti-vaccine online spaces.⁴ A 2021 study conducted by Change

¹ Ana Ceballos & Bianca Padró Ocaso, *It is getting really bad: Misinformation spreads among Florida’s Spanish-speaking voters*, Tampa Bay Times (Oct. 30, 2020)

<https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/elections/2020/10/30/it-is-getting-really-bad-misinformation-spreads-among-floridas-spanish-speaking-voters/>.

² LADL: *Nationwide Poll on COVID Vaccine*, Voto Latino (April 21, 2021), <https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/polloncovid/>.

³ Eva Marie Uzategui, *Democrats, experts warn Spanish-language disinformation is intensifying*, NBC News (Oct. 19, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/democrats-experts-warn-spanish-language-disinformation-intensifying-rcna15172>.

⁴ Jamie Longoria, et al., *A Limiting Lens: How vaccine misinformation has influenced Hispanic conversations online*, First Draft, at 18, https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/COVID-19_VACCINE_MISINFORMATION_HISPANIC_COMMUNITIES.pdf?x58095.

Research on behalf of the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab found that 66% of respondents whose primary language spoke at home is Spanish received wrong or harmful information about the COVID-19 vaccine through messaging apps like Signal.⁵ This is especially concerning because Latinos have a higher chance of being infected by, hospitalized from, and dying of COVID-19 than non-Latinos.⁶

We recognize that Signal is an encrypted messaging application, unique from other non-encrypted messaging platforms. User privacy and end-to-end encryption are critical and support fundamental rights to free speech. However, we know all too well how unchecked mis/disinformation can be weaponized to damage the most vulnerable communities in our country. We urge Signal to invest in preventive efforts to combat mis/disinformation in the context of its focus on private messaging.

As Members of Congress, we have a strong interest in combatting mis/disinformation that is harmful to Latino communities. Many members of Latino communities across the country rely on your platform in their everyday lives. Preventing the spread of content that promotes mis/disinformation, undermines public health efforts, and instills distrust in our democratic institutions must become a top priority for your organization.

We urge you to engage with our offices on this issue, and request that you respond with detailed information in writing to the following questions by June 13, 2022:

1. What staffing, analytical, and data resources does Signal allocate towards studying the spread of mis/disinformation on its platform? Are any resources devoted exclusively to studying Spanish language mis/disinformation on the platform?
2. What systems, protocols, or practices, if any, is Signal considering to prevent the spread of Spanish-language mis/disinformation on its platform?
3. Signal notes that “illegal or impermissible communications such as bulk messaging, auto-messaging, and auto-dialing” is a violation of its Terms of Service.⁷
 - a. What criteria does Signal use to deem communications as “illegal or impermissible communications?”
 - b. What active measures does Signal take to detect when “illegal or impermissible communication” is spreading on its platform?
4. Does Signal take any measures to help users quickly fact-check viral misinformation spreading on its platform?

⁵ LADL: *Nationwide Poll on COVID Vaccine*, *supra* note 2.

⁶ Will Weissert, *From vote to virus, misinformation campaign targets Latinos*, AP News (March 7, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-race-and-ethnicity-media-misinformation-9696392bf389ba8ca3441d2314abcefa>.

⁷ Signal, Signal Terms & Privacy Policy, <https://signal.org/legal/> (last visited May 4, 2022).

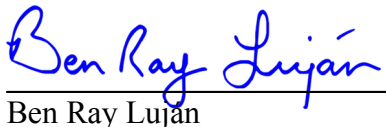
5. Does Signal indicate when a link has been forwarded many times before reaching them so users are better able to detect the spread of misinformation? What are Signal's current restrictions on message forwarding, and how does it evaluate whether those restrictions need to be tightened?
6. What factors does Signal consider prior to disabling a user account that has violated its Terms of Service?⁸
7. How many user accounts are disabled per year?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your responses and a continued dialogue that works towards eliminating harmful mis/disinformation that adversely affects Latino communities across the country and around the world.

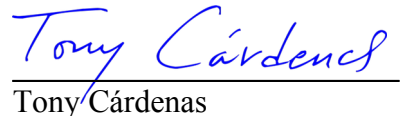
Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



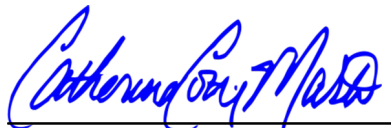
Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress



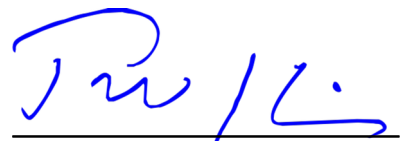
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator

⁸ *Id.*



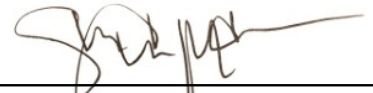
Jack Reed
United States Senator



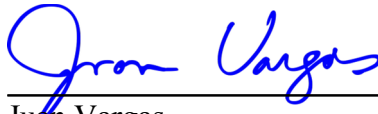
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



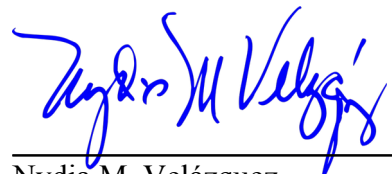
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
Member of Congress



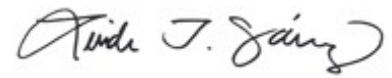
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



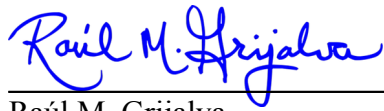
Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress



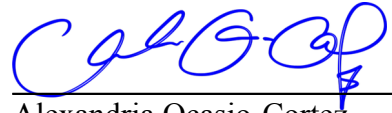
Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



Lucille Roybal-Allard
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Lauren Underwood
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress