

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 16, 2022

Pavel Durov  
Chief Executive Officer  
Telegram  
71-75 Shelton Street  
Covent Garden London  
United Kingdom

Dear Mr. Durov:

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 in the United States. Mis/disinformation continues to disproportionately target Spanish-speaking communities across the U.S., including campaigns during the 2020 presidential election<sup>1</sup> and the COVID-19 vaccination effort.<sup>2</sup> Mis/disinformation can spread rapidly in messaging apps with large group sizes such as Telegram, which supports up to 200,000 users per group. By increasing access to reliable fact-checking across languages, hiring and adequately investing in staff who have the necessary cultural context, and implementing other tools to slow the spread of viral mis/disinformation, Telegram can address this problem 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., with Telegram being one of the platforms of choice for spreading such content.<sup>3</sup> Abroad, campaigns in other non-English languages, like Portuguese, have also been prominent on Telegram and have had similarly harmful effects. For example, mis/disinformation campaigns affected the 2018 Brazilian presidential election, and there is concern that it will influence the country’s upcoming 2022 election as well.<sup>4</sup> Telegram’s option to allow as many as

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Ceballos & Bianca Padró Ocasio, *‘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/>.

<sup>2</sup> LADL: *Nationwide Poll on COVID Vaccine*, VOTO LATINO, (Apr. 21, 2021)

<https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/polloncovid/>.

<sup>3</sup> Carmen Sesin, *Democrats, experts warn Spanish-language disinformation is intensifying*, NBC NEWS, (Feb. 10, 2022) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/democrats-experts-warn-spanish-language-disinformation-intensifying-rcna15172>.

<sup>4</sup> Naiara Galarraga Gortázar, *Bolsonaro and his supporters turn to Telegram to avoid being silenced for spreading fake news*, EL PAÍS, (Jan. 15, 2022) <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2022-01-15/bolsonaro-and-his-supporters-turn-to-telegram-to-avoid-being-silenced-for-spreading-fake-news.html>.

200,000 individuals in a group with limited oversight makes it an attractive platform for bad actors seeking to rapidly spread mis/disinformation to mass audiences.<sup>5</sup> Public officials in Brazil raised such concerns in a December 2021 letter.<sup>6,7</sup>

Unfortunately, the proliferation of mis/disinformation on Telegram extends far beyond elections. 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 messaging applications like Telegram 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.<sup>8</sup> A 2021 study conducted by Change Research on behalf of the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab found that 66% of respondents whose primary language spoken at home is Spanish who received wrong or harmful information about the COVID-19 vaccine received that information through messaging apps.<sup>9</sup> This is extremely concerning because Latinos have a higher chance of being infected by, hospitalized from, and dying of COVID-19 than non-Latinos.<sup>10</sup>

We recognize your platform has taken measures to ban ISIS content through user reports, per the “ISIS Watch” channel.<sup>11</sup> While we are encouraged to see Telegram pursuing substantive steps to fight back against improper content and terrorist activity, we would like to see similar attention paid to combatting the dangers of mis/disinformation. We saw first-hand the most extreme consequences of mis/disinformation on our democracy—a violent insurrection on the U.S. Capitol.<sup>12</sup> We know all too well how mis/disinformation can be further weaponized to damage the most vulnerable communities. We urge Telegram to increase efforts to combat mis/disinformation across its platform.

As Members of Congress, we have a strong interest in combatting mis/disinformation in Spanish that is harmful to Latino communities. Many members of Latino communities across the country rely on your platform in their everyday lives. They should not have to endure a constant onslaught of content that promotes public health fabrications and election mis/disinformation

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Brazil's Bolsonaro turns to Telegram as vote nears*, FRANCE 24, (Feb. 23, 2022)

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220223-brazil-s-bolsonaro-turns-to-telegram-as-vote-nears>.

<sup>7</sup> Naiara Galarraaga Gortázar, *Bolsonaro and his supporters turn to Telegram to avoid being silenced for spreading fake news*, EL PAÍS, (Jan. 15, 2022) <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2022-01-15/bolsonaro-and-his-supporters-turn-to-telegram-to-avoid-being-silenced-for-spreading-fake-news.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Jaime Longoria, Daniel Acosta, Shaydanay Urbani, & Rory Smith, *A Limiting Lens: How Vaccine Misinformation Has Influenced Latinx and Hispanic Conversations Online*, FIRST DRAFT, 18, (Dec. 8, 2021)

[https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/COVID-19\\_VACCINE\\_MISINFORMATION\\_HISPANIC\\_COMMUNITIES.pdf?x58095](https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/COVID-19_VACCINE_MISINFORMATION_HISPANIC_COMMUNITIES.pdf?x58095).

<sup>9</sup> *LADL: Nationwide Poll on COVID Vaccine*, VOTO LATINO, (Apr. 21, 2021)

<https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/polloncovid/>.

<sup>10</sup> Will Weissert, *From vote to virus, misinformation campaign targets Latinos*, AP NEWS, (Mar. 7, 2021)

<https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-race-and-ethnicity-media-misinformation-9696392bf389ba8ca3441d2314abcefa>.

<sup>11</sup> ISIS Watch, TELEGRAM, (Dec. 26, 2016)

<https://t.me/isiswatch/2>.

<sup>12</sup> Darrel M. West, *The role of misinformation in Trump's insurrection*, BROOKINGS, (Jan. 11, 2021)

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/01/11/the-role-of-misinformation-in-trumps-insurrection/>.

simply because of their choice to use your platform. Such content sows distrust and chaos and undermines public health efforts, elections, and democratic institutions.

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 Telegram allocate towards studying the spread of mis/disinformation on its platform? Are any resources devoted exclusively to the problem of Spanish language mis/disinformation on the platform?
2. What systems, protocols, or practices, if any, is Telegram considering to combat Spanish-language mis/disinformation?
3. Is Telegram considering limiting group sizes in order to slow the spread of viral misinformation on the platform?
4. Does Telegram take any measures to help users quickly fact-check viral misinformation spreading on its platform?
5. Does Telegram indicate when a link has been forwarded many times before reaching them so users are better able to detect the spread of misinformation?
  - a. Does Telegram currently limit how many times a link can be forwarded at once to slow the viral spread of misinformation on its platform?
6. Telegram states that a consequence for confirmed spam reports on a user's account can result in a user being "limited from contacting strangers."<sup>13</sup> How many accounts are "limited" every year? What are the three leading reasons that result in user accounts being "limited?"
7. Does Telegram employ moderators to review reports of concerning content? If so, how many are employed to moderate content in:
  - a. English;
  - b. Spanish;
  - c. Other languages.

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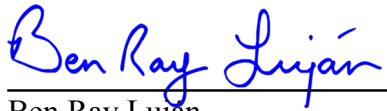
<sup>13</sup> Telegram Privacy Policy, TELEGRAM, (Aug. 14, 2018) <https://telegram.org/privacy>.

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.

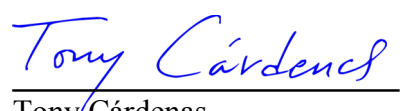
Sincerely,



Robert Menendez  
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator



Tony Cárdenas  
Member of Congress



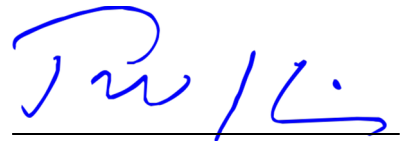
Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto  
United States Senator



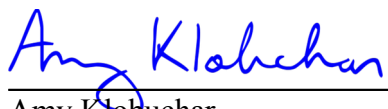
Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



Jack Reed  
United States Senator

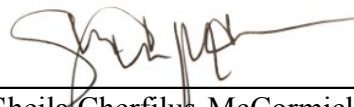


Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



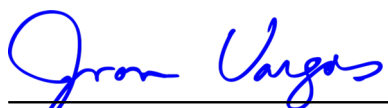
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Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator



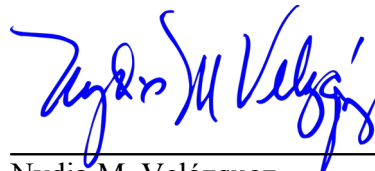
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Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick  
Member of Congress



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Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress



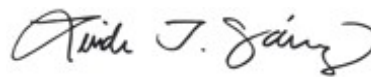
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Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



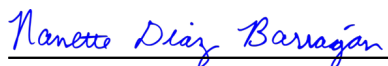
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Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress



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Linda T. Sánchez  
Member of Congress



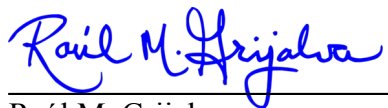
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Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress



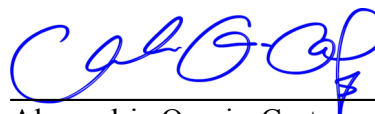
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Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Member of Congress



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Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



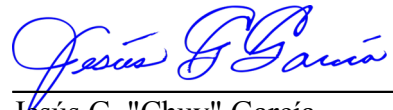
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress



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Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Member of Congress



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Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress



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Lauren Underwood  
Member of Congress



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Darren Soto  
Member of Congress