

United States Senate

April 6, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write to raise our concerns regarding the spread of dangerous misinformation about the coronavirus on Facebook-owned messaging app WhatsApp. With over 2 billion users worldwide and widespread use of the app in the United States—particularly among the immigrant community—it is imperative that Facebook act to stop the spread of factually-inaccurate and outright dangerous information about the coronavirus via WhatsApp.

On January 30, Facebook announced that it would take steps to limit the spread of misinformation and harmful content relating to the coronavirus on both its main platform and Instagram.¹ Notably, Facebook made no such commitment to combat misinformation and harmful content on WhatsApp.

Facebook’s lack of action has allowed WhatsApp to devolve into what has been called a “petri dish of coronavirus misinformation.”² Examples of false and dangerous information spread on WhatsApp include:

- a claim that a regional government in India has identified the juice of bitter melon, a vegetable often used in traditional medicine, as an effective treatment for coronavirus;³
- an advisory supposedly from the United Nations Children’s Fund including purported tips on how to avoid contracting the coronavirus, including “stay away from ice cream and other cold food;”⁴ and
- a claim that anti-malaria drug chloroquine phosphate had been approved as a cure to coronavirus.⁵

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/1/31/21116500/facebook-instagram-coronavirus-misinformation-false-cures-prevention>

² <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2020/03/whatsapp-coronavirus-misinformation/>

³ <https://factcheck.afp.com/busting-coronavirus-myths>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

In total, AFP FactCheck—the fact-checking arm of Agence France Presse—has already identified and debunked at least 140 different myths circulating around WhatsApp.⁶ The negative impact of this information on public health grew so large that Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar felt compelled to ask that people “stop sharing unverified info on What’s app [sic] groups.”⁷

While we appreciate WhatsApp’s partnership with the World Health Organization to help their users gain access to legitimate COVID-19 information, this is not enough as misinformation continues to proliferate on your platform. Experts have identified a number of steps Facebook can take to stop the spread of coronavirus misinformation on WhatsApp. For example, recognizing that misinformation often spreads through forwarded messages, WhatsApp could be altered to include a message asking people “are you sure this is true?” before they forward a message⁸ or otherwise make forwarding a message more difficult.⁹ Even better, WhatsApp could use a combination of metadata and human content moderation to stop the spread of misinformation altogether and punish bad actors (e.g., by suspending their accounts).¹⁰

Facebook’s failure to adopt these commonsense measures suggests an indifference to the problems on WhatsApp that is not only unacceptable, but dangerous. Since coronavirus was first detected in late-2019, over 1.3 million people have been infected with the disease worldwide with nearly 360,000 of the sick in the United States. Over 70,000 of these people have died with over 10,000 deaths in the United States. The spread of misinformation about the coronavirus compounds what is already an extremely difficult problem of stopping this worldwide pandemic as individuals receiving misinformation may fail to take adequate precautions and/or seek out proper medical care.

In light of these facts, it is critical that Facebook take action to stop the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus on WhatsApp. To that end, we request answers to the following questions by April 13, 2020:

1. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, what steps, if any, has Facebook taken to stop the spread of misinformation regarding the disease on WhatsApp?
2. What, if any, additional steps is Facebook currently considering to stop the spread of misinformation regarding the coronavirus on WhatsApp? When does Facebook expect to implement these steps?
3. In response to prior reports of misinformation on WhatsApp, Facebook added labels to clearly identify forwarded messages and placed certain restrictions on how many times a message could be forwarded.¹¹ Will Facebook commit to adding additional measures to make it more difficult for a user to forward a message, thereby limiting the spread of

⁶ <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2020/03/whatsapp-coronavirus-misinformation/>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/LeoVaradkar/status/1239505182221905924>

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/tech/whatsapp-coronavirus-misinformation/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/03/23/misinformation-about-covid19-spread-whatsapp/>

¹⁰ https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/whatsapp-doesnt-have-to-break-encryption-to-beat-fake-news.php

¹¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/21/18191455/whatsapp-forwarding-limit-five-messages-misinformation-battle>

misinformation?

4. It has been reported that WhatsApp is testing a new fact-checking feature for messages sent via the app.¹²
 - a. What is the status of that testing?
 - b. When will the feature be widely available to WhatsApp users?
 - c. Can the rollout of the feature be accelerated in light of the current problem of misinformation about the coronavirus on WhatsApp? If not, why not?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this critical matter. Should you have any questions, please contact Jeff Hantson in Senator Hirono's office at Jeff_Hantson@hirono.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator

¹² <https://www.cnet.com/news/whatsapp-testing-new-fact-checking-feature-for-messages-report-says/>