



Testimony - Stephanie Valencia, Co-Founder  
**EQUIS**

Hearing on:

***“A Growing Threat: The Impact of Disinformation Targeted at  
Communities of Color”***

Subcommittee on Elections, Committee on House Administration  
U.S. House of Representatives

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## Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the Committee on House Administration for having me here today.

Equis Research works to better understand Latino attitudes in the United States. Since early 2019, we have been monitoring disinformation targeting Latinos, identifying examples that violate platforms' terms of service, and comparing the treatment of disinformation in Spanish and English.

Our findings are clear: Disinformation is bad in English. But it is even worse in Spanish. I would go as far as to say that it is a problem of hemispheric proportions because of the connectivity that US Latinos have to the region. The free flow of information knows no borders.

Latinos often encounter disinformation and misinformation in part because of how much time they spend online. Increasingly, Latinos are opting to use social media platforms to get news about what is happening in the world and their place in it. YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp are some of the most used.

According to our research, 47% of Latinos use YouTube as a news source "often" in a typical week, and, overall, our communities are on the platform twice as much as non-Latino adults. It is probably fair to say that Univision's biggest competition is not just Telemundo anymore; it's the latest new influencer on YouTube trying to reach Latinos.

The same goes for messaging apps. Whatsapp is ubiquitous in the Latino community. About half of Latinos in the United States use it, more than any other ethnic or racial group in the country.

Chances are that a Latino in the US today is in multiple Whatsapp groups with their family and friends, their kid's soccer team, or maybe their local church. You will likely find the latest Que Dios Le Bendiga meme from your tia there. You'll also find disinformation and misinformation – from misleading narratives about elections and voting to false claims about COVID-19 vaccines.

WhatsApp is a POWERFUL platform but, its end-to-end encryption makes it a very efficient VECTOR for disinformation.

My point here: The reality of the highly digital Latino media landscape, combined with a sizable information gap in Spanish-language news and minority-owned media in the United States, opens up a world in which many Latinos are exposed to the very real effects of disinformation on a regular basis.



## **The Effects of Disinformation on Latinos in the United States**

One of the lasting effects of disinformation on Latinos – which is a feature not a flaw to those seeding it – is that people are losing trust in news, information and institutions, period. Latinos, like other voters, are confronted with new, strange and contradictory information presented as fact. The true danger is not that they are believing it – we found that largely they are not. Rather, they are reacting with rational skepticism to any new information they receive, true or false. As a result, too many people are unsure what to believe anymore. That is bad for our community, our country and our democracy.

In February of 2022, Equis conducted a poll of 2,400 Latinos to better understand the scope of their exposure to disinformation and how to course correct.

Our poll found Latinos had a high level of familiarity with many of the disinformation narratives we tested – from the false claim that Trump won the 2020 election to the claim that the Earth is flat.

A small subset of people did believe some false narratives; those respondents tended to be more politically engaged, college-educated and affluent – largely voters blinded by partisanship. The bulk of Latinos, however, were able to spot what was questionable. Yet while they didn't outright believe it, they didn't feel equipped to dismiss it either. They weren't sure what was true or false.

This high degree of uncertainty is a serious threat. But it is not a permanent state, and is thus easier to address than deeply-rooted beliefs. That amenability to change reinforces the value of efforts to strengthen and amplify fact-based, good information online.

## **The Flow and Sources of Spanish-Language Disinformation**

The flow of Spanish-language disinformation online is complex and frequently cyclical. Election-related disinformation and misinformation in Spanish has not stopped circulating since November 2020, and we expect it to continue to spread through the 2022 midterms and beyond. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter still have Spanish-language posts active today from November 2020 that promote election lies with no warning labels.

While Russian state-funded media has recently been blocked by YouTube globally, on Meta they continue to promote false and misleading content. RT en Español, a Russian state-controlled media outlet, continues to spread false and misleading information, as well as conspiracies, in Spanish about the situation in Ukraine.

Disinformation originating in the United States, often in English, is co-opted and spread quickly in Spanish, including by foreign accounts and influencers in Latin America, who then spread this



disinformation back to Spanish-speakers in the United States. This cycle also happens with disinformation originating from Latin America.

With many Latinos in the United States maintaining strong ties to their home countries in Latin America – we’ve found that 44% of US Latino adults get their news and information from other countries at least sometimes. Our monitoring has found that users in the United States are actively searching on YouTube for popular Spanish-language channels, including from Latin America, sometimes more than some Spanish-language news sources in the United States.

### **The Critical Gaps and Potential Solutions**

In pivoting to identifying the remaining challenges and the possible solutions, let me say this: Technology is not inherently bad. The Internet has helped foster community, kept families connected and helped small businesses. The Internet has sparked revolutions and helped us hold truth to power.

But problematic algorithms and click-first incentives are exacerbating divisions in our society. Social media platforms and technology companies use the creative nature of connection as a shield for the negative effects of an “innovate-first, ask questions later approach,” an approach that is great in principle, but which can also exacerbate the spread of disinformation in today’s hyperconnected world.

And, unfortunately for the Latino communities we work with, the solutions implemented by the social media platforms have not caught up with the problems. When it comes to disinformation, we consistently see a huge asymmetry between the way the platforms approach and treat disinformation in English and Spanish.

At the bare minimum, social media platforms need to make the investment to take the same actions on Spanish-language content as they do for English, but there is much more the platforms can be doing and more that Congress can do to hold them accountable.

I’m happy to talk more about the solutions we see going forward in the Q&A session, but I’ll leave you with this: language equity, greater transparency and more good information are all key to the fight against Spanish-language disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, and hyper-polarized uncontested narratives.

This is not an issue that can remain on the sidelines of the discussion on counter-disinformation strategies. I am but one of over 60 million Latinos living in the United States today. Latino communities account for about 20% of the US population and we were the largest ethnic minority to vote in the 2020 US presidential election.



We are diverse and complex; we are not a monolith; we do not vote as a bloc. But we are, as communities, being disproportionately impacted by the corrosive effects of disinformation.

Thank you for elevating the challenges of English- and Spanish-language disinformation targeting Latinos in the US here today, and for allowing us to discuss and debate solutions and steps to be taken in this fight.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Equis Memos to Social Media Platforms
  - a. Facebook Memo March 2022 - [HERE](#)
  - b. Twitter Memo March 2022 - [HERE](#)
  - c. YouTube Memo October 2021 - [HERE](#)
  - d. Facebook Memo September 2021 - [HERE](#)
  - e. YouTube Memo April 2021 - [HERE](#)
2. Articles
  - a. [Washington Post Op-ed by Stephanie Valencia](#)