

Written Statement of María Teresa Kumar
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Before the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
"Combating Coronavirus Cons and the Monetization of Misinformation"
November 17, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise and Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today.

I am María Teresa Kumar, founding president and CEO of Voto Latino.

Voto Latino is a digital grassroots civic media organization focused on educating and empowering a new generation of Latinx voters to create a more robust and inclusive democracy.

In 2020, Voto Latino registered more than 617,000 voters and mobilized an additional 3.7 million. Of those we registered, 77% voted. We are the nation's largest Latinx-focused voter registration and turnout organization who seeks to enfranchise every American at the voting booth. We have over 3.2 million supporters and reach roughly 11 million people a month across our digital platforms.

During the 2016 election, we witnessed the strategic targeting of political misinformation seeking to disenfranchise Latinos from exercising their constitutional right to vote.

By early 2019, a massive tidal wave of misinformation, propagated by both domestic and foreign actors, crashed onto American platforms.

Halfway through 2020, widespread misinformation regarding COVID-19 exploded at a catastrophic scale across the internet.

Headed into fall of 2020, dazzled by hundred of millions of digital advertising spending by campaigns, and a pandemic that had shown no signs of slowing down, social media companies failed to act. In fact, Facebook claimed that political advertising was a mere 1% of their revenue. According an October 2020 Business Insider article, that 1% translates into \$2.2 billion dollars since 2018.

As a result, voters were buried under higher levels of misinformation than any other election cycle in the modern age.

The orchestrated misinformation campaigns we witnessed as the pandemic wore on targeted older and less educated voters, typically white rural voters and Latinx spanish-speaking audiences.

My mother was a target.

My mother doesn't seem like one. She is an active, 70-year-old naturalized citizen who runs an elder care facility in California. She is an avid, discernible news consumer.

My mother loves her work, the people she works with, the community they care for and will do everything under her control to protect them.

But as the coronavirus impacted so many people, so did the mere idea of the vaccine. Dark forces and corrupt characters started appearing with video links on her Facebook and Whatsapp accounts.

They came from my mother's friend at the gym who received it from her brother in Houston who received it from a friend in El Salvador. She received it from her family in Colombia. And they all had a common theme: don't trust the vaccine. Don't trust the doctors and don't trust the government that is trying to inject you and harm you.

One featured a Salvadoran woman in a lab coat pretending to be a pharmacist saying, "We don't have to give the vaccine. It's a technology that is new and has never been used on humans. We shouldn't be test subjects."

The makers of the video knew that peer-to-peer transmission is the most effective to dupe users and create a sense that they must share this "coveted" information. Study after study shows that we most trust our neighbors, families and friends over government and institutions and misinformation bets on this to spread harmful, divisive, hateful and in the case of COVID - deadly propaganda.

My mother shared her hesitancy when the healthcare provider for her facility arrived to start administering coronavirus vaccines. "I'm not so sure about this," she told me over the phone. "I've heard this might be bad for me."

My mother wasn't alone.

In May 2021, Voto Latino commissioned a study that found that, among Latinx respondents who had not yet been vaccinated, 51 percent said they would likely not get vaccinated against COVID-19.

That number rose to 67 percent within Spanish-speaking households.

The two most commonly cited reasons against taking the vaccine were around safety and effectiveness. The study found that misinformation around COVID-19 and the vaccines fueled vaccine hesitancy among Latinos. For our community - vaccine hesitancy equates a death sentence.

That's when the "monetization of misinformation," to quote your hearing title, begins.

Nearly half of the respondents to our survey said that they got this inaccurate and harmful information around the vaccines from one place: Facebook.

Other studies have similar findings.

A report by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate found 31 million people following anti-vaccine groups on Facebook and 17 million subscribing to the same kinds of accounts on YouTube, owned by Google.

So why did Voto Latino get involved and how are we combatting the misinformation?

Our work found that those most vaccine hesitant were the most vulnerable. They were also less likely to place trust in government and institutions. For our democracy to work - we need trust that the institutions and those we place in office with our vote have our best interests and those we love as a priority in their leadership decision.

Eroding trust in democratically elected government and institutions is the ultimate goal of swindlers on the internet.

In 2021, Voto Latino officially launched the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab with our partners at Media Matters.

We use sophisticated media monitoring to better understand the misinformation targeting Latinos. Then, we research methods to push back on misinformation through sophisticated experimentation and measurement.

We've found that Spanish language COVID-19 misinformation remains rampant on social media platforms like Facebook and on local news channels.

So who is behind it?

On vaccine disinformation in general, look to Russia, for one.

Starting in 2020, Russia used government Twitter accounts and its own propaganda platforms from the Middle East to Latin and South America to sow distrust of Western vaccine makers while praising their own domestic effort.

Then, Russia's disinformation corps flooded anti-vaccine Facebook groups and closed WhatsApp chats with these stories and other lethal lies.

WhatsApp is also owned by Facebook.

For Spanish-language misinformation, there are a number of sources – and spreaders.

“Influencers” use mirrored or translated narratives from English language right-wing or anti-vaccine influencers.

For example, a claim originally aired by [Fox News](#) alleging that teachers in Colorado taped masks onto school children was translated by [Tierra Pura](#) & circulated in other Spanish language [channels](#). They were viewed more than 50,000 times.

The second group of spreaders are Spanish language sites.

Third are conspiratorial news sources that market themselves as “alternative” news sites. These translate misinformation narratives into Spanish while also peddling localized narratives to specific regions or countries as well.

For example, [Tierra Pura](#) has been heavily advocating against COVID-19 vaccines for children. Most of their articles claim that [children can die](#) from the COVID-19 vaccine or suffer severe adverse side effects.

And last are anti-vaccine doctors/health professionals. These narratives are especially alarming considering that their medical professional label gives them an air of legitimacy.

An example is [Noticias Rafapal](#) sharing a clip of Dr. Ryan Cole claiming that COVID-19 vaccines appear to be deactivating a receptor critical in the natural suppression of [cancer cells](#). That was viewed more than 100,000 times.

So what can we do? We’re pushing back.

This year, the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab began creating content and identifying platforms for testing. We use authentic Latinx non-actors in 15 second and 30 second direct-to-camera ads.

We then take those messages to the source: the platforms where the disinformation is being spread, using online panels, Google+YouTube Search Life, and Facebook Brand Lift.

In one study in particular, we partnered with YouTube and Google to identify zip codes within the United States that were predominantly Latino and had considerably lower vaccination rates than the national average. We split people into two groups: a control group and a treatment group. People in the treatment group got Voto Latino ads encouraging them to get vaccinated. People in the control group didn’t get our ads.

Google found that, of the people who saw our ads, they were 54 times more likely to search “get covid vaccine” on Google Search than people who didn’t get our ads.

Overall, the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab produced significant effect sizes amongst the three experiments we ran. In addition, the Lab was able to actively combat mis- and dis-information while shifting attitudes towards pro-vaccination.

These first experiments persuaded about 85,000 users. It's a small, good start, but we have a lot of work left to do.

Mr. Chairman, more than 132,000 Latinos have [died](#) from COVID-19. Compared to the non-Hispanic White population, Latinos are 1.9 times higher to get COVID, 2.8 times higher to be hospitalized, and 2.3 times higher to die. Of COVID-19 deaths, Latinos make up sizable portions by age group. For example, for those in the 35 to 44 age bracket, Latinos comprised 36.6 percent of COVID deaths - we are less than 20% of the US population. I look at my mother and the communities I work with and know that disinformation is a lethal weapon aimed directly at them.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I am happy to answer your questions.