U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

December 15, 2021

In response to U.S. Rep. Bill Foster's questions from the November 17, 2021 U.S. House Select
Subcommittee hearing, "Combating Coronavirus Cons and the Monetization of Misinformation,"
Kolina S. Koltai, PhD, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Washington's Center for an
Informed Public, offers these written responses.

Statement from Kolina S. Koltai
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1. **How has the spread of online misinformation made it easier for bad actors to
   access large numbers of Americans and convince them to purchase fraudulent
   treatments and preventive medicines?**

Bad actors have been able to capitalize on the widespread proliferation of vaccine and COVID
misinformation. Actors like Dr. Mercola and America's Frontline Doctors (AFLD) profit through
vaccine hesitancy. Either through the sales of speaking engagements, books, services,
consultations, or alternative medical products and drugs, these actors' products and services
depend on the public doubting vaccines' safety, necessity, and effectiveness. For example, AFLD
sells telehealth services and alternative drugs to treat COVID like ivermectin and
hydroxychloroquine. The success of their business model depends on the public not trusting
mainstream medical practices to treat COVID and rather on the effectiveness of those drugs.
Misinformation is the root of why people would choose treatments supported by AFLD instead
of mainstream medicine. Similarly, Dr. Mercola's book sales depend on the idea that the
mainstream information about the pandemic and vaccines are not to be trusted and rather the
information he has is the most trustworthy. His success is due to the proliferation of
misinformation.

2. **What can online platforms do to prevent groups like America's Frontline Doctors and SpeakWithAnMD.com from promoting and selling drugs like ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine?**

Depending on the platform, there are multiple things that can be done. First, by addressing COVID and vaccine misinformation overall, both online and in critical physical communities, you can limit the number of people who seek out these alternative sources. Second, the platforms that host the websites' content and financial transactions can choose not to host content or provide services to groups that profit off of misinformation. Third, online platforms can either limit the spread or remove content altogether that specifically direct user to these organizations and bad actors.

3. **What algorithmic changes would be most effective at decreasing or stopping the spread of coronavirus misinformation by groups like America's Frontline Doctors on online platforms?**

The most effective thing platforms can do is remove and de-platform users that disproportionately share and promote vaccine and COVID misinformation. If platforms are not willing to remove misinformation or users on their platforms, the biggest algorithmic change would be to at least de-rank and deprioritize misinformation content. For example, on Amazon's website, some of the top content that is recommended by Amazon are books that contain vaccine misinformation, often written by prominent anti-vaccine actors. If Amazon does not want to stop the sale of these books, they should at least prevent the algorithmic promotion of products that contain misinformation.

Thank you for your questions.

Sincerely,

Kolina Koltai

Kolina S. Koltai, Ph.D.