

**Statement for the Record of Media Matters for America
U.S. House Oversight and Reform Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus
Crisis**

November 17, 2021

**RE: “Combating Coronavirus Cons and the Monetization of
Misinformation”**

Dear Chairman James E. Clyburn, Ranking Member Steve Scalise, and Members of the Committee,

Media Matters for America is a 501(c3) media watchdog and research information center. We work daily to document how misinformation and disinformation spread in the U.S. media and online.

The following statement will illustrate how COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation has proliferated on right-wing media outlets and social media platforms and how bad actors have profited off of this misinformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic for American citizens, killing upward of half a million people. But bad actors who aim to spread dangerous and misleading misinformation to devalue and undermine the effectiveness of vaccines have dominated the conversations around the pandemic.

Right-wing media’s campaign to downplay the pandemic and undermine vaccines

The right-wing media have been a pivotal force in pushing lies about COVID-19 and the vaccines do not work or are dangerous. Fox News has been the leading misinformer in this campaign. In the first 254 days since President Joe Biden took office, Fox undermined vaccines during 99% of the days¹ despite their effectiveness² at preventing death³ and serious illness from COVID-19 and the higher rate of deaths and hospitalizations among the unvaccinated. A new poll from the

¹ Tyler Monroe, Rob Savillo, Harrison Ray, and Payton Armstrong, Media Matters for America, “Fox has undermined vaccines nearly every day in the last six months,” October 5, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/fox-has-undermined-vaccines-nearly-every-day-last-six-months>

² Lisa Maragakis and Gabor David Kelen, John Hopkins Medicine, “Is the COVID-19 Vaccine Safe?” <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/is-the-covid19-vaccine-safe>

³ Lena H. Sun and Joel Achenbach, The Washington Post, “Unvaccinated people were 11 times more likely to die of covid-19, CDC report finds,” September 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/09/10/moderna-most-effective-covid-vaccine-studies/>

Kaiser Family Foundation found that there is a strong correlation between people trusting Fox News and believing one or more pieces of COVID-19 misinformation; 36% of people who trust Fox believed or were unsure about four or more pieces of COVID-19 misinformation. ⁴ The network's hosts and guests also promoted unproven treatments like hydroxychloroquine nearly 300 times during a two-week span ⁵ and ran at least 1,000 segments that undermined coronavirus health measures over a three-month period in 2020. ⁶

Some of Fox News' most controversial coverage has been its repeated promotion of ivermectin, a drug most commonly used to treat animals, as a prophylactic or therapeutic treatment for COVID-19. ⁷ Discussions of the drug ran rampant, led by Fox hosts like Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Maria Bartiromo, Brian Kilmeade, Greg Gutfeld, and Will Cain. ⁸ These narratives emboldened questionable characters like Spotify host Joe Rogan to encourage discourse around the promotion of an anti-parasite drug that health agencies say has not been shown to be effective against the virus. ⁹

One America News Network has also spread dangerous and bizarre conspiracy theories about the coronavirus and vaccines. ¹⁰ Throughout August, OAN hosts doubled down on presenting their viewers with debunked misinformation in an unhinged attempt to discourage them from following mask mandates and getting vaccinated.

Media platforms and right-wing personalities who have peddled scam coronavirus cures and treatments

Right-wing media figures and outlets have been profiteering off of the coronavirus pandemic by promoting health grifts and scams, including supposed coronavirus treatments, preventatives, and cures. Media Matters documented media figures and outlets ¹¹ that have used various

⁴ Liz Hamel, Lunna Lopes, Ashley Kirzinger, Grace Sparks, Mellisha Stokes, and Mollyann Brodie, Kaiser Family Foundation, "KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation," November 8, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-media-and-misinformation/>

⁵ Lis Power and Rob Savillo, Media Matters for America, "Fox News has promoted hydroxychloroquine nearly 300 times in a two-week period," April 7, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-news-has-promoted-hydroxychloroquine-nearly-300-times-two-week-period>

⁶ Matt Gertz, Media Matters for America, "Misinformers of the Year: Fox News," December 30, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/misinformers-year-fox-news>

⁷ Rebecca Martin, Jane Lee, Brendan Karet, and Will DiGravio, Media Matters for America, "Timeline: Fox News has repeatedly promoted ivermectin as a therapeutic treatment for COVID-19," September 2, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/timeline-fox-news-has-repeatedly-promoted-ivermectin-therapeutic-treatment-covid-19>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alex Paterson, Media Matters for America, "Joe Rogan has recently promoted dangerous COVID-19 misinformation on his Spotify podcast," September 2, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/joe-rogan-has-recently-promoted-dangerous-covid-19-misinformation-his-spotify>

¹⁰ Bobby Lewis and Beatrice Mount, Media Matters for America, "OAN keeps pushing bizarre and dangerous misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines," September 3, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/one-america-news-network/oan-keeps-pushing-bizarre-and-dangerous-misinformation-about-covid-19-and>

¹¹ Eric Hananoki, Media Matters for America, "A guide to media personalities and outlets who are profiteering from coronavirus health scams and grifts," April 10, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/guide-media-personalities-and-outlets-who-are-profiteering-coronavirus-health>

channels, including Facebook,¹² to peddle products that can supposedly “protect” against the coronavirus, “prevent” it, or “kill” it, among other claims. These bad actors have found a way to capitalize on the fears and hesitation of the general public for a profitable gain. For example, conspiracy theorist and Infowars founder Alex Jones has been hawking a variety of supplements as coronavirus cures and preventatives, including a colloidal silver toothpaste¹³ and zinc supplements.¹⁴ Similarly, former Newsmax TV host and Las Vegas Review-Journal columnist Wayne Allyn Root has peddled an “alkaline structured silver” product as a coronavirus cure.¹⁵

How social media platforms became a breeding ground for COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation

Since early 2020, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus have also run amok on social media. From racist narratives about the virus’ origins¹⁶ to its virulence and fearmongering about the usefulness of masks,¹⁷ social media platforms have been a breeding ground¹⁸ for spreading health misinformation that has contributed to both confusion and fatalities around the world.

¹² Eric Hananoki, Media Matters for America, “Facebook says it’s removing content promoting false coronavirus preventatives and cures. These businesses are currently violating that policy.” May 1, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/facebook-says-its-removing-content-promoting-false-coronavirus-preventatives>

¹³ Timothy Johnson, Media Matters for America, “Alex Jones is telling his viewers that the toothpaste he sells kills coronavirus,” March 11, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/alex-jones-telling-his-viewers-toothpaste-he-sells-kills-coronavirus>

¹⁴ Timothy Johnson, Media Matters for America, “Alex Jones won’t stop suggesting the supplements he sells provide a benefit against the novel coronavirus,” March 26, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/alex-jones-wont-stop-suggesting-supplements-he-sells-provide-benefit-against>

¹⁵ Eric Hananoki, Media Matters for America, “Newsmax host Wayne Allyn Root endorses scammy silver product which can supposedly ‘kill’ coronavirus and ‘save your life,’” March 17, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/newsmax/newsmax-host-wayne-allyn-root-endorses-scummy-silver-product-which-can-supposedly-kill>

¹⁶ Eric Hananoki, Media Matters for America, “Facebook has profited from running racist ‘kung flu’ advertising,” June 24, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/facebook-has-profited-running-racist-kung-flu-advertising>

¹⁷ Kayla Gogarty, Carly Evans, Nena Beecham, and Jeremy Tuthill, Media Matters for America, “Hundreds of Facebook groups are stoking outrage over school policies like masking and school curricula,” November 11, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/hundreds-facebook-groups-are-stoking-outrage-over-school-policies-masking-and-school>

¹⁸ Kayla Gogarty, Carly Evans, Kellie Levine, Jeremy Tuthill, and Nena Beecham, Media Matters for America, “As COVID-19 cases surge and schools assess safety measures for the new year, Facebook is allowing anti-mask groups to thrive,” August 10, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/covid-19-cases-surge-and-schools-assess-safety-measures-new-year-facebook-allowing-anti>

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram,¹⁹ TikTok,²⁰ and YouTube²¹ have been used to organize dangerous demonstrations in violation of public health guidelines and to promote outrageous videos like “Plandemic”²² -- all as nations around the globe rush to vaccinate their citizens.

Facebook is notorious for profiting from and enabling the spread of dangerous COVID-19 misinformation -- as well as fomenting anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine forces. A large contributor to this narrative thriving on the platform are right-leaning Facebook pages. **Media Matters found at least 7,300 Facebook posts from right-leaning pages with keywords related to COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation between June 1, 2020, and February 28, 2021.** As COVID-19 vaccines were granted emergency use authorization between December 1, 2020, and February 28, 2021, there were at least 1,900 Facebook posts from right-leaning pages with keywords related to COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation.

In April 2020, Facebook announced that “events that defy government’s guidance on social distancing” wouldn’t be allowed on the platform. Facebook’s actions came after the creation of more than 100 state-specific Facebook groups to protest stay-at-home orders across the country.²³ **These groups and affiliated Facebook pages organized at least 49 different events.**²⁴ Through the course of the pandemic, Facebook has repeatedly allowed its users to organize in opposition of public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus.

In addition, Facebook has been slow to curb the spread of dangerous medical misinformation targeting COVID-19 vaccines. For instance, **Media Matters also discovered an anti-vaccine Facebook group and a network of 17 affiliated state-specific groups spreading harmful coronavirus conspiracy theories and misinformation.**²⁵ This misinformation included false claims that COVID-19 is no different from the flu and that wearing masks increases the chances of people getting the virus. And as COVID-19 cases surged this year, **Media Matters has identified 171 anti-mask groups, including 88 -- or over**

¹⁹ Spencer Silva and Alex Kaplan, Media Matters for America, “Vaccine misinformation still runs wild on Instagram,” March 23, 2021,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/vaccine-misinformation-still-runs-wild-instagram>

²⁰ Olivia Little and Chloe Simon, Media Matters for America, “TikTok’s massive COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation failure,” March 12, 2021,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/tiktok/tiktoks-massive-covid-19-and-vaccine-misinformation-failure>

²¹ Alex Kaplan, Media Matters for America, “Videos promoting ivermectin as a COVID-19 treatment are all over YouTube, despite the platform’s guidelines,” September 8, 2021,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/videos-promoting-ivermectin-covid-19-treatment-are-all-over-youtube-despite>

²² Alex Kaplan, Media Matters for America, “A coronavirus conspiracy theory film attacking vaccines has racked up millions of views and engagements on YouTube and Facebook,” May 7, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-film-attacking-vaccines-has-racked-millions>

²³ Brandy Zadrozny, NBC News, “Facebook removes some events calling for protests of stay-at-home orders,” April 20, 2020,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-removes-some-events-calling-protests-stay-home-orders-n1187811>

²⁴ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, “Facebook says it removed events violating stay-at-home orders. But, it hasn’t removed them,” April 22, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/facebook-says-it-removed-events-violating-stay-home-orders-it-hasnt-removed>

²⁵ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, “A network of anti-vaccine Facebook groups is a hotbed for coronavirus conspiracy theories and medical misinformation,” May 11, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/network-anti-vaccine-facebook-groups-hotbed-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories>

50% -- that were created between April and July 2021. ²⁶ These 171 groups push anti-mask rhetoric and misinformation to nearly 200,000 members, with many specifically targeting the use of masks by children and in schools.

Facebook's algorithm has also contributed to the spread of COVID-19 misinformation by promoting sensational content that elicits an emotional response, making it easier for such content to spread rapidly across Facebook and jump to other platforms. **For example, after a TikTok video encouraging conservative protests around the country went viral in April, the account owner created Freedom515, an organization that now has a network of 51 private Facebook groups and over 30,000 members.** ²⁷ In the months that followed, the user leveraged both platforms to organize numerous right-wing protests for people fed up with "the direction of things," including anti-masks school walkouts on September 10, which eventually forced some schools across the country to warn students and parents about them.

How COVID-19 misinformation has inundated Latinx communities

Spanish language COVID-19 misinformation is also running rampant on social media platforms, specifically on unmoderated platforms like Telegram. Latinx communities are bombarded by narratives that spread there, which often serve as a gateway to other COVID-19 misinformation disseminators like anti-vaccine social media accounts, websites, and videos. Far-right conspiracy theory channels on Telegram, channels of far-right influencers and anti-vaccine doctors, and those dedicated specifically to disseminating COVID-19 misinformation spread a slew of false or misleading narratives about the pandemic on a daily basis and are frequently left unflagged by social media platforms.

In fact, **more than 100 misleading posts about ivermectin circulated on Spanish-language Telegram channels between the months of July and early October, alone.** ²⁸ These included claims that ivermectin can or should be used to treat COVID-19, that Pfizer or another pharmaceutical company is going to make a pricier version of ivermectin, and that global elites are lying about ivermectin to dissuade people from taking it.

Earlier this year, the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab, run by Media Matters and Voto Latino, did polling about vaccine hesitancy and social media's impact in fueling disinformation about COVID-19. ²⁹ **It uncovered that 53% of Latinos had received harmful information about the vaccine on Facebook, and 44% on messaging apps such as SMS, WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram, among others. The poll showed that a majority (51%) of Latinx respondents said they believe the COVID-19 vaccine is not safe.**

²⁶ Kayla Gogarty, Carly Evans, Kellie Levine, Jeremy Tuthill, and Nena Beecham, Media Matters for America, "As COVID-19 cases surge and schools assess safety measures for the new year, Facebook is allowing anti-mask groups to thrive," August 10, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/covid-19-cases-surge-and-schools-assess-safety-measures-new-year-facebook-allowing-anti>

²⁷ Kayla Gogarty and Olivia Little, Media Matters for America, "How one anti-mask activist leveraged TikTok and Facebook to spur local school protests across the country," September 20, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/how-one-anti-mask-activist-leveraged-tiktok-and-facebook-spur-local-school-protests-across>

²⁸ M. Estrada, Media Matters for America, "Telegram is a cesspool for Spanish language misinformation about ivermectin," November 9, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/telegram-cesspool-spanish-language-misinformation-about-ivermectin>

²⁹ Voto Latino, "LADL: Nationwide Poll on COVID Vaccine," April 21, 2021, <https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/polloncovid/>

The spread of medical misinformation will continue to be one of the greatest hurdles to ending the coronavirus pandemic. Bad actors have launched a full-fledged attack on public health measures by pushing conspiracy theories that are dominating the narratives and proliferating on cable news and social media. Vulnerable populations will blindly replicate and spread the information that they are fed until stronger forces can counteract such rhetoric.

Sincerely,
Media Matters for America