



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress  
Committee on Homeland Security  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

April 14, 2020

Mr. Jack Dorsey  
Chief Executive Officer  
Twitter, Inc.  
1355 Market Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Mr. Dorsey:

I write to express my concern about a new University of Oxford study that found Twitter, Inc. (Twitter) has failed to remove or flag nearly 60 percent of false or misleading content related to COVID-19 and to inquire about how Twitter will address COVID-19 misinformation on its platform moving forward.

As the World Health Organization underscored in February, we are experiencing both a global health pandemic and a “massive ‘infodemic,’ – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”<sup>1</sup> Now more than ever, we need social media companies like Twitter to be swift, effective, and agile in addressing misinformation that could undermine public health authorities or put the health and safety of individuals at risk.

The University of Oxford reviewed of a sample of 225 distinct pieces of coronavirus misinformation rated false or misleading by professional fact-checkers. It found that Twitter allowed close to 60 percent of this content to remain on the site without any identification or warning label.<sup>2</sup> For comparison, the study found that only 27 percent of misleading content remained on YouTube, and only 24 percent remained on Facebook.

The unabated presence of misinformation on social media platforms is a problem. Last fall, a Pew Research Center survey found that over half of adults get their news from social media, and that

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<sup>1</sup> *Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report-13*, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, Feb. 2, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> J. Scott Brennen, Felix Simon, Philip N. Howard and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD INTERNET INSTITUTE AND REUTERS INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF JOURNALISM, Apr. 7, 2020, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation#responses>.

figure is increasing.<sup>3</sup> Social media platforms are replacing newspapers as primary sources of information, but do not provide the same level of context, analysis, or fact-checking. With information left unchecked, “prominent public figures continue to play an outsized role in spreading misinformation about COVID-19,” since the claims they share “often have very high levels of engagement” across platforms.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the bulk of coronavirus misinformation is not completely fabricated, but rather “involves various forms of reconfiguration where existing and often true information is spun, twisted, and recontextualized or reworked.<sup>5</sup> Under these circumstances, it is particularly difficult for ordinary citizens to distinguish fact from fiction. Addressing this type of misleading content adds a layer of complexity that may require greater investment in fact-checkers. However, as the Oxford study notes, “fact-checking is a scarce resource,” and with fact-checking organizations devoting their limited resources to COVID-19, other subjects of misinformation may spread more rampantly.<sup>6</sup>

I understand that since March 2020, Twitter has updated its policies to more aggressively police coronavirus misinformation. Specifically, Twitter’s policy is to identify “content that goes directly against guidance from authoritative sources of global and local public health information,” and prioritize removing content that urges action that could directly pose a risk to people’s health and well-being.<sup>7</sup> However, to be effective, this seemingly rigorous policy must be accompanied by similarly rigorous enforcement mechanisms, and the University of Oxford study suggests that Twitter has room for improvement.

While I appreciate Twitter’s commitment to implement a more rigorous approach to policy public health misinformation, I worry about the company’s capacity to enforce its terms.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, pursuant to Rule X(3)(g) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives, I respectfully request you provide a written response to the following questions, and whatever supplementary information you deem responsive, by May 4, 2020:

1. How is Twitter working to address the “59% of false posts [that] remain active on Twitter with no direct warning label,” identified in the University of Oxford’s study on *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*?<sup>9</sup> When was Twitter alerted to the existence of this content, and why it was not removed or labeled?

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Suci, “More Americans Are Getting Their News From Social Media,” *Forbes* (Oct. 11, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2019/10/11/more-americans-are-getting-their-news-from-social-media/#754466963e17>.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan et al., *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation* at 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>6</sup> Brennan et al., *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*.

<sup>7</sup> *An update on our continuing strategy during COVID-19*, TWITTER, Mar. 16, 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html); *Coronavirus: Staying safe and connected on Twitter*,” TWITTER, Apr. 3, 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html).

<sup>8</sup> Ryan Broderick, “Twitter Deleted Two Tweets From Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro For Spreading Coronavirus Misinformation,” BUZZFEED NEWS, Mar. 30, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/twitter-deleted-tweets-brazil-president-coronavirus>.

<sup>9</sup> Brennan et al., *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation* at 7.

2. How has Twitter adjusted its policies on misinformation in response to COVID-19, and what makes this approach different from other common categories of misinformation, such as politically motivated misinformation or election interference?
3. Has Twitter made any changes to the policies on content shared by public officials, as described in *World Leaders on Twitter: principles & approach*,<sup>10</sup> or is Twitter contemplating any changes to such policy? Does Twitter's policy on COVID-19 misinformation apply differently to content shared or statements made by public officials, as opposed to other users?
4. The Oxford University study specifically commends the decisions of Twitter and other social media platforms to remove misinformation shared by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro praising hydroxychloroquine and disparaging social distancing. Does this reflect a change in Twitter's policy on removing misinformation by public officials?
5. In the University of Oxford study, researchers highlight the challenge of "capturing the reach of misinformation spread via TV" and other non-social media platforms. How would Twitter's policy on COVID-19 misinformation apply to, for instance, a public figure posting a video of a cable news broadcast wherein the content of the information was false or misleading, or otherwise violated Twitter's "broadened definition of harm"?
6. Is Twitter planning to invest any additional resources, either internally or with external partners like the International Fact-checking Network, to increase the pool of professional, independent fact-checkers capable of managing the influx of COVID-19 misinformation?
7. How is Twitter working with other social media companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, to harmonize efforts to address misinformation regarding COVID-19?
8. How is Twitter working with public health authorities in the United States and internationally, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, to combat coronavirus misinformation?

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



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Bennie G. Thompson  
Chairman

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<sup>10</sup> *World Leaders on Twitter: principles & approach*, TWITTER, Oct. 15, 2019, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/worldleaders2019.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/worldleaders2019.html).