

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 10, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., President-elect
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear President-elect Biden,

Thank you for committing to a bold and science-based response to the pandemic and naming leading public health experts to your COVID-19 Task Force. Your focus on addressing the public health and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus outbreak reflects the gravity of the challenge our nation currently faces. We write to recommend that you incorporate a focus on misinformation within your broader COVID-19 response, including by adding a leading misinformation studies expert to the Task Force. This expertise will be particularly important as our country's public health objectives will soon shift to ensuring Americans get vaccinated.

COVID-19 has been an enormously destabilizing force for all of society, especially for our institutions we depend on for expertise and authoritative information, which have experienced declining public confidence exacerbated by the Trump Administration. Earlier this year, as public health agencies began the arduous process to understand how the virus spreads, how to diagnose it, and how best to contain it, the dearth of authoritative information provided a boon for bad actors seeking to exploit the public's fear and confusion. We saw a proliferation of conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19,¹ criminal efforts to sell fake treatments and bogus cures,² foreign efforts to generate distrust in our public health efforts,³ and a sustained effort by President Trump to spread disinformation.⁴ In June and July, the World Health Organization (WHO) hosted its first conference on the role of the 'infodemic,' which the WHO calls "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – occurring during an epidemic," underscoring how the pandemic is operating in an evolving information and media context.⁵


Understanding and addressing misinformation – and the wider phenomena of declining public trust in institutions, political polarization, networked social movements, and online information environments that create fertile grounds for the spread of falsehoods – is a critical part of our nation's public health response. Perhaps nowhere is this more pressing than in our efforts to encourage adoption of COVID-19 vaccines. Like you, we welcomed the news of multiple vaccine candidates' impressive efficacy in trials in the last month. While we're optimistic a vaccine will aid our country in short order, we worry that misinformation threatens the success of a national vaccine program. A decade of misinformation on the safety and efficacy of vaccines, propelled in recent years by social media platforms, has laid the foundation for skepticism and opposition towards the COVID-19 vaccines. In November, four in ten Americans said they would not agree to be vaccinated against COVID-19 if an FDA-approved vaccine was available at no cost. While this is an improvement from September when half of Americans said they wouldn't agree to be vaccinated, it's still a frighteningly high number. Furthermore, these numbers are worse for women, people with no college degree, and racial minorities, whose distrust is further compounded by the legacy of sexism and racism in America's health system.⁶ The COVID-19 infodemic is about to dangerously intersect with a misinformation-laden anti-vaccine movement that has led to tragic consequences in our country.⁷

These concerns motivate us to urge you to add a member to the Task Force who has a deep understanding of misinformation, including its causes, exacerbating factors, and ways to combat it. Professor Joan Donovan is ideally situated for the role. She is one of the world's leading scholars of misinformation, currently acting as the Research Director of the Harvard Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy and as Director of the Center's Technology and Social Change Research Project. This year, Professor Donovan testified at two House hearings on misinformation – first at the Energy and Commerce Committee in January⁸ and at the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in October⁹.

Professor Donovan also has a background in health and life sciences and has recently been studying COVID-19 misinformation. After earning a Ph.D. in Sociology & Science Studies, she was a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA's Institute for Society and Genetics. This year, Professor Donovan has had her COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation research published in the prestigious journals of *Nature*,¹⁰ the *American Journal of Public Health*,¹¹ and the *MIT Technology Review*¹². She has also been working with the WHO, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide training, education, and research on combating medical misinformation. We've enclosed a copy of her extensive curriculum vitae for you.

Thank you again for your commitment to addressing the unprecedented economic and public health crisis COVID-19 has precipitated. As we seek to galvanize a whole-of-society effort to address these twin threats, attention to the threat of misinformation to that response will be critically important.

Most gratefully,



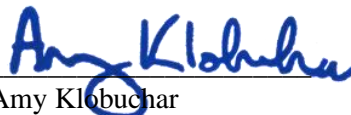
Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress



Mark R. Warner
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Amy Klobuchar
Member of Congress



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

Enclosure

¹ Mark Scott and Steven Overly, “Conspiracy Theorists, Far-Right Extremists Around the World Seize on the Pandemic,” *Politico*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/12/trans-atlantic-conspiracy-coronavirus-251325>; Monika Evstatieva, “Anatomy of A COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory,” *NPR*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/10/889037310/anatomy-of-a-covid-19-conspiracy-theory>.

² Kevin Johnson and Kala Kachmar, “Fraud Follows Coronavirus Spread; Fake Vaccines, Testing, Investment Scams Are Exacting A Toll,” *USA Today*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/04/03/coronavirus-fraud-fake-tests-bogus-cures-and-vaccines-take-root/5112827002/>; Colleen Tressler, “More FTC Warnings About Scam Coronavirus Treatments,” (Federal Trade Commission, June 4, 2020), <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/2020/06/more-ftc-warnings-about-scam-coronavirus-treatments>.

³ Mark Scott, “In Race for Coronavirus Vaccine, Russia Turns to Disinformation,” *Politico*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/covid-vaccine-disinformation-russia/amp/>.

⁴ Jessica Guynn, “From COVID-19 to Voting: Trump Is Nation’s Single Largest Spreader of Disinformation, Studies Say,” *USA Today*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/10/05/trump-covid-19-coronavirus-disinformation-facebook-twitter-election/3632194001/>.

⁵ “1st WHO Infodemiology Conference: How Infodemics Affect the World & How They Can Be Managed” (World Health Organization, June and July 2020), https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/epi-win/infodemic-management/infodemiology-scientific-conference-booklet.pdf?sfvrsn=179de76a_4.

⁶ RJ Reinhart, “More Americans Now Willing to Get COVID-19 Vaccine” (Gallup, November 17, 2020), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/325208/americans-willing-covid-vaccine.aspx>.

⁷ Sara Novak, “The Long History of America’s Anti-Vaccination Movement,” *Discover Magazine*, November 26, 2018, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/health/the-long-history-of-americas-anti-vaccination-movement>.

⁸ Hearing on “Americans at Risk: Manipulation and Deception in the Digital Age,” Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce of the Committee on Energy and Commerce (House of Representatives, January 8, 2020), <https://energycommerce.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-on-americans-at-risk-manipulation-and-deception-in-the-digital>.

⁹ Hearing on “Misinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and ‘Infodemics’: Stopping the Spread Online,” House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (October 15, 2020), <https://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=111087>.

¹⁰ Joan Donovan, “Social-Media Companies Must Flatten the Curve of Misinformation,” *Nature*, April 14, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01107-z>.

¹¹ Joan Donovan, “Concrete Recommendations for Cutting Through Misinformation During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. S3 (October 1, 2020): S286–87, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305922>.

¹² Joan Donovan, “Here’s How Social Media Can Combat the Coronavirus ‘Infodemic,’” *MIT Technology Review*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/03/17/905279/facebook-twitter-social-media-infodemic-misinformation/>.