

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 19, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20011

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are deeply concerned that foreign actors are weaponizing disinformation to undermine efforts by the United States Government and our global partners to inform the public about efforts to address the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We urge the State Department—in partnership with other U.S. agencies—to address troubling false narratives regarding the coronavirus.

Recent EU reports of Russian efforts to sow disinformation about COVID-19 echo warnings made by Lea Gabrielle, the Special Envoy of the Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC), to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Russia is behind "swarms of online, false personas" seeking to spread misinformation about COVID-19 on social media sites. According to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, these malign activities demonstrate how false narratives about COVID-19 are "truly global and spread faster than the virus itself." As such, we encourage the GEC to continue, and expand as appropriate, its work with other relevant U.S. Federal agencies and global partners to combat these false narratives in both the public and private sector. We also ask that the Department provide Congress with copies of GEC's latest reports on the matter.

Moreover, now that the World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic, cybercriminals are loading malicious software onto tracking maps, government reports, and health fact sheets in multiple languages. A recent study by the Israel-based cybersecurity group Check Point revealed that Chinese hackers (such as "Vicious Panda") pose an "advanced persistent threat" in this sphere and are likely being funded by the Chinese government. Furthermore, despite efforts by companies like WhatsApp to work with governments and other partners to mitigate the spread of false information on their social media platforms, disinformation continues to be shared unabated in countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, and Brazil.

This global challenge requires international leadership that the United States is uniquely positioned to provide and one that the GEC was specifically established to coordinate. Similarly, U.S. officials should refrain from using derogatory and inaccurate language that attributes COVID-19 to a specific region or country, including "Wuhan virus" or "foreign virus." Such

terminology plays directly into the hands of malign actors who wish to undermine international efforts to combat the virus in a coordinated manner.

The White House's March 11 meeting with IT leaders—including Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Twitter—and federal health authorities on this global challenge reinforced the need for a whole-of-society approach to counter these dangerous actors during an unprecedented global pandemic. We urge the State Department, and the GEC in particular, to maximize its interagency COVID-19 counter disinformation strategy and to include the private sector in its efforts. Combating malign influences regarding COVID-19 is not only in the national interest of the United States, but also in the interest of the global community. Thank you for your consideration of these issues and your timely response.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator