

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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August 28, 2023

Mandy K. Cohen, MD, MPH  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dear Director Cohen:

I am continuing to review the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) efforts to coordinate with social media companies to censor COVID-19 vaccine information, which led to the censoring of my own tweet on January 3, 2022 that highlighted data from a U.S. government database. Based on recent information I have received from X Corp., the successor to Twitter, Inc. (hereinafter "Twitter"), as well as documents that have been made public through the discovery process of state-led lawsuits against the Biden administration, it is clear that CDC abused its authority by engaging in a censorship campaign to suppress and discredit certain viewpoints it labeled as "misinformation."<sup>1</sup>

On January 3, 2022, I wanted to share with the public information from the U.S. government's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) regarding the COVID-19 vaccines. In a tweet, I examined and compared government data on the number of adverse events reports associated with COVID-19 vaccines, medications used to treat COVID-19, and non-COVID-19 medications.<sup>2</sup> After I tweeted the information from my official U.S. Senate Twitter account, Twitter labeled it "misleading" and blocked all replies, shares, or likes for the tweet.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, during a September 14, 2022 Senate hearing, I asked then-Twitter official Jay Sullivan to explain why Twitter censored government data on my Twitter account.<sup>4</sup> His failure to adequately respond resulted in me sending Twitter a letter on September 21, 2022, requesting information about its censorship policies and its coordination with U.S. public health agencies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from John Moran, Counsel, X Corp., to Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 5, 2023 (on file with Subcomm.).

<sup>2</sup> Ron Johnson (@SenRonJohnson), TWITTER (Jan. 5, 2022, 6:33 PM), <https://twitter.com/SenRonJohnson/status/1478863592606867463>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Social Media's Impact on Homeland Security: Hearing Before the S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs*, 117th Cong. (2022) (statement of Jay Sullivan, General Manager, Bluebird) *video available at* <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/social-medias-impact-on-homeland-security>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*; Letter from Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, to Parag Agrawal, CEO, Twitter, Inc., Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/services/files/BBA12A95-A373-47A1-B376-7482AC96E6F1>.

Many months later, and under new leadership, Twitter finally provided a substantive response to my inquiry and confirmed that:

[T]hroughout 2021, **Executive Branch officials, particularly from the Center[s] for Disease Control (CDC) within the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), communicated with social media companies, including Twitter, about “COVID Vaccine Misinformation”**; and that CDC identified “misleading information about VAERS reports” as a specific subset of “COVID Vaccine Misinformation” which they **encouraged social media companies to address.**<sup>6</sup>

Although many of the documents Twitter produced to me had already been made public by certain state attorneys general as part of lawsuits against the Biden administration, the information Twitter provided showed a clear and concerted effort by the CDC to censor those who tweeted about VAERS data. Based on the timeline below, it appears that CDC’s efforts to coordinate with Twitter to discredit posts about VAERS shortly followed my own public statements about VAERS data and the mainstream media’s condemnation of my remarks:

**Timeline: Sen. Johnson’s Use of VAERS, the Press’ Condemnation of the Senator’s Remarks, and CDC’s Coordination with Twitter to Censor VAERS Posts**

**May 6, 2021:** On the Vicki McKenna radio show, Sen. Johnson first cites to VAERS data regarding deaths associated with the COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>7</sup>

**May 10, 2021:** *CNN* reports on Sen. Johnson’s comments about VAERS calling it, “anti-vaccine misinformation.”<sup>8</sup>

**May 12, 2021:**

- The *Washington Post* runs a story condemning Sen. Johnson’s references to VAERS, calling it an “unscientific use of vaccine and death data.”<sup>9</sup>
- Sen. Johnson releases a full response to the *Washington Post*’s hit piece, underscoring the “need to take the VAERS findings seriously” and that CDC called VAERS the “early warning system used to monitor adverse events that happen after vaccination.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from John Moran, Counsel, X Corp., to Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 5, 2023 (emphasis added) (on file with Subcomm.).

<sup>7</sup> Salvador Rizzo, Ron Johnson’s unscientific use of vaccine and death data, *WASH. POST*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/12/ron-johnsons-unscientific-use-vaccine-death-data/>; Press release, Washington Post “Fact Check”, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, May 12, 2021, <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/2021/5/washington-post-fact-check>.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes Lybrand and Tara Subramaniam, Fact-checking Sen. Ron Johnson’s anti-vaccine misinformation, *CNN*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/07/politics/ron-johnson-vaccine-misinformation-fact-check/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Salvador Rizzo, Ron Johnson’s unscientific use of vaccine and death data, *WASH. POST*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/12/ron-johnsons-unscientific-use-vaccine-death-data/>.

<sup>10</sup> Press release, Washington Post “Fact Check”, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, May 12, 2021, <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/2021/5/washington-post-fact-check>.

**May 13, 2021:** Sen. Johnson publishes an op-ed and cites to VAERS reports of deaths and hospitalizations associated with the COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>11</sup>

**May 14, 2021:** Carol Crawford, Chief of the Digital Media Branch of CDC’s Office of Public Affairs, provides representatives from social media platforms, including Twitter, a presentation entitled “COVID Vaccine Misinformation: Hot Topics.”<sup>12</sup>

- Twitter noted that CDC “warned” social media companies to “Be On the Lookout” for information about specific categories of “COVID Vaccine Misinformation,” including “Falsified VAERS Report” and “Potentially Misleading VAERS Posts.”<sup>13</sup>
- CDC’s presentation consists of nine slides, with one containing the advisory below regarding misinformation about VAERS:<sup>14</sup>

*CDC’s Advisory to Twitter about VAERS*

<b>ADVISORY</b>	
<b>Potential Misinformation</b> has been identified about the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS).	
Please <b>Be On the Lookout</b> for: Statements, pictures, posts, or messages containing misleading information about VAERS reports.	
<b>When</b>	December 2020 – Present
<b>Where</b>	Digital Platform(s): All.
<b>Status</b>	Users frequently share data and reports from VAERS that may be confusing or misleading to readers without further background or context about VAERS.
<b>Potential Impact</b>	Reduced vaccine acceptance and confusion.
<b>The Facts</b>	VAERS is a passive reporting system, meaning it relies on individuals to send in reports of their experiences to CDC and FDA. VAERS is not designed to determine if a vaccine caused a health problem but is especially useful for detecting unusual or unexpected patterns of adverse event reporting that might indicate a possible safety problem with a vaccine.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Johnson, Getting vaccinated is a personal choice, WASH. EXAMINER, May 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/getting-vaccinated-is-a-personal-choice>.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from John Moran, Counsel, X Corp., to Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 5, 2023 (on file with Subcomm.).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> COVID Vaccine Misinformation: Hot Topics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 14, 2021, slide 4 (on file with Subcomm). Also available at Missouri v. Biden, No. 3:22-cv-01213-TAD-KDM (W.D. La. July 12, 2022), Document 45-1, PageID# 1838.

- CDC’s presentation also includes the following examples of posts that it apparently wanted social media companies to be on the lookout for:<sup>15</sup>

*CDC’s Examples of Misleading Posts about VAERS*



**June 28, 2021:** At a roundtable in Milwaukee, WI, Sen. Johnson presents charts on COVID-19 vaccine adverse events based on VAERS data.<sup>16</sup>

**November 5, 2021:** CDC attempts to arrange another briefing with Twitter to discuss VAERS misinformation.<sup>17</sup>

- In an email to a Twitter official with the subject line, “Discuss VAERS Misinformation with a CDC Expert?” Ms. Crawford writes, “**As you probably are aware, people citing CDC VAERS data incorrectly is a major source of misinformation about COVID.** One of our experts on the VAERS system has already briefed another tech platform to

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Press Release, Sen. Johnson: “These Families Have a Very Simple Request: They Want to be Seen, Their Stories Heard. They Would Like To Be Believed”, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, June 29, 2021, <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/2021/6/sen-johnson-these-families-have-a-very-simple-request-they-want-to-be-seen-their-stories-heard-they-would-like-to-be-believed>.

<sup>17</sup> Emails between Carol Crawford, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and [Redacted], Twitter, Inc., Nov. 5, 2021 (on file with Subcomm). Also available at *Missouri v. Biden*, No. 3:22-cv-01213-TAD-KDM (W.D. La. July 12, 2022), Document 71-6, PageID# 2627-2628.

answer some of their policy team questions. Would Twitter be interested in [a] short 30 minute briefing & Q/A on the topic?”<sup>18</sup>

**November 18, 2021:** According to Twitter, the CDC briefing occurs.<sup>19</sup>

**January 3, 2022:** Sen. Johnson tweets about VAERS data.<sup>20</sup> Below is an image of the censored tweet:

*Sen. Ron Johnson's Censored Tweet, Jan. 3, 2022*

**Senator Ron Johnson** @SenRonJ... · 2d

Sadly, we passed two milestones on VAERS. Over 1 million adverse events and over 21,000 deaths. 30% of those deaths occurred on day 0, 1, or 2 following vaccination. When will federal agencies start being transparent with Americans? Why do they continue to ignore early treatment?

	Adverse events	Deaths	Deaths/year
<small>1/1/1996 - 9/30/2021:</small>			
Ivermectin	3,756	393	15
HCQ	23,355	1,770	69
Flu vaccines	197,816	2,001	77
Dexamethasone	83,599	15,910	618
Tylenol	112,244	26,356	1,024
<small>Since 2020:</small>			
Remdesivir	6,504	1,612	921
<small>In 22 months:</small>			
Covid vaccines	1,000,229	21,002	21,002

**Misleading**  
Learn why health officials consider COVID-19 vaccines safe for most people.  
[Find out more](#)

This Tweet can't be replied to, shared, or liked.

**January 5, 2022:** Twitter labels Sen. Johnson’s January 3, 2022 tweet as “Misleading . . . treating [it] as a violation of [Twitter’s] User Agreement,” despite the tweet using data that was entirely generated from the CDC’s own database.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Letter from John Moran, Counsel, X Corp., to Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 5, 2023 (on file with Subcomm.).

<sup>20</sup> Ron Johnson (@SenRonJohnson), TWITTER (Jan. 5, 2022, 6:33 PM), <https://twitter.com/SenRonJohnson/status/1478863592606867463>.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from John Moran, Counsel, X Corp., to Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 5, 2023 (on file with Subcomm.).

- Twitter subsequently informed my office that while it did not identify any communications with Executive Branch officials about my tweet, Twitter “cannot state definitively that no such communication ever occurred.”<sup>22</sup>

CDC’s efforts to discredit VAERS data stand in stark contrast to CDC’s initial commitment to rely on VAERS for the COVID-19 vaccines. In October 2020, before the vaccines for COVID-19 were approved, CDC’s Dr. Tom Shimabukuro said, “VAERS is the national passive surveillance or spontaneous reporting system that is co-managed by CDC and FDA. VAERS can rapidly detect safety signals and can detect rare adverse events.”<sup>23</sup> He added,

VAERS traditionally has provided the initial data on the safety profile of new vaccines when they are introduced. For COVID, vaccine reports will be processed within one to five business days, depending on the seriousness of the report. CDC and FDA receive updated datasets daily, and data mining runs are planned to be conducted every one to two weeks. So this is an example of the timeliness and responsiveness of VAERS going back to H1N1.<sup>24</sup>

CDC’s campaign to encourage social media companies to suppress CDC’s own data appears to be a blatant attempt to mislead the public about adverse events associated with the COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>25</sup> In order to better understand CDC’s apparent abuse of power, I request the following information:

1. All records<sup>26</sup> between and among CDC employees and employees of Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube regarding social media posts of the following individuals from December 1, 2019 – present:
  - a. Ron Johnson;
  - b. Brianne Dressen;
  - c. John Ioannidis;
  - d. Robert Kennedy, Jr.;
  - e. Pierre Kory;
  - f. Theresa Long;
  - g. Robert Malone;
  - h. Peter McCullough;

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, CENTER FOR BIOLOGICS EVALUATION AND RESEARCH, 161ST VACCINES AND RELATED BIOLOGICAL PRODUCTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING 94 (OCT. 22, 2020), *transcript available at* <https://www.fda.gov/media/143982/download>.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 95.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to Twitter, CDC worked with other social media companies regarding COVID misinformation. For example, at a September 14, 2022 Senate hearing a YouTube official told Senator Johnson that the company worked with CDC when developing their COVID misinformation policies. *Social Media’s Impact on Homeland Security: Hearing Before the S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs*, 117th Cong. (2022) (statement of Neal Mohan, Chief Product Officer, YouTube) <https://plus.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-7565822?0>.

<sup>26</sup> “Records” include any written, recorded, or graphic material of any kind, including letters, memoranda, reports, notes, electronic data (emails, email attachments, and any other electronically-created or stored information), calendar entries, inter-office communications, meeting minutes, phone/voice mail or recordings/records of verbal communications, and drafts (whether or not they resulted in final documents).

- i. Harvey Risch; and
  - j. Aaron Siri.
2. All records referring or relating to the CDC's interactions with companies in the private sector, and other third-party groups, such as nonprofit organizations, regarding disinformation, misinformation, disfavored speech, content moderation, any form of censorship or suppression of online speech, or the development of COVID-19 misinformation policies.
3. All records referring or relating to the CDC's interactions with other federal agencies regarding disinformation, misinformation, disfavored speech, content moderation, any form of censorship or suppression of online speech, or development of COVID-19 misinformation policies.
4. All records referring or relating to "Be On the Lookout" topics related to COVID-19 identified by the CDC, including but not limited to all communications to or from CDC employee Carol Crawford.
  - a. When did CDC first develop the "Be On the Lookout" advisories?
5. A list of all social media posts that the CDC identified to a social media company, or other company or third-party group, as containing misinformation, disinformation, or generally disfavored speech.

Please provide this information by no later than September 11, 2023. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson  
Ranking Member  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

cc: The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
Chairman  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

The Honorable Christi A. Grimm  
Inspector General  
Department of Health and Human Services