



December 20, 2018

Representative Katherine Clark
2448 Rayburn Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Elizabeth Warren
317 Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Edward Markey
255 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Representative Clark and Senators Markey and Warren,

As Vice President and Chief Program Officer of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), I write to express our grave concern over recent news reports indicating a fake Facebook account was used to impersonate a prominent member of Honduran civil society, Bartolo Fuentes, and to boost participation in a caravan (a.k.a. exodus) of asylum-seekers from Honduras in early October 2018.¹

As an influential member of Congress, I ask that you personally contact the leadership of Facebook to request they publicly reveal the identities of the persons or agencies involved in the creation of this false account. Future efforts to protect civil society actors from the appropriation of their identity, and to guard against efforts to manipulate the very real refugee crisis in Honduras for political ends, depend critically on this information.

UUSC is a Massachusetts-based human rights organization with over 40,000 members and supporters around the country. As an organization committed to the advancement of human rights, including the right to seek asylum from persecution, UUSC has been active in Honduras for several years. We are a partner and supporter of Radio Progreso, a non-profit radio station that serves as a faith-based voice for human rights reporting throughout Honduras. Bartolo Fuentes has worked with Radio Progreso in the past and is a trusted human rights advocate, who accompanied the recent migrant caravan on the first stage of its journey.

According to findings first reported on December 6, 2018 by BuzzFeed, an imposter Facebook account used Fuentes' name to promote participation in the caravan in October 2018, without his knowledge or consent. This account also used Fuentes' identity to falsely claim that an advocacy organization, Pueblos Sin Fronteras, was involved in organizing the caravan, despite their actual concerns that the timing might be used to fuel an anti-immigrant backlash ahead of the U.S. midterm elections.²

Shortly after the caravan began its journey, these fears were borne out. President Donald Trump promoted a variety of false claims about the caravan in the run-up to the midterm elections,³ some of which appear to have motivated the perpetrator of the Tree of Life synagogue massacre on October 27, 2018, in which 11 people were murdered.⁴

The extent of participation in the October 2018 caravan reveals the urgency of the crisis of violence, impunity, and displacement that drives many Hondurans to seek asylum in the United States. The role of the imposter account in no way diminishes the reality of this underlying humanitarian need. However, it

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does point to the disturbing possibility that malicious actors may seek to manipulate the refugee crisis in Honduras for ends detrimental to human rights and destabilizing to democracy in the region.

While any conjectures as to the identity of the actors behind the imposter account are speculative at this stage, recent reports have shed light on the way in which foreign entities have routinely used social media platforms – particularly Facebook – to undermine U.S. political institutions and our democratic process. These include two Senate Intelligence Committee reports released on December 17, 2018, which detail fake news dissemination, racially-targeted voter suppression, and other propaganda efforts linked to Russian agents attempting to influence the outcome of the 2016 election.⁵ One of the reports notes these efforts are ongoing and active.⁶

Earlier reports indicated that similar election interference may have taken place in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections, as Facebook blocked a number of accounts in late October that were believed to be linked to foreign entities.⁷ At the time, Facebook pledged to inform the public once they learned more about these accounts, including whether they were tied “to the Russia-based Internet Research Agency or other foreign entities.”⁸

Facebook must make good on this promise of greater transparency. After numerous revelations that the platform has been used for deceitful and malicious purposes, including hate speech linked to genocide against the Rohingya minority in Burma, Russia-backed interference in the 2016 elections, and housing discrimination in the United States, Facebook owes it to the public to reveal what it knows regarding the impersonation of Fuentes.

We ask that you use the influence and moral authority of your office to press Facebook to fulfill its obligations to the public by providing this information, thereby helping to protect courageous members of Honduran civil society and others from similar attempts at impersonation and manipulation.

Sincerely,



Rachel Gore Freed
Vice President and Chief Program Officer

Cc: Senator Burr, Chairman, U.S Senate Select Intelligence Committee
Senator Warner, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Select Intelligence Committee
Representative Nunes, Chairman, U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
Representative Schiff, Ranking Member, U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

¹ Ken Bensinger and Karla Zabłudovsky, “A Mysterious Imposter Account Was Used On Facebook To Drum Up Support For The Migrant Caravan,” *BuzzFeed News*, December 6, 2018. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kenbensinger/a-mysterious-imposter-account-was-used-on-facebook-to-drum-up-support-for-the-migrant-caravan>

² *Ibid.*
³ Salvador Rizzo, “A caravan of phony claims from the Trump administration,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/25/caravan-phony-claims-trump-administration/>

⁴ Adam Serwer, “Trump’s Caravan Hysteria Led to This,” *The Atlantic*, October 28, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/caravan-lie-sparked-massacre-american-jews/574213/>

⁵ Sheera Frenkel, Daisuke Wakabayashi and Kate Conger, “Facebook, Twitter and YouTube Withheld Russia Data, Reports Say,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/technology/tech-companies-russian-interference.html>.

⁶ Renee DiResta et. al., “The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,” New Knowledge <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/533-read-report-internet-research-agency/7871ea6d5b7bedafbf19/optimized/full.pdf>.

⁷ Hannah Kozłowska, “What’s happening on Facebook this midterm election is scarier than ever,” *Quartz*, November 6, 2018. <https://qz.com/1453127/facebook-manipulation-this-midterm-election-is-scarier-than-ever/>

⁸ Facebook, “Election Update,” Newsroom, November 5, 2018. <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/11/election-update/>.