



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #18

April 20, 2021 - April 27, 2021

This report was created by analysts from the [Virality Project](#), a coalition of research entities focused on real-time detection, analysis, and response to COVID-19 anti-vaccine mis- and disinformation. The Virality Project aims to support information exchange between public health officials, government, and social media platforms through weekly briefings and real-time incident response.

Public officials and health organizations interested in officially joining this collaboration can reach the partnership at info@viralityproject.org.

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Key Takeaways

- The Virality Project [published a rapid response analysis on vaccine shedding narratives](#) targeting women and found that **general concerns about vaccine impact on women's health may enable the spread of false shedding claims.**
- Concerns stemming from an **Israeli study linking vaccines to shingles** and **CDC reports on a limited number of breakthrough cases** spread within vaccine hesitant online communities, though **negative engagement has largely declined.**
- An **unfounded story about a girl who was hospitalized after receiving a vaccine** should be taken as a warning that anti-vaccine narratives will focus on children as we progress towards vaccine authorization for them.

Events this week:

This section contains key events from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners.

Vaccine “shedding” narrative about menstrual cycles creates confusion about COVID-19 vaccines’ impact on women’s health among anti-vaccine and wellness communities.

- Vaccine shedding, the phenomenon of vaccinated individuals spreading the disease for which they were immunized, is [not possible](#) for US-administered COVID-19 vaccines.
- [Anti-vaccine activists have historically used](#) claims of vaccine shedding to create fear around other vaccines. Anti-vaccine activists have updated this trope to spread a false narrative that unvaccinated women can experience abnormal menstruation and fertility issues from coming in contact with vaccinated women.
- What is particularly novel about this shedding narrative for COVID-19 is that it alleges the spread of side effects rather than the virus itself.
- This narrative has gained traction within the anti-vaccine community and also QAnon and wellness communities.
- **Takeaway:** [As discussed in our rapid response analysis](#), this story may open the door for those with large platforms to link women’s health to vaccines via false claims, and also introduce others to more sensationalized narratives that may grab more attention.

Israeli study with small sample size finds correlation between Pfizer vaccine and shingles. Online users twist the findings to suggest a link between vaccines and herpes.

- [Researchers in Israel](#) identified 6 cases of a possible link between the Pfizer vaccine and shingles (*herpes zoster*). Headlines about the study have led to confusion on all platforms among anti-vaccine users who **are mistaking shingles (*herpes zoster*) with the STI genital herpes (*herpes simplex*).**

- For example, the NY Post initially ran the sensationalized headline “[Herpes infection possibly linked to COVID-19 vaccine, study says](#),” though the headline has since been updated to say “shingles” instead.
- This narrative has moderate engagement on all platforms and is shared among [conservative](#) and [medical freedom groups](#). There are roughly 19.1K interactions on Facebook and 138.3K engagements on Instagram, with the [NY Post](#) article circulated most widely.
- Overall, many comments on Facebook and Twitter are using this study as “evidence” that the COVID-19 vaccines do not work and describe the vaccines with words like “poison.”
- **Takeaway:** [Fact check articles](#) have received little attention in comparison to misleading headlines. Public health communicators should be aware of this narrative, though we believe that this does not warrant proactive debunking at this time given declining engagement.

CDC reports 5,800 “breakthrough” cases of people getting coronavirus after vaccination. Some accounts have seized on this data to suggest that vaccines are ineffective.

- [The CDC reported](#) that approximately 5,800 fully-vaccinated people have gotten infected with COVID-19 in the US. [News reports state](#) that 396 required hospitalization and 74 died. [The CDC says that this is to be expected](#), as none of the current vaccines are 100% effective.
- Some [medical freedom Facebook groups](#) and anti-vax activists have seized this data to suggest the vaccines are ineffective. Many of the comments on these posts called the vaccine a “con” and “poison.”
- The statistics have been discussed by well-intentioned [epidemiologists](#) and other [infectious disease doctors](#) on social media, who seek to highlight the [efficacy of the vaccines and the extreme rarity of the breakthrough cases](#) in hopes of quelling public fears.
- **Takeaway:** As journalists and medical professionals have [urged, the media should emphasize the rarity of breakthrough infections](#) when reporting on these extremely rare events.

An unfounded claim that a 12-year-old was hospitalized due to a vaccine trial spread among anti-vaccine groups resulting in safety concerns about vaccinating children.

- A [YouTube video posted on April 15](#) discusses an unverified Facebook post that claims a 12-year-old girl in the Moderna adolescent clinical trial was hospitalized due to a bowel obstruction caused by the second vaccine dose.
- Although [the Moderna trial in children began on March 16](#), the video states that the child had been experiencing symptoms for over a month before that date, suggesting that she would not have been vaccinated at the time of the onset of her symptoms.
- The YouTube video has received roughly 96.9K views and has been shared by [anti-vaccine](#) and [health freedom accounts](#).
- We have also seen [this story spread on popular anti-vaccine Telegram channels](#). A link to the story has been shared on five anti-vaccine telegram channels with over 15.5K combined views. The video also has [roughly 7.2K views on the alt-video hosting site BitChute](#).

- This story has also been posted to at least one Spanish-language Telegram group with 5.7K members that spreads pandemic-related misinformation.
- **Takeaway:** As we progress towards vaccine authorization for children in the US, we expect more anti-vaccine narratives to raise concerns about children. Public health communicators should be aware of this upcoming dynamic.

Anti-vaccine accounts attempt to hijack #RollUpYourSleeves after NBC TV Special to draw attention to vaccine misinformation.

- [NBC aired an hour-long special program](#) about COVID-19 vaccinations called “Roll Up Your Sleeves” on April 18. The show featured a host of celebrities and was intended to educate viewers and dispel concerns about the vaccines.
- The show was promoted on social media concurrently, primarily using the hashtags #RollUpYourSleeves, #PlanYourVaccine, and #DoYourPart.
- A counter-campaign was spun up by vaccine-skeptics ahead of the show, organized by a Facebook page with over 14K followers. [These posts encouraged](#) followers to hijack the NBC program’s hashtags to draw attention to the “risks” of vaccines, as well as push other hashtags, including #DoYourPartResearchVaccines and #TruthAboutVaccines.
- **Takeaway:** We have previously seen anti-vaccine groups hijack vaccine-related hashtags. **Organizers of pro-vaccine hashtag campaigns should be aware of this possibility and be prepared to mitigate it.**

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

This section highlights content in additional languages and content spread by foreign state media. The non-English content and foreign state media targets users in the U.S. though may also have international spread.

Chinese language video from Guo Wengui spreads false narrative that no COVID-19 vaccines work.

- Guo Wengui, the Chinese dissident mogul who has worked with Steve Bannon, released a new [video](#) in which he claims all COVID-19 vaccines are “fake” and that the virus is a bioweapon of the Chinese Communist Party. He further claims that the CCP has an antidote and it is “the only way we can survive.”
- The video seems to have been published by his own media channel [GNews](#) on April 21. It has also spread on [YouTube](#) and [Twitter](#), though some instances have since been removed. At least two versions of the video remain on YouTube (41K total views). The video has also been shared by [many](#) Chinese Twitter [accounts](#). Together, those videos have received several thousand engagements.
- On April 23, in response to a Chinese language tweet from the New York Times Chinese Twitter account ([@nytchinese](#)) about the Derek Chauvin verdict, a Twitter user [shared](#) two Wengui [quotes](#) saying “all vaccines are fake” and that only the CCP has the antidote. The New York Times Chauvin story was specifically targeted toward Chinese speakers in the U.S. (the column is titled “Overseas Chinese Notes”), and such posts did not appear in response to other more popular

@nytchinese tweets. The @nytchinese account has 1.6M followers, but the responses received no engagement.

- **Takeaway:** Guo Wengui has previously involved himself in [U.S. politics](#) and is a known spreader of conspiracy theories and disinformation. **Messages promoted by Wengui and his followers appear to target a Chinese-speaking U.S. audience.**

Children’s Health Defense article translated into Chinese spreads on WeChat.

- A [blog post](#) written by personal trainer Christian Elliott and republished by [Children’s Health Defense](#) was translated into Chinese and published by a public WeChat account.
- As of April 19, the article had been read 4K times on WeChat, but has since been removed by the platform.
- The original English language article, “18 Reasons I Won’t Be Getting a COVID Vaccine,” was published April 5 on Elliott’s blog and republished by CHD on April 15. The original blog post has received 149K Facebook engagements; the CHD version has garnered 12K Facebook engagements.
- The article rehashes several known anti-vaccine tropes and applies them to COVID, including claims that vaccines cannot be safe due to a lack of liability and testing, that the vaccines are an experiment, and that vaccines are ineffective against variants. The article cites known sources of anti-vaccine disinformation, including [Geert Vanden Bossche](#) and [Joseph Mercola](#), and cherry-picks a number of stories about [adverse events](#) and [VAERS data](#).
- **Takeaway:** The phenomenon of this Children’s Health Defense article translated into Chinese is **another example of popular English-language anti-vaccine content being translated and spread in other languages, and on platforms popular with diaspora communities.**

Report from Israeli People’s Committee uses unverified reports to claim Pfizer vaccine more dangerous than others

- The Israeli People’s Committee, an [Israeli medical freedom group](#), claims to have collected reports of deaths related to the Pfizer vaccine, [saying](#) “there has never been a vaccine that has harmed as many people,” and claiming that based on the data they’ve collected the side effects from the Pfizer vaccine may be more dangerous than the blood clots caused by AstraZeneca’s.
- The report, originally published in [Hebrew](#), was covered in English by British musician [Gilad Atzmon](#), who has previously spread [anti-Semitic conspiracy theories](#). A Spanish-language pandemic conspiracy theory Telegram group (7.5K members) linked to Atzmon’s site and provided a summary in Spanish (15.8K views).

Ongoing Themes and Tactics:

This section highlights ongoing themes and tactics that we track each week including notable vaccine injury stories and overall key statistics about online vaccine discussions.

New film featuring footage from the “Worldwide Rally for Freedom” marketed widely online among anti-vaccine and health freedom groups.

- [“THE PUSHBACK”](#) is an anti-lockdown, COVID-19 conspiracy film that features footage from the “Worldwide Rally for Freedom” rally held in March (discussed in the VP briefing [here](#)).
- The film claims to tell the unvarnished truth about the rally, which they call the “Largest non-violent, grassroots, human-rights protest in history,” and alleges a coordinated campaign of omission by the mainstream media.
- It leverages ongoing narratives about vaccine efficacy, vaccine trials, vaccine passports, and the “New World Order”, and features well-known anti-vaccine activists.
- The film is being spread via the hashtag #DareToThink, and the opening screen encourages viewers to “SHARE. [DOWNLOAD](#). REUPLOAD.”
- The original upload has 95K views, and the quantity of uploads across [both major social media platforms](#) and [alternative platforms](#) is significant.
- **Takeway:** “THE PUSHBACK” is one of several COVID-19 conspiracy films that have maintained engagement through enticing users to upload their own copies to both major social media platforms and alt platforms.

Key Statistics

Here we contextualize the above narratives by examining the engagement of other posts from this week.

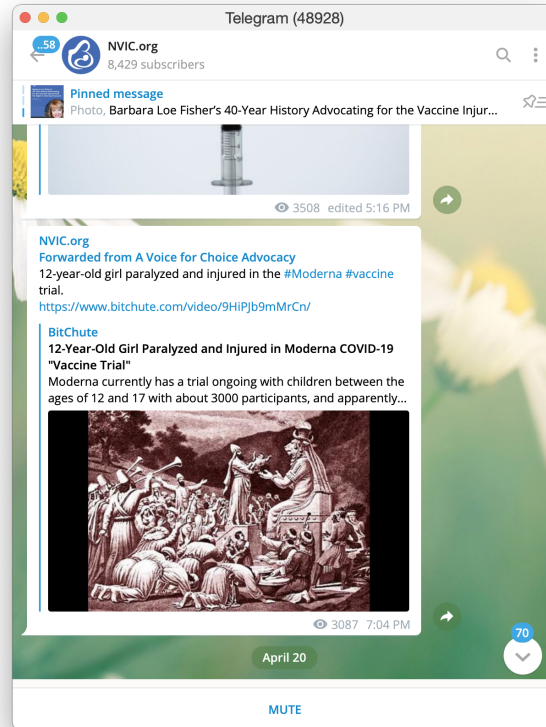
- The top **Facebook** [post](#) this week with the word “vaccine” relating to COVID-19 was from the WHO. The post celebrates the achievements of the ACT-Accelerator, an initiative that distributed diagnostic kits, vaccines, and COVID-19 treatments globally. The post has received 227K interactions (likes, comments, shares).
- The top **Instagram** [post](#) containing the word “vaccine” and related to COVID-19 was from Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau. The post shares a photo of Trudeau being vaccinated and encourages Canadians to get vaccinated. The post has received 252K likes.
- The top **Reddit** [post](#) this week containing the word “vaccine” and relating to COVID-19 shares a criticism of vaccine card forgery. The post has received 58.8K upvotes.
- The top vaccine-related [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Facebook** was a livestream discussion between Shiva Ayyadurai and politician Scott Jensen, who has previously spread COVID-19 misinformation. In the livestream, which received 79.1K views and 7.5K interactions, Ayyadurai suggests that Pfizer was financially incentivized to develop a widespread vaccine.
- The top vaccine-related [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Twitter** was from Alex Berenson. Berenson shared a VAERS report alleging the death of a breastfeeding 5-month-old due to a blood disorder, thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura, following the mother’s second Pfizer vaccine dose. The post has received 9.8K interactions.

Appendix

We have included some notable screenshots from the above incidents. More screenshots and assets can be made available, upon request and as needed!

Links	Screenshot
<p>A Tweet from Naomi Wolf, a conspiracy theorist has spread anti-vax misinformation previously, has pushed the false narrative that unvaccinated women can experience side effects as a result of being around vaccinated women.</p>	
<p>Right-wing Australian politician Craig Kelly who has previously spread anti-vax misinformation falsely shared reports of 5,800 breakthrough cases as reason to believe COVID-19 vaccines are not effective.</p>	

The story of a 12 year old girl who was supposedly injured in the Moderna COVID-19 children vaccine trial has spread among Telegram channels.



Guo Wengui, the Chinese dissident mogul who has worked with Steve Bannon, released a new [video](#) in which he claims all COVID-19 vaccines are “fake” and that the virus is a bioweapon of the Chinese Communist Party.

