



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #20

May 5, 2021 - May 11, 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 supports 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

- After the FDA approved the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for use in adolescents, we are observing similar anti-vaccine narratives to those about other vaccines. The primary concerns are about **subjecting children to “experimental” vaccines** and fears that **perceived vaccine risk is greater** than the risk of getting COVID-19.
- Videos this week of a **man stealing a dose of the J&J vaccine** to prove it is poisonous and of **people putting magnets over their vaccine injections** furthered vaccine safety conspiracy theories.
- The false vaccine “shedding” narrative that unvaccinated women can experience reactions from vaccinated women continues to spread as **anti-vaccine communities apply false scientific backings**. These concerns also spread in Chinese and Spanish language groups.

Events this week:

Key events from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners.

Pfizer vaccine approved for children has the potential to fuel narratives about children and vaccine mandates

- The [FDA approved Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine for use in children](#) ages 12-15 in the US, furthering discussions about whether or not parents should let their kids get vaccinated.
- **The announcement of the FDA approval has received significant attention online** with over 1.2M interactions on posts on Facebook discussing the announcement in the past 24 hours. The top [posts on Facebook express excitement about this news](#).
- Posts in right-wing and anti-vaccine communities express concern. For example, the top Tweet on Pfizer’s approval in the past 24 hours was from a Newsmax contributor who [noted that COVID-19 has not presented a risk to this age group](#).
- One prominent concern expressed online is the underlying false sentiment that [perceived safety risks of the vaccine are worse than contracting COVID-19](#) for younger populations.
- Additionally, others are concerned about the perceived experimental nature of the vaccine and wish to protect their children from being “lab rats,” “guinea pigs,” “test subjects,” etc.
- Other parents are expressing concerns about manufacturer accountability and general distrust of “Big Pharma.”
- **Takeaway:** The vast majority of anti-vaccine misinformation emerging around COVID-19 and children is **identical to narratives surrounding other vaccines**. We have [previously seen misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine safety and efficacy for children](#) spike around the announcement of vaccine trials for children. This is a developing story and we will publish a rapid response post highlighting the dynamics midweek. Now that it has been approved, we anticipate it will become a hot-button issue with the potential for significant impact.

Viral videos of individuals putting magnets on their arm where they received their COVID-19 vaccine further microchip and harmful metal conspiracy theories

- A [TikTok video from May 9th with over 645k likes and 8.2 million views](#) portrays a magnet sticking to a vaccinated individual's arm, implying that a microchip is implanted in the vaccine
- A similar video posted on the same day shows a [woman appearing to show that a magnet sticks to her arm](#) signifying a trend of online videos [some users have deemed the "magnet challenge."](#)
- The trend has received viral engagement on social media, including TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Gab, Twitter, Telegram, and VK (a Russian video hosting platform), and has led to others posting similar videos.
- While some comments on TikTok note that this is a joke and caution about the impact of this video on vaccine hesitancy, the majority of comments express concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.
- Some comments attempt to debunk the microchip conspiracy by suggesting that there is iron in the vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** Given the virality of this TikTok, this semi-joking video format may lead to more videos that reinforce microchip conspiracy theories and [historical concerns of metals in vaccines](#).

COVID-19 case spike in Seychelles, the world's most vaccinated nation, used by anti-vaccine community to discredit vaccine efficacy

- Seychelles, which has the world's highest vaccination rate at 62.2%, has instituted restrictions on schools and sporting activities [amidst a surge in COVID-19 cases](#).
- Anti-vaccine communities falsely [point to the high vaccination rate](#) to make the unfounded claim that Seychelles needs to re-implement restrictions due to poor vaccine efficacy.
- Similar to [conspiracy theories surrounding India's COVID-19 case rates](#), other accounts claim that the majority of COVID-19 deaths took place after vaccine administration began, and [suggest](#) that the vaccines were the cause of these deaths.
- An [article from Bloomberg](#) is the main source about this incident, gaining traction among both media outlets and the anti-vaccine community. The article was published May 5th and garnered 57.3k interactions, largely from a variety of vaccine-skeptical accounts that doubt the utility of getting vaccinated.
- The Bloomberg article is also being cited by well-known anti-vax influencers like [Sherri Tenpenny](#). Her Telegram story has received 19K views.
- Use of #Seychelles spiked within anti-vax communities this week in tandem with this narrative, particularly on Twitter. Across the platform, the hashtag was used over 10K times in the last seven days, a 980% increase from the previous week.
- **Takeaway:** This is the second instance in the past two weeks where international COVID-19 cases and vaccination rates are appearing within U.S. domestic vaccine discussions.

Video of man stealing J&J vial to "independently test it" pushes safety conspiracy theories

- Thomas Humphrey, who has previously posted anti-vaccine content, recorded himself stealing a vial of the J&J COVID-19 vaccine from a CVS [claiming that he wants to independently test it to show that the vaccines are poisoning people](#).
- On his Instagram, he also claims to have a vial of Pfizer, which he says he is also sending in for testing with plans to announce the “results” relatively soon.
- His Instagram posts have over 40K interactions, and his Facebook posts have several thousand interactions. Several TikTok videos supporting his actions have over 25K interactions.
- While Facebook has removed his video, the video has been re-uploaded to alt video hosting sites such as BrandNewTube.
- Humphrey has received strong encouragement from his online followers, and [in a follow-up video reposted by a fan of his to TikTok](#), he expressed appreciation for the support emphasizing he “would die for the truth.”
- **Takeaway:** This is a serious example of online narratives having offline impacts. Given that Humphrey has found online supporters, we will track his follow-up posts on this and be on the lookout for copy-cat behavior.

Johns Hopkins report on “self-spreading” vaccines shared by anti-vaccine users assigns false scientific explanation to the false shedding narrative

- A 2018 Johns Hopkins paper titled “[Technologies to Address Global Catastrophic Biological Risks](#)” discusses “self-spreading” vaccines which could dramatically increase vaccine coverage without requiring each individual to be inoculated.
- Several posts used the hashtag #DontShedOnMe to connect the report with [the false narrative that vaccinated women can “shed” vaccine symptoms](#).
- The paper gained traction in [far-right Telegram channels](#) and [conspiratorial anti-vaccine communities](#) who claim that vaccines are a “[tool for depopulation](#).”
- Since the report was first shared on April 28th, the spread seems to be contained among smaller pages and accounts within anti-vaccine spaces.
- **Takeaway:** Misinformation narratives often spread before there is evidence to support them. People will then try to apply “scientific” backing retroactively to these false ideas. Moving forward, **we may expect to see more examples of false evidence used to support the emerging “vaccine shedding” narrative.**

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. and may also have international spread.

Vaccinated Rutgers doctor's death in India used to undermine vaccine efficacy in Non-English posts

- Dr. Rajendra Kapila, an Indian-American doctor, and professor at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School died of COVID-19 in India after receiving two doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine while in the United States.
- Since May 3rd, discussion of Dr. Rajendra Kapila's death has received a moderate amount of spread (roughly 100K interactions) across Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter.
- **The majority of English language posts with significant interaction do not mention Dr. Kapila's vaccination status.** As a result, the comments on these posts express their sympathy towards Dr. Kapila rather than discuss the vaccine's efficacy.
- We have seen coverage in English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Hindi, and other languages. **Posts in languages other than English tend to [emphasize his prior vaccination status](#)** and express concerns about Indian COVID-19 variants.
- [A Chinese state-owned newspaper also reported the news](#) about Kapila's death with a headline questioning the efficacy of Pfizer.
- **There is likely discussion of this in closed communication channels such as WhatsApp and Telegram.** Of the roughly 60 English anti-vax telegram channels we monitor, one discussed Dr. Kipala's death with a screenshot from WhatsApp. However, we do not have visibility into WhatsApp or non-English Telegram groups.

Claims about Vaccine shedding, concerns about fertility appear in Spanish

- At least one [Telegram post](#) has translated portions of a Pfizer document into Spanish, using it to claim that the COVID-19 vaccine can be transmitted from vaccinated to unvaccinated individuals through touching or breathing. The post claims that this could cause adverse events, such as miscarriage, poisoned breast milk, and pregnancy complications.
- **These claims have been [debunked](#).**
- The Telegram group, which frequently spreads misinformation about the pandemic and vaccines, has 5.7K members. The post has been viewed 1.1K times.

Claims in Chinese that spike proteins are a “man made weapon” and could spread secondary effects to unvaccinated

- One [video](#), which appears to have been spreading since late April 2021, shows anti-vaccine [pediatrician](#) Dr. Larry Palevsky calling the COVID-19 spike protein a “dissidents weapon” and spreads the false shedding claim that vaccinated people are causing adverse events in unvaccinated people.

- Versions of this video have been viewed at least 60K times and gained 1.8K Facebook engagements. Recently, a version of the video (in English) was shared on [Twitter](#) by a Chinese language account, receiving 1K engagements.
- Another video shared in a Chinese language post on [Twitter](#) from Steven Baker (who has spread misinformation about the [pandemic](#) and [vaccines](#) previously) claims COVID-19 vaccines turn the body into “literally a spike protein factory” and those proteins may be exhaled by vaccinated people, endangering the unvaccinated.
- Similar claims have been made by Chinese dissident and frequent spreader of misinformation, Guo Wengui. His assertion that the COVID-19 vaccines are “all fake” and that only the CCP has the “antidote” to COVID-19 continue to spread on Twitter. Some of the posts have since been removed, but those that [remain up](#) have garnered 3.3K engagements.
- **Takeaway:** Claims that COVID-19 is manmade or a biological weapon have spread in Chinese [previously](#). English language anti-vaccine content that mentions similar narratives may continue spreading in Chinese.

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.

Use of VAERS data: PDF with consolidated VAERS anecdotes shared among anti-vaccine groups to push safety concerns

- A PDF consisting of consolidated VAERS data of anecdotes of injuries and deaths that the authors believe to have been a result of the COVID-19 vaccine is being shared among anti-vaccine and medical freedom groups.
- We have found versions of the PDF from March, April, and May, with each containing articles from reputable news sources (e.g. NYTimes, NBC News) and social media posts.
- Posts [in anti-vaccine and medical freedom communities](#) linking to the PDF have received 14k interactions on Facebook, 117 on Instagram, 346 on Reddit, and 225 on Twitter.
- Google has removed the PDF from Google Drive, however, it is still hosted on some anti-vaccine websites, such as Circle of Mamas.
- **Takeaway:** We continue to see VAERS as a major source of unfounded statistics for vaccine safety claims such as when right-wing talk show host [Tucker Carlson misrepresented this data](#).

Key Statistics

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

- The top COVID-19-related **Facebook post** with the word “vaccine,” from UNICEF, shares information about navigating the process to receive the vaccine. The post has received 722K interactions (likes, comments, shares).
- The top COVID-19-related **Instagram post** from this week with the word “vaccine” was from an India-focused media outlet and states that other countries will support India through their

outbreak because India has previously offered aid to countries in need. The post has received 506K likes.

- The top COVID-19-related **Reddit post** from this week with the word “vaccine” discusses Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s call for increased insulin access following President Biden’s decision to waive intellectual property rights for the COVID-19 vaccine. The post has received 53K upvotes.
- The top COVID-19 vaccine-related **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Facebook** was from anti-vaccine influencer Shiva Ayyadurai. The post shares a video in which Ayyadurai claims that the COVID-19 outbreak in India has been inflated by media outlets that oppose Prime Minister Narendra Modi because he refused Pfizer’s offer to provide vaccines. The video has received 60K views and 6.6K interactions.
- The top COVID-19 vaccine-related **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Twitter** was from Alex Berenson, a right-wing influencer. The post, which has received 9K interactions, shared the story of a 17-year-old who was hospitalized with blood clots following the Pfizer vaccine.

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 TikTok video of a vaccinated woman putting a magnet on her arm is fueling the ongoing conspiracy that vaccines contain microchips. Comments attempt to debunk the microchip theory by furthering the false idea that vaccines contain metal.</p>	

A screenshot of a WhatsApp message was shared in multiple languages to connect the death of Dr. Kapila to the ineffectiveness of vaccines. Overall, most English language posts online expressed sympathy and honored his career.

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11:13 pm

+91 95387 19055 ~Vikas
Forwarded many times

Dr Rajendra Kapila, Infectious disease expert with Rutgers University was visiting India due to his father in-law's poor health. He got infected with covid and died yesterday in India. His friends here are sad and in disbelief how quickly he passed away. Apparently, he had both shots vaccines here before he left for India. Irony is he was infectious disease doctor. So sad to know this. Looks like the vaccine may not be as effective with the new variants. After two Pfizer vaccines shots in US , this doctor travelled to india to see his parents and succumbed to Indian variant

A PDF of deaths and injuries after COVID-19 vaccines uses VAERS anecdotes to further unfounded safety concerns.

MOST of these people would have survived COVID (based on published survival statistics)

55 People Died in US After Receiving COVID-19 Vaccines: Reporting System

Since this article was published in January, VAERS has recorded **118,902 COVID vaccine adverse reactions** including:

- 3,544 deaths
- 1,595 permanent disabilities
- 24,000+ ER / hospitalizations

Source: <https://wonder.cdc.gov/vaers.html>

Dr. Michael would have had a 99.5% chance of surviving COVID but he died from ITP (vaccine reaction)

DEC 18 - gets shot → DEC 21 - ER → JAN 3 - dead

Death of Florida doctor after receiving COVID-19 vaccine under investigation

Dr. Gregory Michael, 61, an OB-GYN at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach, died after suffering a hemorrhagic stroke apparently resulting from a lack of platelets.

In a Facebook post, Michael's wife, Heidi Neckenmann, said he sought emergency care three days after the shot because he had dots on his skin that indicated internal bleeding.

Johns Hopkins Scientist: 'A Medical Certainty' Pfizer Vaccine Caused Death of Florida Doctor

Dr. Jerry L. Spivak, an expert on blood disorders at Johns Hopkins University, told the New York Times Tuesday that he believes "it is a medical certainty" that Pfizer's COVID vaccine caused the death of Dr. Gregory Michael.

Autism means that something in the vaccine may be provoking the body to create antibodies to its own platelets, could be because of molecular mimicry, or cross reactivity between proteins. ITP has been documented to occur after the MMR vaccine, as well as influenza vaccines, DTP vaccine and hepatitis A vaccines.