



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #21

May 12, 2021 - May 18, 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

- Much of the focus of the week centered around new CDC recommendations related to wearing masks. The announcement was met with a variety of reactions. **Right-wing and anti-vaccine accounts trolled about “identifying as vaccinated,”** a dig on their perception of the left’s views on gender identity, and **left-leaning accounts expressed concerns about the suddenness** of the announcement
- **Changes in CDC’s methodology for counting COVID-19 cases among vaccinated individuals** and **vaccine inserts** were used to spread conspiracy theories about vaccine efficacy and safety this week,
- Chinese dissident and repeat misinformation spreader Guo Wengui put out another video undermining confidence in vaccines. **Graphika, a member of the Virality Project, [released a report](#) detailing the network of media entities surrounding Wengui.**

Events this week:

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

Online reaction to CDC announcement that vaccinated people no longer have to wear masks is mixed and primarily positive

- The [CDC announced on Thursday](#), May 13th that vaccinated people can go maskless in most places leading to a range of reactions online.
- While [many prominent physicians](#) have expressed support for the CDC’s recommendations, some people think [that it is too soon to be doing this](#), either because of a perceived dearth of evidence around vaccinated people spreading the virus or because they believe this will lead to unvaccinated people no longer masking.
- While many in the anti-mask communities expressed support, some such as Fox News medical contributor [Nicole Saphier](#) felt that CDC’s guidance did not go far enough, suggesting that unvaccinated people should not have to wear masks in public either.
- Medical professionals expressed [concern about the difficulty of determining who is vaccinated](#).
- In right-leaning communities, users posted that they “identify as fully vaccinated”, [mocking LGBT people](#) who express gender and sexual identities. The phrase went viral immediately following recommendation with [several prominent influencers](#) getting tens of thousands of engagement and hundreds of other accounts additionally using the phrase.
- **Takeaway:** While there has been a range of reactions to the CDC’s announcement expressed online, we have not seen these conversations further vaccine hesitancy and are optimistic that this guidance can result in more individuals choosing to get vaccinated. We will continue to monitor how these new guidelines impact the tone of anti-vaccine conversations given that a previous major ongoing concern had been skepticism in efficacy due to vaccinated people still needing to wear a mask.

Instagram video of pharmacist finding blank Pfizer vaccination package insert furthers conspiracy theories about lack of information about vaccines

- An [Instagram video from an alternative health account](#) shows a pharmacist opening a sealed box of Pfizer vaccinations to reveal that the package insert, which typically contains information on the vaccine, is blank. The pharmacist then comments on missing data and the lack of a list of ingredients.
- Package inserts for COVID-19 [vaccines are intentionally left blank](#) to encourage customers to find the most up-to-date FDA-authorized fact sheets electronically. The public, however, may not be aware of this.
- The original Instagram video has received 34.4K views and has been posted on alternative video hosting sites such as [Bitchute](#) and [BrandNewTub](#), where it has received an additional 6K views.
- The video has been shared primarily among anti-vaccine and conspiracy communities.
- Comments on the content promote the false ideas that the ingredients are unsafe and the vaccines are experimental.
- **Takeaway:** While [content from vaccine inserts](#) has long been used to support misleading claims about the composition of vaccines, this is the first incident we have identified of blank inserts being used to further conspiracy theories.

After CDC changes its methodology for counting COVID-19 cases among vaccinated people, anti-vaccine activists push vaccine efficacy concerns

- The CDC [announced](#) that COVID-19 cases among vaccinated people will only be counted if they require hospitalization or result in death, to maintain better data on "breakthrough cases" post-vaccination.
- Anti-vaccine activists claimed that the updated policy is intended to exaggerate vaccine efficacy by deflating case numbers.
- The [top post on this from a medical freedom Instagram account](#) has received 7.2K likes. The Children's Health Defense also published [an article](#) about the changes a week ago, subsequently tweeted by anti-vaccine activist [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#)
- Another popular Youtube [video](#) from anti-vaccine activist [WhatsHerFace](#) has been viewed over 60K times.
- We have previously seen [false allegations that the CDC intentionally over-counted](#) COVID-19 cases to support more stringent lockdown restrictions, which conspiracy theorists termed "casedemic."
- **Takeaway:** The decision to be restrictive in counting breakthrough cases is seen as hypocrisy and, among some communities, suggestive of a cover-up.

Copy-pasta anecdote alleging infertility after vaccines spreads among anti-vaccine and wellness accounts

- A [health and wellness account posted a personal anecdote](#) from a Utah-based fertility specialist claiming that embryos from vaccinated women were unable to survive, meaning the women were now infertile.

- The verbatim text of the post has been posted over 1K times on Facebook (this is sometimes called “cospypasta”, in which text is copied and pasted across multiple posts).
- In addition to the Facebook traction, the anecdote was found on [Twitter](#) and 4chan.
- The [original user who posted the story](#) has previously spread [COVID-19 misinformation](#) and [conspiracy theories](#) urged viewers to “rise up” against lockdown measures and hosted anti-vaccine doctors such as [Sherri Tenpenny](#), [Sarah Myhill](#), and [Greg Hughes](#).
- **Takeaway:** Personal anecdotes are difficult to verify and thus hard to fact-check. These “[Friend of a friend](#)” posts are often unverified and spread quickly on platforms and in private networks due to the easy ability to copy-and-paste text.

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.

Network of entities enable Guo Wengui to continue spreading false claims about vaccines and other disinformation

- [Graphika released a report](#) this week analyzing a network of entities connected to Chinese dissident and [disinformation spreader](#) Guo Wengei that spanned multiple platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Gab, Telegram, Parler, and Discord. The network was responsible for online disinformation about topics including COVID-19, the US election, QAnon narratives, and more.
- Guo and his network are primarily responsible for the promotion of work by Dr. Li-Meng Yan starting in mid-2020, a Chinese virologist famous for claiming that [China had created Covid-19](#) in a research lab, among other poorly researched claims at odds with the current scientific consensus.
- In April, Guo released a [video](#) claiming “The vaccines are all fake. ... There is no vaccine, never ever” and that the CCP has the only true antidote to Covid-19.
- This week, Guo released a video claiming that 200 scientists around the world are calling for vaccinations to end, that Israeli scientists believe vaccinations cause “unfathomable” harm, and that hydroxychloroquine and zinc will protect against the virus. [Tweets sharing the video](#) have received at least 12.8K engagements.
- **Takeaway:** Guo Wengui continues to engage in the explicit promotion of anti-vaccine narratives that appear to be targeted at the Chinese diaspora across many platforms, including his own media apps.

Uptick in discussions of children deaths after vaccinations circulating in Spanish Telegram channels

- Children and vaccinations have been a popular topic of discussion across several Spanish-language Telegram groups over the last week. Similar to many anecdotal stories about

the apparent side effects of the vaccines on adults, these stories focus on unconfirmed reports of deaths and other adverse events.

- A Twitter user named Joe Smalley, who is associated with an anti-vaccine [group](#) in the UK, tweeted false statistics about adverse events in children vaccinated against COVID-19. The tweet was taken down (after receiving at least 6.5K engagements) but was reshared in an anti-vaccine Spanish-language [Telegram group](#), receiving 5K views.
- Another Telegram group recently shared a [National File](#) story from early May, telling the unconfirmed story of a 15-year-old in Colorado who allegedly died of a heart attack two days after receiving the Pfizer vaccine. PolitiFact [reports](#) the story resulted from an unconfirmed report in VAERS and points out that the Pfizer vaccine was not approved for 15-year-olds at the time the story was written.
- Unconfirmed VAERS reports of deaths and seizures in one- and two-year-olds spread in at least [two](#) Spanish-language Telegram [groups](#), garnering 28.3K views. The post also links to a [video](#) of a child allegedly having a reaction to a COVID-19 vaccine (12.3K views). The unconfirmed reports were pulled from VAERS.
- **Takeaway:** As children are vaccinated against COVID-19, we expect to see an increase in claims that use longstanding anti-vaccine tactics, like emotional unconfirmed anecdotes, to promote hesitancy for the COVID-19 vaccines specifically.

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.

Repeat Misinformation Spreader: America’s Frontline Doctors’ Simone Gold’s anti-vaccine tour in the southern US

- As Simone Gold, a prominent purveyor of anti-lockdown sentiment and false COVID-19 cures awaits a trial on charges related to [her involvement in the storming of the US Capitol](#) on January 6, she has organized a [cross country tour to promote anti-vaccine misinformation](#).
- The tour called the “Uncensored Truth Tour” will visit Texas, Florida, Louisiana, and New Mexico.
- Gold’s tour will likely focus on COVID-19 vaccines, which she falsely claims are experimental, are being [tested on Black people](#), and cause infertility.
- [America’s Frontline Doctors](#), which Gold founded, and [local anti-vaccine groups](#) in the areas where she is visiting, have promoted her tour.

Senator Ron Johnson’s media appearances discussing why he is not getting vaccinated are leveraged to promote vaccine hesitancy in right-leaning online spaces

- Senator Ron Johnson appeared on both [FNC’s “Sunday Morning Futures”](#) and [Tucker Carlson](#) to discuss why he is not getting the COVID-19 vaccine after having previously been infected.

- His discussion with Carlson in particular incorporated common hesitancy rhetoric including concerns about medical freedom and informed consent for children.
- Johnson additionally has noted that he already has some COVID-19 antibodies from his previous infection and cited VAERS data to claim that there have been "over 3,000 deaths within 30 days of taking the vaccine."
- The Tucker Carlson clip on Facebook has received 192K views, 14K likes, and 2.2K shares. A Breitbart article covering his media appearances received ~17K engagements on Twitter and ~4K engagements on Facebook.

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](#) containing the word "vaccine" this week, shared by a Filipino meme account, was a parodic meme using sexual innuendo to promote the vaccine. The post received 143.5k interactions (135k reactions, 4.4k comments, 4.1k shares).
- This week's top COVID-19 related **Instagram** [post](#) containing the word "vaccine" is by 19-year-old Irish-Canadian actress Amybeth McNulty, flaunting her recent vaccine shot. The post has received 709.7k likes.
- This week's top COVID-19 related [post](#) with the word "vaccine" on **Reddit** reports on the vaccine lottery announced by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine. The post has received 59.5k upvotes.
- This week's top COVID-19 related [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was by Robert Kennedy Jr., an environmental lawyer, and advocate, sharing an article that denounces the pay packages earned by Big Pharma CEOs. The post received 1,055 interactions, including 729 reactions and 244 shares.
- This week's top COVID-19 related [Tweet](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was by Alex Berenson, a right-wing influencer. The Tweet is a reply to author Jill Filipovic and opposes vaccine passports on legal and policy grounds. The Tweet was retweeted 1,097 times and received 4.8k likes.

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>Hundreds of accounts posted about how they “identify as fully vaccinated” after the CDC’s recommendation that vaccinated individuals do not need to wear a mask.</p>	
<p>A video of a pharmacist opening a blank vaccine insert was used to push conspiracy theories about the safety of vaccines.</p>	