



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #22

May 18, 2021 - May 25, 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

- Discussions of the safety and necessity of **vaccines for children** continue to gather speed after the FDA approved the Pfizer vaccine for 12-15-year-olds and [Moderna's May 25 announcement](#) that its vaccine is safe and effective in 12-17-year-olds. Recent discussions revolve around the CDC's current investigation of a **possible but unproven link** between mRNA vaccines and heart inflammation in young people, as well as the ethics of **school vaccination mandates**.
- Public comments from celebrities and politicians spread within right-wing communities online this week. **Senator Rand Paul's statement** that he did not need a vaccine after having had COVID-19 and guitarist **Eric Clapton's letter** detailing severe reactions to a vaccine drove concerns about both safety and efficacy.
- A new conspiracy theory emerged this week about an **ingredient in the Moderna vaccine, SM-102**, while the **development of the world's smallest microchip** fueled the ongoing conspiracy theory that vaccines contain microchips.

Events this week:

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

CDC investigation of potential instances of post-vaccination myocarditis increases backlash against vaccines for children

- On May 17, the [Centers for Disease Control announced](#) that it is investigating potential instances of myocarditis – a type of heart inflammation – in young adults and adolescents following vaccination with mRNA vaccines.
- Most of the cases reported were mild and appeared within four days after the second dose of an mRNA vaccine. The number of cases reported after vaccination does not appear to be greater than would be normally seen in this age group without vaccination, [according to the CDC](#).
- This story has high engagement across all platforms. On Facebook, posts with mentions of myocarditis and vaccines have received roughly 250K engagements in the last week.
- [The New York Times](#)'s May 22 article garnered the most interaction on the issue, receiving 31K engagements. The article was shared, alongside [The Guardian](#)'s reporting, by [anti-lockdown](#), [anti-vaccine](#), [alt-right](#), and “medical freedom/informed consent” groups.
- Comments on posts discussing the CDC announcement call vaccines “poison” and accuse parents who are allowing their children to be vaccinated of being “murderers.” Some call for mandatory cardiac examinations for vaccinated teen athletes and others accuse doctors of deliberately minimizing the risk to profit from vaccines. They also call the CDC's refusal to establish a direct link between myocarditis and vaccines a conspiracy.
- Commenters also share a new theory that the higher the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine, the more side effects, and risks associated with it.
- **Takeaway:** Discussion of the vaccine's risk to children has picked up pace since the FDA's May 10th approval of the Pfizer vaccine for 12-15-year-olds. Because the mainstream news media is

reporting on the CDC’s safety measures, readers may associate heart problems and mRNA vaccines. That association is being **seized upon and rewritten in narratives proliferating out of the anti-vaccine movement.**

Senator Rand Paul refuses to get the COVID-19 vaccine, spurring circulation of the medical freedom narrative in right-wing media

- Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky was the [first known member of the US Senate](#) to contract and test positive for COVID-19 in March of 2020.
- In a radio interview with conservative talk-show host John Catsimatidis on May 23rd, Paul [commented](#) that because of his 2020 infection, he feels he has “natural immunity” and does not need the vaccine. The CDC recommends that people who have been previously infected with COVID-19 still receive the vaccine, as experts still do not agree on how long natural immunity lasts.
- Sen. Paul also discussed vaccine mandates, [saying](#) that “in a free society,” he believes medical decisions are up to individuals, who assume their own risk. He noted that he does not think “Big Brother” should tell him to get the vaccine.
- A [Newsmax article](#) that reported on Paul’s interview also states scientists believe natural immunity wanes after six months but do not have “empirical evidence” for this claim. This has become a common talking point in right-leaning misinformation circles.
- The Newsmax article amassed around 60K engagements; other right-leaning media covered this, including a [Fox News article](#) which amassed around 40K engagements.
- On Facebook more broadly, Paul’s comments have received around 440K engagements.
- **Takeaway:** The COVID-19 pandemic, masking, and US vaccination program have been politicized as issues of individual freedom since the winter of 2020. Given that [Republicans remain a vaccination-resistant demographic](#) and a recent [PBS/NPR/Marist poll](#) found that over 4 in 10 Republicans say they have no plans to get vaccinated, **Republican politicians’ public announcements regarding vaccination are significant**—not only in policy but also in their ability to sway mass opinion.

Schools across the US debate student vaccination mandate ahead of fall 2021

- Some private and public schools, colleges, and universities have already called for [campus-wide vaccine mandates](#) for fall 2021. These announcements have led to online debates about mandates that require students to be vaccinated to attend school in person.
- A flurry of news articles has emerged online over the past few weeks, largely from local news organizations, reporting whether various schools will mandate vaccination.
- For K-12 public schools, [all 50 states also have existing non-COVID vaccine mandates](#) for K-12 public schools (and even some for private schools), though [it seems unlikely that public schools will see a system-wide COVID-19 vaccine mandate](#). However, a higher proportion of institutions for college-age students will require vaccination.
- We have previously seen [discussions of “vaccine passports”](#) drive vaccine discussions online and create spaces for anti-vaccine advocates to spread misinformation. **It is still unclear whether online debate around the issue of mandating vaccination in school environments is creating**

space for actual policy decisions to be swayed, though politicians from across the spectrum have voiced their opinions on student vaccine mandates.

- On the left, Sen. Bernie Sanders [spoke out](#) against mandating vaccinations for children ages 2-11. On May 21, GOP state representatives from Indiana [wrote](#) to the president and general counsel at Indiana University regarding their recent COVID-19 vaccination mandate, calling it “forced tyranny.”
- Students are engaging in the discussion. This past week, [some students protested school mandate announcements](#), although about [three-quarters of college students report willingness to be vaccinated](#) for COVID-19.
- **Takeaway:** Schools and universities have been a hotspot for debate about vaccination since before COVID-19 vaccines were even developed or approved. **The debate has intensified alongside concerns around the safety of vaccines in children and within the ongoing debates around vaccine passports and mandates in the general population.** We will continue to track online discussions about vaccine mandates in schools as more young people become eligible to be vaccinated in the coming weeks and assess whether the debate around mandates drives hesitancy.

Proposed Oregon legislation about parental consent for vaccines exacerbates confusion as vaccine rollout extends to younger age groups

- Two Oregon counties vote on resolutions this week in an attempt to block teenagers 15-17 from seeking COVID-19 vaccination without parental permission, despite an existing state law that establishes that minors 15 and older [can consent to immunizations on their own](#).
- Oregon’s legal confusion aligns with the rise in discussion of whether children need parental permission to receive vaccinations. Parental consent laws [vary by state](#); many require consent for children of all ages, while others require it only for children under 12 or 15. In other states, the rules depend on childrens’ health care providers.
- Young people are also collaborating online to try to help adolescents and children who want to get the vaccine but live in anti-vaccine households. This week, NBC News reported on teenagers like Kelly Danielpour, who was [inspired \(pre-pandemic\) by teenagers on Reddit who wanted to be vaccinated](#). Danielpour fights misinformation about vaccines through her website [VaxTeen](#).
- **Takeaway:** Children 12-15 are newly permitted to receive the vaccine, but may experience tension from anti-vaccine or vaccine-hesitant families. [Providers need to be aware of how to deal with situations where children want a shot but their parents do not give consent](#), and children should also be made aware of what their rights are and [how to involve their physicians if they experience parental pushback](#). Parents, physicians, and children should be given clear information about parental consent requirements in their state of residence.

Conspiracy theory that Moderna vaccine contains ‘toxic chemical’ SM-102 used to push safety concerns

- COVID-skeptic influencers drew attention to an ingredient of the Moderna vaccine, known as SM-102, to claim that the shot is ‘not safe for human or veterinary use’ and that COVID-19 vaccines have been manufactured to cause intentional harm.

- Many of these social media posts reference that SM-102 contains the toxic chemical chloroform. Scientists have been quick to point out that [there are two formulations of SM-102](#) available for pharmaceutical use; the one used in the Moderna vaccine is simply used to coat messenger RNA so that it can be delivered to cells and does not contain chloroform.
- Many of these posts reference a URL and a graphic of a list of ingredients used in a Cayman Chemical product, which states that [the chloroform formulation of SM-102 is considered toxic](#).
- Popular Irish anti-vaccine activist Dolores Cahill shared this same graphic and several related posts on her Telegram channel, including a [video that has over 68K views](#) which displays Google search results for ‘simple ingredients of the Moderna vaccine’ and subsequent searches for SM-102.
- The claim was covered by US outlets with large audiences, such as the [Hal Turner Radio Show](#). Facebook posts referencing the theory have also been noted in multiple European languages, including German, Italian, Dutch, and Finnish.
- **Takeaway:** Although this claim has been debunked by fact-checkers, it is still being employed by anti-vaccine activists to push safety concerns. **Speculation about vaccine “ingredients” is a longstanding theme within anti-vaccine messaging. Fact-checking must be combined with effective health communication to combat this popular form of fear-mongering.**

False claims that vaccines contain microchips and magnets multiply after Columbia University announces its creation of an injectable microchip

- Researchers at Columbia University announced earlier this month that they had developed ‘[the smallest single-chip system](#)’ that could be ‘injected into the body with a hypodermic needle to monitor medical conditions,’ prompting a flurry of activity from vaccine-skeptics and [conspiracy theorists on Reddit](#).
- Microchip conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 vaccines have featured prominently in anti-vaccine rhetoric since the [beginning of their development](#). These theories usually involve figures such as Bill Gates, Dr. Fauci, and President Biden and allegations of a secret plot to microchip and track the public, and have been noted across most social media platforms.
- This particular scientific development received overwhelmingly positive coverage from scientific publications and medical professionals but was used to further claim that COVID-19 vaccines contain ‘nefarious’ materials like magnets and tracking devices.
- Much of this content also references a ‘60 Minutes’ [segment from April](#) in which retired Col. Matthew Hepburn discusses the potential for a microchip that can detect COVID-19 in the human body.
- **Takeaway:** Unfounded theories that COVID-19 vaccinations are being used as a conduit for implanting foreign objects into the body, including [magnets](#) and tracking devices, continue to circulate online.

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

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

Virality magnet videos popular in English now appearing in Spanish

- After the “magnet challenge” and similar videos [went viral in English earlier this month](#), Spanish-language social media is experiencing the trend.
- Several different videos and articles claim that metal objects will stick to a person at the site of their vaccine injection. Some falsely claim that this is caused by metal nanoparticles in the vaccine. In Spanish, this content has spread on [Instagram](#), [Telegram](#), [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and [news sites](#). These videos and articles have more than 100K engagements.
- **Takeaway:** Often, trends and narratives in English will appear in other languages days or weeks later, as content is translated and spreads through and among networks.

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.

Project Veritas releases new video “exposing” Facebook’s efforts to downrank vaccine-hesitant content getting attention from right-wing media

- [The 10-minute video](#) features two “whistleblowers” who share how Facebook algorithms determine vaccine-hesitant content and downrank it. The speaker alleges that Facebook’s goal is to censor vaccine concerns “on a global scale.”
- The video has received roughly 734.5K views on Twitter in less than 24 hours.
- On Facebook, discussion of the video has spread among right-wing influencers, including [Dinesh D’Souza](#) and [Sean Hannity](#). The video has also been [amplified by Russian state media](#).
- **Takeaway:** In the past, Project Veritas has [selectively edited video content and interviews to perform political stings](#). The Virality Project will continue to monitor the spread of this content.

Vaccine Passports: Orange County in-person protests online coverage spreading misinformation

- On Tuesday, May 11, [hundreds of people protested](#) the potential implementation of voluntary digital vaccine passports outside of the Orange County Board of Supervisors, leading lawmakers to pause their planning. The protest was [organized by activists](#) including anti-mask Peggy Hall and anti-vaccine Leigh Dundas.
- [Comparisons were made between a digital vaccine passport and passports that Jewish people were required to use during the Holocaust](#). Users mention how such a passport makes way for segregation, discrimination, coercion and a “digital tracking system.”

- The O.C. protest received ~10k engagements on Twitter alone. [A YouTube video](#) that functioned as a call to action to participate in the protest received 22K views and 1.5K likes.
- Much of the top content does not explicitly spread misinformation about vaccines or violate platform policies. Instead, it makes the argument that not all people have smartphones and would therefore be unfairly discriminated against in a digital vaccine passport system, and is shared alongside misinformation about vaccines and conspiracies about vaccine passports.
- **Takeaway:** Online communities can have an offline impact, as seen in this example, wherein protestors from in and outside Orange County entered a government building. Numerous anti-vaccine activist groups such as the Freedom Angels have prioritized the disruption of legislative processes. Local officials should pay attention to planned protests and online discussions of future action.

Side Effects: Celebrities sharing their personal experiences with vaccine side effects receive negative attention among fanbases

- Recently, musician Eric Clapton and actress Chelsea Handler shared their COVID-19 vaccine side effects in online posts that got significant attention among their respective fan bases.
- [In a letter to an anti-lockdown activist](#), singer Eric Clapton said he experienced “disastrous” side effects from the Moderna vaccine. The letter was initially shared via Telegram with Clapton’s permission and has since been shared by America’s Frontline Doctors (18.3K Facebook engagements) and other anti-vaccine groups.
- Clapton’s story has received [mainstream media coverage](#) and attention among right-leaning pages, as well as within [Spanish-language anti-vaccine online communities](#). The AFD article was shared in at least five Spanish-language Telegram channels, receiving over 133K views. A Rolling Stone YouTube video discussing the story has over 300K views.
- In a [viral Instagram post from May 14th](#), popular comedian, actress, and producer Chelsea Handler shared that she felt sick and went deaf in one ear four hours after receiving her second dose of Moderna. The video has 843k views on Instagram and 485k views on Twitter as of May 20th.
- Handler’s video led some Twitter users and skeptical/anti-vaccine sites to question the safety of the vaccine. Her story was also picked up by [Alex Berenson’s prominent anti-vaccine account](#). On May 17th, Berenson told Handler to reach out to him about post-vaccine tinnitus.
- **Takeaway:** Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen that celebrity voices with high reach and dedicated followers on social networks get significant engagement on their vaccination commentary as well. Public health officials might consider outreach to celebrities in advance, or in cases such as Handler’s, to ensure that their stories are not co-opted by anti-vaccine communities.



Key Statistics

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

- The top COVID-19 related English-language **Facebook post** containing the word “vaccine” this week is by the Ministry of Health of India, celebrating that 18.2 million vaccine doses have been made available in the country as of May 24th. The post received 98.1k interactions (91k likes, 3.5k comments, and 3.6k shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is a Fox News report about Sen. Rand Paul refusing to get vaccinated. Rand Paul claims he will not get the shot unless he sees evidence proving that the vaccine is more effective than having survived the virus ([see our coverage on p.2](#)). The post received 122k likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** links to an op-ed by newsmagazine LGBTQ Nation that denounces the lack of consistency between Rand Paul's defense of free vaccine decisions, and his opposition to gender-affirming healthcare for trans teens. The post received 59.5k upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** involves physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing unflattering New York Post pictures of Bill Gates and mockingly referring to him as "the global leader of health policy."
- This week’s top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** is by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an environmental lawyer and prominent anti-vaccine advocate, claiming vaccine mandates are illegal because COVID-19 vaccines are only approved through an Emergency Use Authorization. The Tweet received 10.3k interactions (234 comments, 4k retweets and 6k 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>Facebook comments on a New York Times article about the CDC's investigation of myocarditis</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows a Facebook post with the headline "a Heart Problem in a Few..." and a sub-headline "...nts". The text below reads: "ozen reports that teenagers and young arditis after vaccination, officials said. But urther the vaccine caused the condition." Below the text is a video thumbnail showing a person's neck and a hand in a blue glove. To the right, the Facebook interface shows 608 reactions and 62 comments. Two comments are visible: one from Michelle Maloney stating "Just happened to a friends son after second jab , currently in the hospital. Nothing to see here folks ! Keep moving along ! But let's make it mandatory for kids!!!" and another from Michelle Rose asking "Question: does anyone think it odd (suspicious) that they use the general and more encompassing term 'coronavirus' sometimes and others 'COVID-19'? E.g., 'As of May 13, the coronavirus has infected more than 3.9 million children and sent more than 16,..."</p>
<p>Anti-vaccine activist Dolores Cahill shared a video on her Telegram channel spreading misinformation about SM-102, an ingredient in the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows a Telegram channel interface for Dolores Cahill, who has 13,593 subscribers. A pinned message is visible at the top. Below it, a video post by Dolores Cahill is shown. The video has a green background with a white daisy flower and text that reads "Ingredients", "SM-102.", and "1,2-dimy". The video has 66 comments and was viewed by 69.5K people at 2:01 AM. Below the video, there are 212 comments and a "JOIN CHANNEL" button.</p>