



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #23

May 26, 2021 - June 2, 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

- On May 25, the Virality Project noted that with the [approval of COVID-19 vaccines extended to younger children](#), we would see **old narratives recycled from adult audiences to now target youth**. This week we see those tactics in action as a right-leaning doctors’ group, **America’s Frontline Doctors**, petitions to **ban the use of Pfizer in children**.

- French and German social media influencers were the target of a **Russian-linked campaign to smear US- and European-developed vaccines** last week, bringing attention to **influencers’ potential role in the spread of and resistance to misinformation**.
- Exceedingly rare cases of fatal blood clots following COVID-19 vaccination continue to capture the public and media’s attention after BBC’s Lisa Shaw dies one week after receiving her first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Events this week:

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

Nobel Prize winner misquoted to suggest that vaccinated people will all die

- French virologist and Nobel prize winner **Luc Montagnier** was falsely quoted this week stating that **“all vaccinated people will die within two years”** in a series of posts circulated on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram.
- The fabricated quote was used to support the false theory, popular among anti-vaccine communities, that the **COVID-19 vaccine is experimental** and that its long-term health implications are not fully understood.
- The content also references an interview with [Michael Yeadon](#), a former Pfizer-vice president turned anti-vaccine proponent, who has stated that mRNA vaccines will cause “mass deaths.”
- Montaigner’s falsely attributed comments also spread in [Spanish](#) and [Chinese](#), primarily in the form of subtitled [videos](#). Across platforms, videos in both languages were [viewed](#) at least 175K times. It also gained significant traction amongst [Hindi](#) and [French-speaking](#) audiences.
- **Despite the story being [fact-checked](#)**, the content is still up on multiple platforms, including [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) and [more](#). These platforms have since included misinformation warnings.
- While [some outlets](#) have acknowledged that Montaigner’s quote is misattributed, others have leveraged the story to allege that his thesis about new variants is credible.
- **Takeaway:** Although Montaigner has previously made unreliable statements about vaccination programs prior to COVID, because of his status as a Nobel laureate, he remains a seemingly authoritative voice. Montaigner has already gained attention for his controversial comments on the [possible human-made origins of the virus](#). Although fact-checkers quickly noted that Montaigner’s comments on mass deaths were falsely attributed, given his stature, they were nonetheless able to spread.

Confusion continues over blood donations after COVID-19 vaccinations

- Social media users are claiming that blood banks are refusing to accept blood or plasma donations from individuals who have received the COVID-19 vaccination because the shot “destroys” natural antibodies.
- Some users have amplified a “tainted blood” or “tainted vaccine” narrative. (On May 17, TikTok removed a viral post that falsely claimed that a local Red Cross worker said [vaccinated people would be prevented from giving “tainted” blood and plasma.](#))

- This is **not the first time** this story has spread. The Red Cross has frequently been cited as a source for this information, despite their repeated clarifications that [vaccinated patients can donate blood](#).
- Misinformation appears to be driven by de-contextualized [footage](#) from a local news channel accurately reporting that convalescent plasma must come from a donor that has not received a COVID-19 vaccine. [Facebook pages](#) have shared [screenshots](#) from this reporting but leave out the wider context.
- Conservative personality and entrepreneur David J. Harris Jr. also shared portions of the news clip. He discourages his audience from getting the vaccine and promotes his [anti-vaccination T-shirts](#), printed with the slogan “My Body My Choice” (an increasingly-popular reappropriation of language from the feminist movement).
- **Takeaway:** Uncertainty about whether or not people can give blood after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine has been exploited to spread a false and dangerous association between vaccines and tainting or contamination.

Right-leaning doctors’ group sues to ban the use of Pfizer vaccine in children

- On May 21, America’s Frontline Doctors (AFLDS) filed a motion for a temporary restraining order with a federal court in Alabama to [block the emergency use authorization \(EUA\) for the use of the COVID-19 vaccine in 12- to 15-year-olds](#).
- This week, Minnesota Republican gubernatorial candidate Scott Jensen became the first named plaintiff in [the suit](#).
- In the complaint, AFLDS writes that the [vaccine is more dangerous to children than COVID-19](#), and that children are at low risk of contracting a serious case of the disease.
- Their petition has received a moderate amount of engagement online with roughly 22K interactions across major platforms.
- Following in the footsteps of other “medical freedom” groups, this petition similarly **weaponizes Holocaust history**, drawing parallels to Nazi physicians to make claims about the vaccines being a form of non-consensual medical experimentation.
- **Takeaway:** As noted in [last week’s briefing](#), as vaccine approval is extended to children under the age of 15, we expect the conversation in anti-vaccine communities to **focus increasingly on children’s safety** and on any possible side effects of the vaccine in children. It is no surprise that AFLDS has taken up this call, as AFLDS’s founder, Simone Gold, is an active anti-vaccine activist who has purportedly [assembled a legal team to fight “medical discrimination”](#) around vaccines. We see AFLDS and the larger movement recycling old narratives in their attempts to block the use of the vaccine in children, ie. through Holocaust analogies and “medical freedom” messaging.

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.

European influencers contacted by Russia-linked advertising agency to smear Pfizer vaccine

- On May 25, [several major media sources reported](#) that multiple French and German social media influencers—some with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers across YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms—were contacted by an advertising agency, [known as Fazze](#), **offering to pay them to smear the reputations of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines** for Western European audiences.
- French counterintelligence authorities are [currently investigating](#) whether the Russian government is responsible for the attempt. US officials from the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, which monitors foreign disinformation efforts, have identified a [Russian-led campaign to undermine confidence in US- and European-developed vaccines](#).
- On May 23, influencers began to alert their audiences to the situation. One influencer, Léo Grasset, posted screenshots of communications from Fazze in [a Twitter post](#) that received 44K likes.
- **Takeaway:** This represents a major attempt to **undermine multiple vaccines on a global scale—specifically using social media influencers**. Grasset began sounding public alarm bells, indicating that education of influencers about vaccine mis/disinformation may prevent this scenario from repeating itself to more detriment. The Virality Project will continue to stay abreast of the situation, as research is ongoing in multiple countries.

Viral magnet videos newly appearing in Chinese

- Claims that magnets will stick to a vaccine recipient’s arm after receiving their shot continue to spread in [Spanish](#) and have also newly appeared in [Chinese](#). Similar claims about metals in vaccines turning humans into “antennas” have also spread via a subtitled video of noted anti-vaccine physician [Christiane Northrup](#) (12.6K views) and other content on [Telegram](#) (5K views).
- **Takeaway:** The Virality Project has [reported](#) on the magnet narrative multiple times now, but these are the first instances of the narrative showing up in videos in Chinese, indicating a new flow of information between online communities communicating in different languages.

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.

Anti-vaccine channels encourage sharing non-conspiratorial, more “trustworthy” information with the public

- In a **notable shift in tactics**, anti-vaccine channels in Spanish and Chinese have been promoting sharing significantly **less purely conspiratorial content**, shifting towards content from “trustworthy” sources, like medical professionals—including using “**legitimate**” **scientific studies that have been stripped of important context**. These same sources often have a history of sharing vaccine and pandemic disinformation.
- *Examples across online communities:*
 - In a right-leaning Chinese-language Telegram channel with 7.6K members, one [post](#) discourages users from sharing content that sounds too much like conspiracy (microchip claims). The post encourages focusing on “reasonable arguments,” for example, that the vaccine is not FDA approved and causes negative side effects.
 - In Spanish, posts feature **anti-vaccine medical professionals**. One Telegram [post](#) with 90K views highlights French geneticist [Alexandra Henrion-Caude](#), who has claimed that mRNA vaccines are an experiment and that those who take them are “guinea pigs.” Dr. Henrion-Caude’s arguments have also been used by anti-vaccine [channels](#) in English.
 - Anti-vaccine posts in [Spanish](#) and [English](#) have shared research from the [Salk Institute for Biological Studies](#) to claim that spike proteins produced by the body after vaccination cause “injury and death.” According to AFP [fact checkers](#), posts like these wholly misrepresent the study.

Alternative wellness website, Mercola, capitalizes on accurate new findings about the longevity of “natural immunity” to undermine vaccine necessity

- [Two new studies](#) published last week furthered scientific understanding that **immunity to the coronavirus lasts at least a year** and improves over time, [including after vaccination](#).
- The idea that **natural immunity is sufficient in place of vaccination** is a common and increasingly-popular talking point among anti-vaccine communities.
- Last week, [we reported on a radio interview with Senator Rand Paul](#) where he announced that he would not receive the COVID-19 vaccine, citing natural immunity after his infection.
- This week, a post by anti-vaccine influencer Joseph Mercola, D.O., [shared a link to Wash-U’s findings](#). Mercola comments: “This is good news for everyone except the vaccine manufacturers and health authorities who have said otherwise.”
- Mercola’s post garnered moderate spread (2.8K likes). It has also been shared by anti-vaccine and medical freedom groups across social media platforms.
- Mercola is a repeat offender whose [website activity](#) has repeatedly surfaced in our analysts’ research.

- **Takeaway:** Scientific understanding about natural immunity is ongoing. These most recent findings about the longevity of COVID-19 immunity after infection have been and may be further instrumentalized to create distrust in vaccination policy writ large—and to weaken calls for the vaccine’s necessity, especially for those who have previously had COVID-19.

Death after vaccine: BBC’s Lisa Shaw dies after experiencing blood clots a week after her AZ vaccine, furthering safety concerns

- BBC’s well-known broadcaster [Lisa Shaw died May 21](#), a week after receiving her first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine. According to a statement from Shaw’s family, the 44-year-old developed severe headaches and was being treated in the hospital for blood clots when she died.
- A [coroner’s interim death certificate](#) lists “complication of AstraZeneca Covid-19 virus vaccination” as a factor [to be investigated](#) in Shaw’s death.
- Major news sources that published about Shaw’s death, including [The Guardian](#) and BBC, included information about the low risk factors of the vaccine, including blood clotting, alongside their information about Shaw’s death.
- As of June 1, a Crowdtangle search for “Lisa Shaw” in the preceding 7 days revealed 254K Facebook interactions and 66K Instagram interactions. Twenty-five posts had more than 1K interactions, including posts in Portuguese, French, German, Italian, and Romanian.
- **Takeaway:** The **death of a public figure after an AstraZeneca vaccine** shows predictably viral engagement on social media. Though this engagement does not seem to focus on elevating a specific vaccine disinformation narrative, actual deaths—notably, of celebrities—due to blood clots from vaccines do have an effect on the public’s perception of vaccine safety. Investigations of the **link between the vaccine and unusual blood clotting are still under way and have implications at the global scale.**

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 UNICEF and shares the testimony of an Afghan teacher who recently got vaccinated. The post received 796.2k interactions (781.3K likes, 8.9K comments, and 6K shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, showing her getting her first dose of the vaccine. The post received 1.16M likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** shares an article about the Ohio vaccine lottery winner. The post received 63K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** is by Joseph Mercola, D.O., showing *Time* magazine covers about pandemics from various years (SARS, H1N1) with the comment “Same fear, different years.” The post received 14.4K interactions (7.3K likes, 1.2K comments and 5.9K shares).
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** is by Alex Berenson, who shared one of Anthony Fauci’s email conversations with a researcher after Fauci’s 2020 emails

were released under the Freedom of Information Act. The conversation is interpreted to suggest that the coronavirus may have leaked from a lab. The Tweet received 10.3K interactions (255 replies, 3K retweets, 7K 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>Viral magnet videos newly appearing in Chinese</p>	