



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #24

June 2, 2021 - June 8, 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

- **Information voids** have opened up around two topics that remain unclear to the public: **the risk of myocarditis for vaccinated teens**; and the **necessity of vaccines for people who have previously had COVID-19**. Public health communicators should consider focusing on providing the most up-to-date recommendations on these topics.
- The anti-vax community continues to seize upon fears that the [vaccines contain a “spike protein”](#) that can cause damage to vaccinated people. The term has been used to support a number of unsubstantiated claims about COVID-19 vaccine safety.
- The release of Dr. Anthony Fauci’s spring 2020 emails via the Freedom of Information Act has been **used to exacerbate distrust in Dr. Fauci and in US public health institutions**.
- As vaccine mandate discussions continue to take place online, stoked by legislation attempting to ban them, a [new analogy is emerging](#) between **vaccine passports and Jim Crow laws** in the American South. This comes as previous analogies between vaccine passports and the Nazi use of Star of David badges received blowback.

Events this week:

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

Release of Fauci’s emails foments distrust among anti-vaccine communities around handling of pandemic and vaccine development

- Hundreds of pages of **Dr. Anthony Fauci’s** NIH emails were released this week by BuzzFeed and the *Washington Post* under a Freedom of Information Act request.
- Dr. Fauci’s emails were legally obtained (not leaked), but their contents—on mask guidance, the Wuhan lab, and more—nonetheless led to a **wave of calls for his resignation, firing, and even arrest**.
- Republican lawmakers [claimed the emails](#) were leaked and that they prove Dr. Fauci “misled the American public... at the onset of the pandemic.”
- Twitter [suspended the account of the anti-vaccine Informed Consent Action Network \(ICAN\) for claiming it had obtained thousands of new emails from Dr. Fauci](#). ICAN tweeted that it would publish 3,000 pages of new FOIA’d emails, including “insight... on vaccine safety.”
- Twitter noted that the ICAN account was spreading “misleading and potentially harmful information related to COVID-19”.
- Discussion of Fauci’s emails also **spread in Chinese on Telegram**. At least one [group](#) with 7.8K members, which mostly discusses right-wing conspiracies, claims “Fauci, the CCP, WHO, and several DS [deep state] agencies have information on how to manipulate viruses and vaccines, which will fully expose the truth about viruses and vaccines.”
- **Takeaway:** Although much of the focus on Fauci’s emails is related to his communication with Chinese officials in the early stages of the pandemic, the information also has a major impact on anti-vaccine networks. These networks are **keen to foment increased distrust in Fauci’s expert guidance and in American public health officials and institutions**. Given the large volume of the emails, we also expect that responses will continue to flow in.

Israel finds possible link between Pfizer vaccine and myocarditis; engagement on the topic in the anti-vax community is lower than expected

- At the beginning of the month, Israeli researchers [found a probable link](#) between the Pfizer vaccine and myocarditis in young men aged 16-30.
- The condition still [appears to be rare](#) and most cases were mild and resolved within a few weeks. As noted in *Science* last September, COVID-19 infections themselves [can cause myocarditis](#).
- Pfizer maintains that [no causal link has been established](#) and that reported incidents of myocarditis may be proportional to rates in the general population.
- The story is circulating in both mainstream and right-leaning media circles.
- The news was immediately shared by anti-vaccine activists on Twitter, including [Alex Berenson](#), [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), and [Alexandra Henrion-Caude](#).
- Engagement for the story remains viral. On June 1, a Reuters article shared on Facebook and Twitter received 9.7K and 1.6K interactions, respectively, while a similar Reuters article published on June 4 received lower engagement. But the issue **has not been taken up in a disproportionate fashion by anti-vaccine communities**.
- Instead, the news is being discussed in the medical community—including in conversations regarding children and young adults receiving vaccines.
- **Takeaway:** It has been three weeks since the CDC announced its investigation of possible post-vaccination myocarditis. The gap here between actual medical findings and lack of anti-vaccine conversation on the issue is telling, as it suggests a focus on more outlandish information. But it remains imperative that patients are given **upfront information about the relative risks of side effects** from the vaccine so that an **information vacuum is not created** that can be filled by misinformation.

GOP and right-leaning personalities rely on increasingly common anti-vaccine vocabulary of “discrimination” in the vaccine passports sphere

- Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX), Mike Braun (R-IN), and Cynthia Lummis (R-WY) [introduced a bill to ban vaccine passports at the federal level](#). The motion stops the Biden administration from **“discriminating” against unvaccinated workers** in the workplace through vaccine mandates and from [working with third parties](#) (like airlines) to establish passport systems.
- Cruz’s bill is one of the first to attempt to hamper vaccine passports at the federal level, but uses common anti-vaccine **language around discrimination, personal choice, and government overreach**.
- The story quickly went viral on right-leaning media accounts, including a [Fox News post](#) that amassed over 50K engagements. The article received a total of 100K+ interactions on Facebook and 8.1K on Twitter.
- Meanwhile, in Oregon, the Clackamas County commissioner, Mark Shull, [put forth a draft resolution](#) that states the use of vaccine passports creates **“the conditions of a new Jim Crow 2.0.”** (Shull was later [stripped of his duties](#).)
- Fox News host Tucker Carlson was slammed online after echoing the lawmakers and comparing vaccine passport requirements to [“medical Jim Crow.”](#)

- [MSNBC's Joy Reid](#) rebuked what she called “the **favorite new, offensive analogy of some in the GOP.**”
- Carlson’s comments went viral. The reaction to his controversial statements were mixed. On YouTube, three segments that were critical of Carlson’s clip garnered 111K, 57K, and 41K views, respectively.
- **Takeaway:** The anti-vaccine movement has long leveraged comparisons to the Holocaust—including unethical medical testing and Nazi Germany’s discriminatory laws targeting Jewish people—to achieve their aims. Here, we see **new historical analogies being weaponized to the same ends.** Further, as states continue to reopen and New York state rolls out its [Excelsior Pass](#), we [witness these arguments](#) being used to inform and push through legislation, and must continue to monitor and respond to the **links between anti-vaccine language and policy.**

Antisemitic channels highlight “Jewish Contributions” to vaccine development and activism

- Numerous antisemitic Telegram channels have shared vaccine-related content from “[Jewish Contributions](#)”. The group operates a website and social media accounts on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Telegram](#), and [Instagram](#) and purports to be run by individuals of Jewish descent “dedicated to showcasing Jewish achievement”, but pushes antisemitic tropes and stereotypes.
- Shares highlight the supposedly disproportionate number of Jewish people in leadership positions at the CDC, including high-level positions in “vaccination development and pro-vaccination activism”. The shares **provide fuel for antisemitic conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines.**
- The website has predominantly been shared in far-right Telegram channels and has had little engagement on mainstream platforms. It has been shared to antisemitic Facebook groups including [Anti Kalergification League](#) and [Дискуссионна группа на Война и мир](#) (War and Peace Discussion Group).
- **Takeaway:** This website parrots common antisemitic stereotypes while fusing conspiracy theory and extreme far-right topics. The group’s tactics demonstrate how **extremist or offensive groups with different strategic aims and ideologies can quickly move into the anti-vaccine space.**

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

Content in additional languages and content spread by foreign state media. The non-English content and foreign state media targets users in the US, though may also have international spread.

French fireman releases viral video claiming fatalities have increased from COVID-19 vaccinations, spreads in English

- A viral video of Pierrick Thevenon, a French fireman who claims that vaccines are causing strokes two weeks after injection, was translated into English and shared among English-speaking anti-vaccine communities.
- Thevenon has previously [confronted local officials](#) on vaccine efficiency and “Big Pharma” lobbying.

- An English translation of the video has received over 107K views on the Telegram channel [mRNA Death Toll](#), and over 34K views on [Bitchute](#). A second Bitchute [video](#) claiming “massive” deaths, has over 16K views.
- French domains including [Planètes360](#) and [Le Média en 4-4-2](#) were frequently linked by conspiratorial communities engaging with this narrative.

RT responds to anti-Pfizer marketing campaign organized by Russian-linked marketing firm

- Last week, the Virality Project [covered a story about French and German social media influencers](#) who were approached by a Russian-linked marketing firm Fazze **offering to pay them to smear the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines.**
- Now, a segment on Russian state media entity RT, titled “Shady Priorities,” discusses the same questionable report that was used by Fazze in their communications with influencers. RT claims the study’s findings come from an “internal report” from AstraZeneca, rather than a “Russian agency.”
- The official Twitter account for the Russian COVID-19 vaccine, [@sputnikvaccine](#), repeats these claims and **depicts the Pfizer vaccine as unsafe.**
- The segment has over 250K views on [YouTube](#) and has been shared by vaccine-skeptic accounts on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Telegram](#).
- **Takeaway:** Russian state media continues to undermine the global vaccine effort by denigrating European and American-developed vaccines through misleading and false information.

Ongoing Themes and Tactics:

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

Decontextualized *Nature* article shared to further confusion about “natural immunity”

- Several Covid-skeptic groups and pages on Facebook shared **an [article from *Nature*](#)** that reports that people who have recovered from COVID-19 can produce antibodies for most of their lives.
- Though the article recommends everyone still get vaccinated (particularly because new variants can undermine the protective effects of antibodies), the anti-vaccine community has seized upon the findings to share **misleading information about “natural immunity.”**
- Comments on posts celebrated the finding as evidence that recovered patients had developed [natural antibodies](#) that would prevent them from needing to be vaccinated and **exposed to “[awful ingredients](#).”**
- The article has been shared by popular COVID-19 skeptic and anti-lockdown groups on Facebook, including [The Refusers](#), which has over 98K members, and [Michigan Needs an Adjustment](#), which has over 77K members.
- **Takeaway:** Last week we reported on a [shift in disinformation circles](#) towards using more “legitimate” and “scientific” information. The use of decontextualized findings from this *Nature* article marks the **ongoing tactic to spread anti-vaccine sentiment** through new scientific

information—specifically by seizing upon a lack of messaging and public understanding about **what natural immunity really is**, how it works, and whether people who have recovered from COVID-19 need to get vaccinated.

Canadian virologist bolsters the popular spike protein narrative

- On June 3, Children’s Health Defense (CHD) released an article on the research of Canadian anti-COVID-vaccine virologist Dr. Byram Bridle, which claims that vaccine spike proteins travel from the injection site and accumulate in the organs and tissues (most notably, the ovaries), where they can cause organ damage.
- Bridle noted: “We thought the spike protein was a great target antigen, we never knew the **spike protein itself was a toxin** and was a pathogenic protein. So by vaccinating people we are inadvertently inoculating them with a toxin.”
- Despite the fact that many of Bridle’s claims have been debunked, his claims also spread in several Spanish-language Telegram [groups](#), including at least [one group](#) that discusses QAnon and other conspiracies.
- **Takeaway:** These comments further [problematic narratives](#) that the spike protein is dangerous and that vaccines are toxic. CrowdTangle searches for “spike protein” routinely show viral engagement: in the last week, the engine revealed 563K engagements on Instagram and 316K on Facebook. The comments also signify the popular emphasis on the vaccine’s impact on women’s fertility.

Del Bigtree refuses blood transfusion, bolstering “tainted blood” conspiracy

- Anti-vaccine activist Del Bigtree, CEO of Informed Consent Action Network and producer of the anti-vaccine documentary “VAXXED” posted online about how he [refused blood transfusions](#) for internal hemorrhoids from any donor who had been vaccinated against COVID-19 and instead flew to Cancun to obtain “unvaccinated blood”.
- Bigtree’s story was used by Steven Baker, an Idaho chiropractor, to give a video follow-up to his Instagram video listing five reasons not to get the vaccine. The follow-up video discussing Bigtree’s story received 36.3K views and 3.5K engagements, significantly outperforming Baker’s previous posts.
- **Takeaway:** Bigtree’s statements **bolster the narrative**, reported in [last week’s Virality Project briefing](#), that the **blood of vaccinated people is somehow “contaminated” or “tainted.”**

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 Taiwanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, thanking the US government for donating 750K vaccine doses. The post received 87.9K interactions (81.1K likes, 4.6K comments, and 2.2K shares).

- This week's top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is a video showing famous comedian and TV host Ellen DeGeneres getting her second shot of the Moderna vaccine. The post received 311.6K likes.
- This week's top **Reddit post** with the word “vaccine” covers Spanish golfer Jon Rahm's withdrawal from the Memorial tournament. Rahm tested positive for COVID-19 after he refused to receive the vaccine. The post received 21.8K upvotes.
- This week's top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** is by physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing a *Guardian* article about the Wuhan lab-leak hypothesis. The post received 19.3K interactions (13.3K likes, 1.8K comments and 4.2K shares).
- This week's top **tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** is by Dr. Simone Gold, founder of America's Frontline Doctors, condemning the suspension of Naomi Wolf's Twitter account. The Tweet received 20K interactions (1K replies, 6K retweets and 13K likes).