



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #27

June 22, 2021 - June 29, 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.

In this briefing:

Events This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent WHO and UK advisories about child vaccination leveraged to assert that US children are being “experimented on” • Right-leaning and anti-vaccine wellness groups post about ACIP meeting on myocarditis • JAMA research letter counters claims that vaccines cause “mass male infertility” • Tucker Carlson hosts the “inventor” of mRNA vaccine technology after YouTube removes his video claiming COVID-19 vaccines are cytotoxic • Conspiracy theory accounts assert Moderna sent mRNA vaccine candidates to university researchers before the emergence of COVID-19
Non-English Language and Foreign Spotlight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumor spreads that the British government was forced to hold “crisis talks” after British Airways pilots’ deaths • Concerns about vaccine-induced myocarditis in children spreads in Spanish and Chinese
Ongoing Themes and Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaccine mandate debates continue in the contexts of sports and cruise ships • Aunt tweets about her nephew’s death, which is then incorporated into right-wing and anti-vaccine child safety narratives

Key Takeaways

- This week, [debates over vaccine mandates](#) continued to take place online. They also fueled legal challenges, which often take their language from the online conversation.
- Child safety concerns were at the forefront of the anti-vaccine community’s discussions this week, as groups [spread a story](#) about the death of a 13-year-old who had previously received a vaccine, **despite no established connection between the two events**, and as posts circulated in

[multiple languages](#) after [the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices](#) met to discuss myocarditis and pericarditis.

- A new and sensational false narrative that vaccines cause “mass male infertility” has spread on social media this week. The Journal of the American Medicine Association has already attempted to pre-bunk the claims, **though it is unclear whether the effort has been fully effective in staunching the narrative.**
- Conspiracy theory accounts are using a recently uncovered confidential transfer agreement to suggest that Moderna was working on a vaccine even before COVID-19 emerged. Last week, the Virality Project [released a blog post](#) discussing **how influencers have systematically undermined trust in public health figures.**

Events this week:

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

Recent WHO and UK advisories about child vaccination leveraged to assert that US children are being “experimented on”

- A cabinet minister in the UK [announced](#) that vaccination experts in the nation are not planning to recommend vaccines to children aged 12-17.
- The UK’s announcement coincided with the WHO’s June 22 release of its [updated guidance](#), which included information on vaccinating children. The guidance appears to have been edited; it initially read as a recommendation that children *not* be vaccinated. It was **edited to reflect that children are a “less urgent” vaccination priority than older people.**
- Anti-vaccine activists quickly picked up on the UK story. **Capitalizing on concerns about the vaccine being “experimental,”** influencers – including frequent spreaders of misinformation such as [Joseph Mercola](#) and [Alex Berenson](#) – framed vaccinated children in the US as being “experimented on” or “guinea pigs”, in contrast to British children.
- These posts appeared on several social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, and each received a fair amount of attention (3K and 8K, respectively). On Instagram, some [posts](#) directed viewers back to anti-vaccine wellness sources, urging parents to “get your son or daughter to a homeopath or naturopath ASAP.”
- Other conspiracy theory [websites](#) and influential accounts, including [Representative Majorie Taylor Greene](#) (R-GA), are additionally sharing [old WHO guidance](#) from April as if it is current, misleadingly claiming that the institution has been “caught” [flip-flopping](#) due to undue [influence](#). Critics on Reddit use screenshots of the WHO’s original guidance to suggest the WHO is unreliable in its recommendations for children.
- Posts claiming that the WHO recommends against vaccinating children have gotten around 60K interactions on Facebook, with lower but still-viral engagement on Instagram and Reddit. Some [posts](#) also **politicize the issue by claiming the WHO and CDC are “at odds”** because their recommendations differ. Notably, the WHO’s recommendations are global, and include countries where vaccines are scarce.
- **Takeaway:** Differences in official guidelines for vaccinating 12-17 year olds are being used to undermine American public health institutions’ expertise and [ferry parents towards alternative wellness influencers](#).

Right-leaning and anti-vaccine wellness groups post about ACIP's meeting on myocarditis

- On June 23, the [Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices \(ACIP\)](#) met to discuss the possible link between mRNA vaccines and myocarditis in people under 30, concluding that there is a “likely association” between having received either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine and the reported myocarditis cases in the US, which were exceedingly [rare and mostly mild](#).
- The FDA will revise patient and provider fact sheets to include warnings about myocarditis and pericarditis (inflammation of the tissue surrounding the heart, rather than of the heart muscle) after vaccination.
- The ACIP meeting has been widely discussed on social media. Facebook interactions number 1.7 million, while Instagram interactions number 864K in the last week.
- Several [right-leaning](#) and [anti-vaccine wellness groups](#) have predictably each posted about the news. The most popular Facebook posts included several written by [medical professionals with a naturopathic or alternative focus](#), including [Children's Health Defense](#).
- On Reddit, the conversation around the ACIP meeting has primarily occurred on conspiracy theory subreddits. Some users are speculating about the Delta variant of the virus, claiming the variant is being used as a “scare tactic” to “bully” people into accepting the vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** The possible link between rare cases of heart inflammation and mRNA vaccines has been in the public eye [for more than a month](#). Now that the results of ACIP's investigations have been released, it is imperative that the committee's conclusions be circulated alongside clinical guidance from health officials and medical organizations – who expressed in a recent [statement](#) their recommendation that young people be vaccinated.

Tucker Carlson hosts the “inventor” of mRNA vaccine technology after YouTube removes his video claiming COVID-19 vaccines are cytotoxic

- Dr. Robert Malone – the self-declared “[inventor](#)” of mRNA vaccine – spoke about unverified vaccine dangers and risks, claiming that vaccines are cytotoxic. Malone was “speaking out” because YouTube had deleted one of his videos on the same topic.
- Malone did perform pioneering mRNA research in the 1980s, but most [credible sources](#) credit University of Pennsylvania researchers, Dr. Drew Weissman and Dr. Katalin Karikó, with the development of the technology – not Malone.
- Malone blended **medical freedom language** with the unfounded allegations of harm, saying that “people have the right to decide whether to accept the vaccine or not, especially since these are experimental vaccines. This is a fundamental right having to do with clinical research ethics.”
- The story has received over 14K engagements on Facebook and 40K on Instagram, with shares from popular anti-vaccine activists including [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#) and [Dr. Scott Jensen](#).
- [Claims](#) made in Malone's removed Youtube video, which discussed the VAERS database and suggested adverse events are not being taken seriously by medical professionals, are also circulating in a Chinese-language article on WeChat. The article has more than 40K views.
- Malone's points have been debunked by [Reuters](#) and [Verify This](#).
- **Takeaway:** mRNA vaccines have been the popular target of anti-vaccine communities. Here, we see unfounded scientific claims about mRNA technology being televised on a program with millions of viewers, used as the underpinning for a compelling narrative about “health freedom”.

JAMA research letter works to counter claims that vaccines cause “mass male infertility”

- On June 17, [Vaccine Choice Canada](#) posted a [Daily Expose article](#) titled “Florida doctor finds signs of infertility and prostate cancer in men who received Covid-19.” The doctor, Diego Rubinowicz, cited his concerns about male patients, claiming that many have “falsely elevated Prostate-specific antigen (PSA) levels” after receiving the vaccine.
- The UK-based Daily Expose has [previously shared](#) misleading viral stories that cite a Canadian pathologist and COVID-19-denier’s [allegations](#) that vaccines cause “mass male infertility.”
- [The Journal of the American Medical Association](#) published a research letter to address premature speculation about vaccines and male fertility. **They conclude that the vaccine has no effect on sperm.**
- The JAMA article currently has over 5K Facebook engagements; the top three posts are pro-vaccine and account for 75% of the engagements.
- [Forbes](#)’ write-up of the JAMA letter and other [fact checks](#) note that claims of “mass male infertility” have been circulating virally on [social media accounts](#).
- These accounts claim men will “lose their reproductive capacity” and that mRNA vaccines are found to “damage men’s reproductive organs.”
- **Takeaway:** Concerns about vaccines and fertility on social media, which have previously focused on women, have **recently shifted to men**. Infertility is one of the more eye-catching vaccine narratives with the ability to go viral. It is vital that public health professionals **debunk the narrative and prove accurate, easily-accessible information is vital**.

Conspiracy theory accounts assert Moderna sent mRNA vaccine candidates to university researchers before the emergence of COVID-19

- Far-right and conspiracy theory accounts active on mainstream and alt-social media platforms have been sharing several articles claiming that a [confidential transfer agreement](#) was recently uncovered, which purportedly reveals that weeks before the emergence of the virus, a COVID-19 vaccine candidate was sent by the NIH and Moderna to university researchers linked to the Wuhan Institute of Virology.
- This narrative [implies](#) that individuals and organizations, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the National Institute of Health, Moderna executives and others knew about COVID-19. It plays into existing conspiracy theories suggesting that the virus was planned in advance, and implicates “elite” individuals and institutions.
- The claims are also being tied to more general [narratives](#) that suggest the Chinese Communist Party intentionally released the coronavirus as a bioweapon.
- **Takeaway:** Virality Project researchers continue to monitor incidents involving conspiratorial “leaked” documents, particularly as they relate to the origins of COVID-19 and the vaccine, as these documents are used to [cast doubt on established narratives and health institutions](#).

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

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

Rumor spreads that the British government was forced to hold “crisis talks” after British Airways pilot deaths

- The source of this rumor is a voice recording – shared on [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#) – of an unidentified man who reports that, according to his friend who works at British Airways, three pilots have died in the last week after they each received the COVID-19 vaccine.
- The recording was widely shared: comments from several accounts on Facebook ([1](#), [2](#)) and Twitter ([1](#), [2](#)) gained up to 2K engagements, while at least four different alternative or conspiratorial outlets ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#)) published stories based on the recording. A [photo](#) of what appears to be a memorial to four pilots was also shared as evidence of the reported deaths.
- After social media users directed questions about the recording to British Airways, the company sent a [clarification](#) on Twitter that “there is no truth whatsoever in the claims on social media speculating that the four deaths are linked.”
- **Takeaway:** Last week, the Virality Project reported on the [circulation of a false article](#) warning people not to fly due to blood clot concerns, which included the claim that airlines were meeting about the problem. The narrative has continued to fester and implies that vaccination is a danger for air travel, potentially furthering the public’s safety concerns and presenting a challenge for airlines.

Concerns about myocarditis in children from vaccines spreads in Spanish and Chinese

- Concerns that the COVID-19 vaccine could cause myocarditis in young people continue to spread. This week, the Virality Project surfaced several popular posts in Spanish and Chinese that emphasize worries about myocarditis.
- A [Telegram post](#) from a Spanish-language anti-vaccine channel with 24K members links to a blog post falsely claiming that 30 children [died](#) during the FDA’s Pfizer vaccine trial. The blog post also references a Pfizer [drug trial](#) in Nigeria in which 11 children died, claiming that Pfizer “is hurting children in the name of Big Pharma’s profits.”
- A [Telegram post](#) from a Spanish-language anti-vaccine channel with 18K members linked to a story about a 13-year-old in the US who apparently died of myocarditis three days post-vaccination. His death is under [investigation](#) (see above).
- The Israeli Public Emergency Council for the COVID-19 Crisis – a group of medical professionals and researchers which has previously [spread](#) misinformation about the pandemic and vaccines – has called for the suspension of vaccines in those under 30 years of age due to concerns about myocarditis. This [document](#) has spread in at least two Spanish-language anti-vaccine Telegram groups (10K total members).
- **Takeaway:** Claims about myocarditis, some based on real adverse reactions and others blended with unrelated or conspiratorial claims, spread across languages as well as platforms, potentially reflecting significant ongoing public concern.

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.

Vaccine mandates debate continues in the contexts of sports and cruise ships

- The topic of mandated vaccination remains a constant theme in the online anti-vaccine space. Activists are currently drawing attention to **high-profile stories of employees or celebrities** faced with the decision to receive the vaccine or lose their jobs.
- In the sports context, the news of NFL player Cole Beasley's rejection of the NFL's vaccine requirements ([previously reported](#) on by the Virality Project) was amplified and at times celebrated by high-profile right-leaning commentators, including [Ben Shapiro](#) and [Michael Knowles](#), as well as anti-vaccine communities on Telegram and Twitter. Some supporters used the hashtag #BeLikeCole.
- Users resurfaced statements made by other professional athletes expressing skepticism or concern over COVID-19 vaccines, including tennis player [Novak Djokovic](#) and Jamaican Olympic sprinter [Yohan Blake](#).
- The debate about mandates also generally intensified after a Florida judge recently ruled that [the CDC does not have the power to mandate](#) vaccination on cruise ships.
- This story was covered extensively by right-wing media, amassing 55K engagements on Facebook social media and publications.
- **Takeaway:** Campaigns against vaccine mandates continue to gain significant traction online, particularly among right-leaning communities.

Aunt tweets about her nephew's death, prompting right-wing and anti-vaccine communities to spread child safety narrative

- On June 21, Tami Burages [tweeted](#) about the death of her 13-year-old nephew, Jacob Clynick, who apparently died with an enlarged heart after his second vaccine dose. Her thread calls on the CDC to investigate Clynick's death, calling him an "innocent child" and a "sacrificial lamb."
- Burages later deleted her thread after it was swiftly picked up by [right-leaning ecosystems](#), including [Fox](#), [Breitbart](#), and [National File](#). These sources' posts, which have gone viral on several platforms, emphasize Burages' quote and also suggest that Twitter censored National File for reporting on Clynick's death.
- The CDC [responded](#) affirming that it would investigate whether Clynick's death can be linked to the vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** As our analysts observed last week via the "medical mystery" story of [Simone Scott](#), the anti-vaccine community is inflaming fears about vaccine safety by opportunistically and rapidly spreading dramatized news of the death of a young person, even when there has been **no established link between that person's vaccination and their death.**

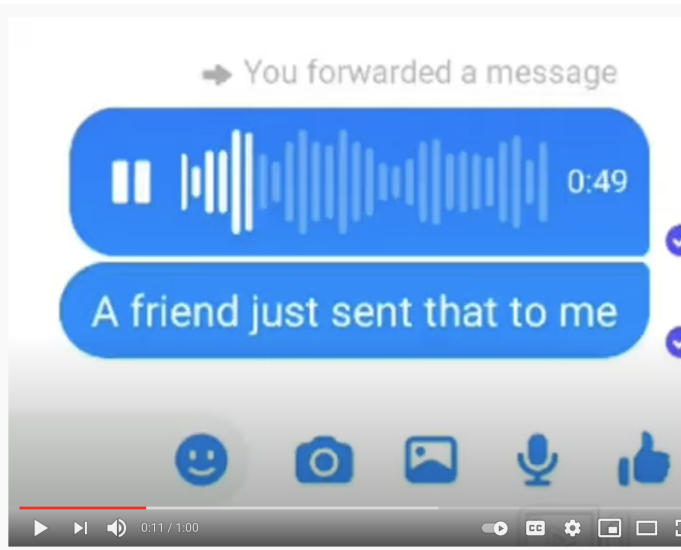
Key Statistics

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 Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, showing Minister Ashwini Kumar Choubey getting the second dose of the vaccine. The post received 369.7K interactions (366.5K reactions, 2.4K comments, 826 shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by Malala Yousafzai and shows her getting her first Pfizer vaccine. The post received 318.8K likes and 2.6K comments.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is an educational cartoon entitled “how vaccine work.” The post received 29.4K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** is by physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing a screenshot of a tweet by Dr. Simon, self-published science journalist and biotechnology PhD. The tweet reads “The majority of people believe the most frequently washed body part in 2021 was the hands. But in fact, it was the brain.” The post received 30K interactions (22.2K reactions, 1.1K comments and 6.8K 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 (AFLDS), covering and supporting the anti-lockdown protests in London on Saturday, June 26. The tweet received 8.3K interactions (1.9K retweets, 104 quote tweets and 6.3K 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>YouTube link with 5K views showing recording spreading fears about air travel risks</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows a video player interface. At the top, it says "You forwarded a message". Below that is a blue audio waveform with a duration of 0:49. Underneath the waveform is a blue speech bubble containing the text "A friend just sent that to me". At the bottom of the video frame, there are icons for emojis, camera, gallery, microphone, and thumbs up. Below the video frame, the video title is "British Airways in Crisis talks after 3rd Pilot Dies after taking the 2nd Jab (4 died)" and it shows "5,189 views · Jun 17, 2021". At the very bottom, there are icons for likes (178), comments (1), share, save, and a menu icon.</p>

[Tweet asserting the WHO “stealth edited” their page on vaccination for children](#)



[Graphic of Dr. Fauci from Governmentpropaganda.net that alleges leaked documents show Moderna sent transfer agreements to specialists before the pandemic](#)

