



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #30

July 13, 2021 – July 20, 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

- In Tennessee, conservative politicians used anti-vaccine rhetoric to advocate for parental consent for minors seeking vaccines while [a state vaccine official was fired for her teen vaccine outreach program](#).
- Anti-vaccine influencers in English and Chinese continue to manipulate health science to spread concerns about vaccine safety – including data from the [CDC’s pregnancy registry](#) and a [screenshot of an FDA fact sheet](#).
- French President Emmanuel Macron’s announcement of a new vaccine pass system triggered [mass anti-vaccine and COVID-19 skeptic protests in France](#).

Evolving Platform News

- Social media platforms and the [Biden administration](#) have been in recent disputes regarding platforms’ role in spreading and countering vaccine disinformation. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy accused Facebook of “poisoning information” and President Biden initially claimed platforms are “killing people” by allowing disinformation to spread.
- President Biden [walked back his claim](#) after Facebook [countered](#) his statement with a [blog post](#) saying that 85% of Facebook users were either vaccinated or wanted to be.
- On July 19, [The Washington Post](#) reported that nearly 30 groups were urging Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to take down disinformation and deplatform the “disinformation dozen”: 12 users who have a combined following of 59 million people and who are responsible for the “vast majority” of anti-vaccine misinformation and conspiracy theories according to a report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate.

Events this week:

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

Tennessee Department of Health (TDH) fires vaccination leader and ends adolescent vaccine outreach program; online discussion celebrates and spreads misinformation about vaccines for children.

- As reported by First Draft News in their [July 15 newsletter](#), **TDH ended *all* vaccine outreach for teenagers after firing Dr. Michelle Fiscus, the state’s medical director for vaccine-preventable disease and immunization programs.**
- Tennessee is one of many states that [requires children 14-18 years old to obtain parental consent](#) for vaccination.
- Dr. Fiscus was [purportedly fired](#) after the department sent public service ads to teenagers informing them of their eligibility to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, [distributed a memo](#) suggesting they could potentially be vaccinated without parental consent, and [sent a letter](#) in response to medical providers’ questions that explained the “[mature minor doctrine](#)” (a legal principle that allows teens to opt-in to vaccines without parental consent in some cases).
- Dr. Fiscus [maintains](#) that **her firing was a “political move” spurred by backlash to the state’s teen vaccination outreach program.**

- This is not the first time Tennessee’s Republican lawmakers have spoken out against vaccine outreach. In [one case in June](#), they threatened to dissolve the TDH, accusing it of targeting minors for vaccination. Lawmakers used the opportunity – including the [meeting that preceded Fiscus’s firing](#) – to spread vaccine misinformation popular in online spaces, such as the idea the vaccine’s “long-term effects” are still unknown.
- First Draft News also [reported](#) that anti-vaccine influencers spread news of Fiscus’s firing via right-leaning sources, including a viral tweet from a Newsmax [correspondent](#) and a Pro-Trump Facebook message board.
- Reverberations of Dr. Fiscus’s firing have also been felt across left-leaning media and social media, as viral posts, [articles](#) and [opinions](#) in progressive news media denounced the state’s actions.
- **Key Takeaway: Mis/disinformation narratives fueled this politicized conflict in Tennessee**, providing politicians with anti-vaccine language and ideology – including the idea that efforts to educate teens about vaccination are an overreach on the part of health departments – that ultimately led to the removal of a vaccine official, to the detriment of all childhood vaccination programs.

V-safe pregnancy registry study misinterpreted to circulate false narrative that COVID-19 vaccines lead to miscarriages

- On July 7, our analysts observed an uptick in posts implying that vaccines lead to pregnancy loss. While the Virality Project [saw this narrative first gain traction in February](#), the uptick stemmed from the misinterpretation of a [study](#) published in late June by the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) on the effects of vaccination on pregnant women. **The actual numbers found in the study are similar to the prevailing rate of miscarriage in the general population.**
- The study utilized data from the CDC’s [v-safe pregnancy registry](#). The registry is a program for self-identified pregnant participants that uses text messaging and web surveys to provide personalized health check-ins after vaccination.
- A meme manipulating the NEJM study states, “827 pregnant women get the jab. Of those, 104 were in the first trimester. Of that 104, 96 ended in miscarriage.”
- The meme is spreading within wellness and parenting groups. It has received 2K engagements across several Instagram posts and over 1K engagements on an [Earthy](#) Facebook post.
- Another [misinterpretation](#) – shared more often on conspiracy accounts – is that 82% of pregnancies in vaccinated women result in miscarriages. This has received 1.7K interactions on Facebook and 3.4K on Twitter. On [Twitter](#), it is also receiving engagement in Spanish and [German](#).
- Pro-life advocates used the misinformation to publish articles in [Virginia Christian Alliance](#) and Life Site News (a Canadian anti-abortion publication), respectively, each alleging the vaccines cause “spontaneous abortion” – a term for early pregnancy loss often used by pro-life advocates.
- **Key Takeaway:** An older narrative linking vaccines to miscarriages has resurfaced thanks to the misrepresentation of a recent scientific study. The narrative intentionally undermines scientific information and manipulates it into an easily-shareable meme.

Johnson & Johnson vaccine's connection to Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) receiving less attention online than expected

- Last week, we [reported](#) that the FDA's new label warning that the J&J vaccine can lead to an increased risk of GBS could result in a rise in anti-vaccine rhetoric around the J&J vaccine specifically as well as other vaccines more generally.
- This week, Graphika analysts observed upticks in the hashtag #GuillainBarre within non-conspiratorial online anti-vaccine communities. These communities also spread the notion that this was “the tip of the iceberg” for vaccine injury.
- Twitter also flagged a [post](#) from a Brazilian conservative journalist, Rodrigo Constantino, “updating” a list of COVID-19 vaccine side effects to include GBS. The tweet received over 3K interactions and was shared on Facebook and Instagram.
- **Key Takeaway: The news of the slightly enhanced risk of developing GBS post-vaccination has not received significantly more spread on anti-vaccine pages this week compared to last week.** We suggest continuing to monitor signs of a growing narrative around GBS, other neurological disorders, and COVID-19 vaccines.

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 U.S. though may also have international spread.

President Emmanuel Macron announces vaccine passes and mandatory vaccines for health workers, sparking unrest among French COVID-19 skeptics.

- Macron's July 12 [announcement](#) included mandated passes for restaurants, malls, public transportation, and airplanes.
- Fringe narratives compared mandated vaccines to the Holocaust and apartheid, as well as to sexual assault – a comparison also used by the German COVID-19 skeptic political party dieBasis in its election campaign.
- In Paris, police [clashed with protesters](#) who gathered to object to the new plan.
- Online, far-right and COVID-19 skeptic influencers shared protest videos. In [videos](#) viewed hundreds of thousands of times, far-right personalities called for supporters to “stand for their freedom” in protests on July 17.
- **Key Takeaway:** Backlash to mandated vaccines and vaccine passes shows international spread and the potential to create large, disruptive in-person protests, as we have witnessed with previous multiple Worldwide Freedom Rallies.

FDA fact sheet on Pfizer vaccine emergency use authorization (EUA) used in Chinese-language groups to claim vaccine is ineffective

- A screenshot of an FDA fact sheet on the Pfizer vaccine's EUA is circulating on WeChat. The spread is currently exclusive to Chinese. Though WeChat provides limited data on reach, the misinformation is spreading in various groups.

- The fact sheet reads, in part: “The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine is a vaccine and may prevent you from getting COVID-19. There is no U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved vaccine to prevent COVID-19.” The last sentence is highlighted, and the image is annotated in Chinese, implying there are no approved vaccines.
- The fact sheet is [real](#) and unaltered; it is true that no vaccines are currently FDA approved to prevent COVID-19. But as fully described in the fact sheet, the Pfizer vaccine has received an [emergency use authorization](#), which means the FDA allows the use of the product.
- **Key Takeaway:** The manipulation of the FDA’s own materials has been used as false evidence that the agency does not condone the use of the vaccines.

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.

People claiming vaccine injury are crowdsourcing financial help on GoFundMe

- The Virality Project [first reported in February](#) that people were beginning to use GoFundMe to crowdsource money for medical expenses accumulated from purported vaccine injuries.
- On July 8, Children’s Health Defense (CHD) published an [article](#) on the growing number of people seeking help for vaccine injuries this way.
- CHD’s newspaper, The Defender, reported that over 180 GoFundMe accounts were seeking help from medical bills and expenses from vaccine injury.
- Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. later [tweeted](#) out the news in a post that garnered about 5K interactions. He stated that the “U.S. government shields vaccine makers from liability.”
- **Many of these GoFundMe pages use personal anecdotes to request money from the person’s community.** Others use [inflammatory images](#): for instance, one page that has raised \$1,500 uses a screenshot from a Fox News Tucker Carlson clip with the caption “Shocking!!! The horrors of COVID-19 vaccine injuries.”
- **Takeaway:** The escalation in discussion about GoFundMe hits on **two significant anti-vaccine talking points: safety and pharmaceutical liability.** Further, it also plays into real but unfounded public concerns that the vaccine is costly.

“Body connection coach” releases promotional video, signaling continued rise of anti-vaccine paid content

- Lauren Geertsen, author of the [Empowered Sustenance](#) blog, recently released “Behind the Scenes of Covid Vaccines, A Guide for Truth-Seekers.” The [video](#) claims vaccines are unnecessary and that viewers don’t need to “accept Pharma as your one and only health savior.”
- On YouTube, Geertsen states “there’s a global corporate campaign to convince every single human being on the face of planet Earth that they need a man-made synthetic injected pharmaceutical product to ensure their health.” Instead, Geertsen promotes homeopathic food and supplemental alternatives.

- Our analysis shows the video has garnered roughly 3K interactions, mainly from Facebook posts sharing the YouTube video. Most of the posts are from Empowered Sustenance, which has shared the video nine times since May 19.
- **Key Takeaway:** Though engagement is low, this is another instance of paid anti-vaccine content emerging from the wellness community, pointing to the growing professionalization of influencers promoting vaccine hesitancy discourse.

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 Indian actress Parineeti Chopra, celebrating her vaccination (and documenting the immediate side effects). The post received 252K interactions (250K reactions, 2.3K comments, 260 shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by the POTUS account, showing President Joe Biden and pop star Olivia Rodrigo during her visit at the White House, and thanking her for her efforts to encourage vaccination among the youth. The post received 2.69M likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** shared a Tweet by @AustinERDoc retelling his conversation with a patient exposed to misinformation, specifically the claim that vaccines are made from "aborted babies". The post received 82.1K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Facebook** is by anti-vaccine physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing a Reuters photo of anti-vaccine protests in Athens. The post received 4.8k interactions (3.8K reactions, 261 comments and 727 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), also sharing a photo of the anti-vaccine protests in Athens, Greece. The tweet received 26K interactions (436 replies, 6.9K retweets and 18.4K 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One German graphic from @coronainsanity claiming 82% of pregnancies in vaccinated mothers result in miscarriages 	<p>The screenshot shows a graphic with the following text: Baby-Todesrate 82 % bei früh-geimpften Schwangeren. Below this, it states: Von 127 Frauen - im 1. Schwangerschaftsdrittel geimpft - verloren 115 ihr Baby. At the bottom, it references: Studie des „New England Journal of Medicine“* - eines der meistbeachteten Ärztefachblätter weltweit. The cim logo is in the top right corner.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facebook post from Liz Wheeler with 7K interactions mocking President Biden for asserting Cuban protesters want vaccines 	<p>The screenshot shows a Facebook post by Liz Wheeler from July 13 at 8:45 PM. The text of the post reads: The Cuban people hoist the American flag in a cry for freedom and the Biden Administration assumes they want... the COVID vaccine?! The video thumbnail features Liz Wheeler and the text: THE EYES OF THE WORLD ARE ON CUBA. Below the video, it says: EXCLUSIVE AD-FREE: The Eyes of the World Are on Cuba Ep. 22. At the bottom, there is a Facebook link: Visit the COVID-19 Information Center for vaccine resources. Get Vaccine Info. The post has 6.3K reactions and 278 Comments / 603 Shares.</p>

- [Screenshot of a GoFundMe post using Tucker Carlson images to request money for vaccine injury](#)

Help Alicia's Vaccine Recovery

