



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #31

July 20, 2021 - July 27, 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

- The Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS) continues to be used by anti-vaccine activists to stir up fears about vaccine safety. Right wing and anti-vaccine accounts used the data to [falsely claim that the CDC was covering up vaccine-related deaths](#) and that vaccines are more deadly than COVID-19.
- A [mistake on the part of a British public health official](#) in reporting the percentage of hospitalized patients who have been vaccinated spread online, proving difficult to purge from conversation even after he issued a correction. In addition, UK recommendations to not vaccinate children sent conflicting messages about the necessity of vaccines for youth.
- Multiple ongoing themes persisted in online conversation this week: Bill Gates' link to ["microchip" research](#); the [necessity of the vaccine for children](#); and an [injury story amplified by Republican lawmakers](#).

Virality Project Blog Posts: Foreign actors and global narrative spread

- Last week we published two new rapid response blogs on global trends in anti-vaccine discourse, including foreign interference.
- While we have primarily observed online anti-vaccine conversations stemming from domestic actors, [state-backed actors in Russia and China have actively fed online cycles of misinformation](#) about United States and Western-based COVID-19 vaccines: both by **selectively promoting content to shape vaccine debate and injecting new content into existing vaccine conversations**.
 - Russia has notably promoted content that challenges the trustworthiness of institutions in the eyes of the American public, while China is more likely to create content that promotes itself and highlights negative content on other countries' vaccines or distribution plans.
- In a second post, our analysts discussed [how anti-vaccine stories can go global through anxieties shared across communities](#). They use a case study of the death of a 13-year-old boy whose story went viral twice: once domestically and once internationally.

Events this week:

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

Whistleblower claims COVID-19 vaccine deaths cover-up using VAERS data in lawsuit with America's Frontline Doctors

- A [conspiracy theory that the Biden administration is covering up at least 45K vaccine-related deaths](#) spread online after an anonymous "whistleblower" complaint appeared in a [lawsuit](#) against COVID-19 vaccines.
- The lawsuit was filed by attorney Thomas Renz in conjunction with America's Frontline Doctors, a right-leaning group [known for spreading misinformation about the pandemic](#).
- The whistleblower apparently wrote a sworn [testimony](#) for the lawsuit that [falsely stated](#) there have been "45,000 deaths based on how many people died within three days of the vaccine."

- On July 16, Renz [spoke](#) at Clay Clark's ReAwaken America tour and [presented](#) the whistleblower's claims. Renz's speech spread widely on [Bitchute](#) (16.9K views) and was shared by right-leaning and anti-vaccine groups, including [The Daily Expose](#) and [Vaccine Choice Canada](#).
- Alex Berenson, a frequent spreader of vaccine misinformation, [tweeted](#) about a related narrative that the CDC had "quietly" doubled the number of reported VAERS deaths overnight.
- In the thread, which gathered more than 16K interactions, Berenson said the numbers spiked from 6K to 12K and claimed the CDC has received more reports of deaths after COVID-19 vaccination than all other vaccines combined over VAERS' 30+ year history.
- The tweet was [reposted](#) by top anti-vaccine influencer, Joseph Mercola, D.O.
- This narrative also spread in several Spanish-language anti-vaccine Telegram [channels](#), Facebook [groups](#), and at least two Spanish-language [blogs](#) that often [spread](#) health misinformation.
- Though posts on mainstream platforms and blogs received low levels of engagement, posts on Telegram accounted for at least 120K views of the content in Spanish.
- **Key Takeaway: The anti-vaccine community has consistently used the language of "whistleblowers" and "cover ups" to claim American public health institutions are deceiving the public about the vaccines.** Capitalizing on safety concerns and the misleading nature of VAERS reports, anti-vaccine activists and groups recently used that vocabulary to maintain that vaccine deaths are much higher than the public is aware of.

Right-leaning accounts circulate graphics based on VAERS data to suggest there have been more deaths from COVID-19 vaccines than COVID-19 infections

- [The Gateway Pundit](#) used a timeline graphic – going back to the establishment of VAERS in 1990 – to show extreme spikes in VAERS reports in 2020. These particular reports have been fact-checked by [multiple organizations](#).
- [The Daily Expose](#), an influential medical misinformation platform, drew from data released by Public Health Scotland to make the same claim about deaths in the UK, but excluded any COVID-19 deaths in people with preexisting conditions.
- The narrative spread mainly via right-leaning, [general anti-vaccine](#), and [medical freedom](#) accounts, which also used memes to make the same claim. Collectively, Gateway Pundit and Daily Expose articles garnered 24K interactions across Facebook and Twitter.
- **Key Takeaway:** Right-leaning publications used misinformation spreading about the VAERS database in the form of **memes, graphics, and manipulated data to assert the vaccine is more dangerous than COVID-19.**

Britain's Chief Scientific Adviser accidentally stated that 60 percent of hospitalized patients are double-vaccinated in a claim that went viral in anti-vaccine channels

- Sir Patrick Vallance [corrected the claim](#) on July 19, restating that **60 percent of hospitalized COVID-19 patients are unvaccinated.**
- Despite the correction, the claim spread on Facebook and Twitter. **Posts were [updated](#) to include the correction, but follow-up posts had vastly fewer interactions.**
- A Skynet article (since removed) parroting the initial false claim garnered over 142K interactions on Facebook, including in English, French, and Italian.

- The spread of this false statistic was driven in large part by a Candace Owens [Facebook post](#) with over 90K interactions. Her post has been shared by various [anti-vaccine accounts](#).
- Other posts note that 40% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients being double vaccinated is still high.
- Some Twitter users have explained that [40% of hospital patients being vaccinated indicates a high level of efficacy](#). [Here is the most thorough explanation](#) our analysts have found.
- **Key Takeaway:** Even when committed unintentionally, **errors made by public health officials in reporting accurate health information are costly to the vaccination effort** and not always easily remedied, even after clarifications are issued.

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.

European anti-vaccine groups call to halt Pfizer vaccine in children as UK government committee recommends children not be universally vaccinated

- The [UK Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation](#) (JCVI) found that the “minimal health benefits of offering universal COVID-19 vaccination do not outweigh the potential risks.”
- The [discrepancy](#) between the JCVI’s guidance and findings from the MHRA – the British equivalent of the FDA – has sparked online conversation. **In the U.S., [commenters question why the advice from the JCVI also differs from that of the CDC](#).**
- [Doctors for COVID Ethics](#), a European anti-vaccine group, released a [20-page report calling to immediately halt the use of Pfizer vaccines in children](#).
- The report was shared with low engagement across social media, but its information has been amplified by anti-vaccine groups including Vaccine Choice Canada and [Children’s Health Defense](#).
- **Key Takeaway:** Vaccination in children remains a sensitive issue globally, and various countries have made different conclusions about whether or not to universally vaccinate. **Governmental choices in other countries influence the online conversation in the U.S. about vaccines.**

Manipulated NHS graphic warns of severe vaccine symptoms, including cerebral blood clots, spread in Chinese and Spanish

- A graphic warning of the dangers of vaccines is spreading in Chinese and Spanish on Twitter and Telegram. **The graphic was created in the style of NHS Manchester City Council [public service announcements](#) and branded with their logos.**
- The false [graphic](#) reads, “Covid Vaccinated: New Symptoms to Look Out For,” listing “cardiac arrest,” “sudden death,” and “blood clots in the brain,” among others.
- The text of the graphic is English, but has been translated and [reposted](#) in several Spanish-language anti-vaccine Telegram channels, where it has garnered at least 30K views. The

graphic has also been translated in Chinese and posted to [Twitter](#) by at least one account, but received low engagement.

- **Key Takeaway:** The **manipulation of a graphic to mimic authoritative public health announcements** was used to further vaccine safety fears in Spanish and Chinese.

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.

Injury story: Woman claims life-altering injuries after vaccines and meets with two senators to take further action

- [Brienne Dressen participated in an AstraZeneca trial in November](#) that she claims left her with “life-altering” side effects, including months-long mysterious neurological disorders that have kept her in isolation from her family. Dressen also claims she has incurred \$250K in medical bills.
- [The Children’s Health Defense article](#) about Dressen’s story received around 3K interactions on Facebook and 6K interactions on Twitter. The interactions are mostly based around [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s tweet about the story](#).
- Dressen met with [Senator Mike Lee](#) (R-UT) and Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI), escalating the political implications of her anti-vaccine story. The two senators co-signed a [letter](#) to the CDC asking for more information on specific medical conditions that trial participants incurred after receiving the vaccines.
- The letter was published last month, on the same day that Johnson held a [forum for individuals experiencing adverse events](#), which was lambasted by health experts.
- **Key Takeaway:** An injury story that **does not have a proven causal link to the vaccine** nevertheless garnered high spread because it was picked up by a major anti-vaccine activist and by conservative politicians engaged in prior anti-vaccine activities.

Information resurfaces about a project for storing medical information under the skin’s surface, co-opts ongoing microchip narrative

- In December 2019, MIT researchers developed a way to [record a patient’s vaccination history](#) by storing the data in a pattern of dye that is delivered under the skin during vaccination. The technology uses nanocrystals, called quantum dots, that can remain under the skin for at least five years.
- Although it has been [public knowledge](#) since 2019 that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided funding for the project, the link was re-escalated this week. The Western Journal, a conservative political website, published a July 19 article with over 2K interactions about the Gates’s link to the technology.
- Candace Owens also brought attention to the old news in a [Facebook post](#) with 58K interactions that was picked up by anti-vaccine accounts. The original link Owens shares is from a 2019 MIT article.

- **Key Takeaway:** The Virality Project has [repeatedly reported](#) on the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates is behind a plot to implant vaccinated people with tracking devices, microchips, or magnets. **Given that a recent [Economist/YouGov poll](#) found that $\frac{1}{5}$ of Americans believe the vaccine contains a government-issued microchip, online incidents that further the narrative are still deterrents for mass vaccination.**

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, encouraging well-supplied countries to make vaccine donations, and citing Nepal receiving doses as an example. The post received 884K interactions (862K reactions, 17K comments, 6K shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by American actress Emmy Rossum, sharing that after she was vaccinated during pregnancy, her newborn girl now has antibodies against COVID-19. Emmy Rossum encourages all to get the vaccine. The post received 644K likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** shares the story of a man who, despite recovering from COVID-19 in hospital, claims he would not have agreed to receiving the vaccine, because “the government can't tell [him] what to do.” Most of the discussion is skeptical of the argument. The post received 59K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** is by anti-vax physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing a letter by his lawyers to The New York Times, in which they accuse the newspaper of defamation towards Mercola, and request that an article be retracted. The post received 5.4K interactions (4.3K reactions, 409 comments and 734 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). The tweet shares a promotional video advertising a conference by AFLDS. The conference, which takes place today, July 27, 2021, marks the first anniversary of the “White Coat Summit.” Gold claims that after the summit, the association was unjustly censored on social media. The tweet received 15K interactions (4.5K retweets, 9.5K likes and 198 replies).

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>Alex Berenson's viral tweet on VAERS deaths increase (later corrected by Berenson)</p>	
<p>Candace Owens' Facebook post sharing 2019 research from MIT about recording medical data under the skin</p>	