



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #32

July 27, 2021 - August 3, 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.

***Please note that this is our last official briefing. Our analysts will be continuing internal monitoring and sending out newsletters and blog posts with some of our analysis.***

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## Key Takeaways

- Online discussion heavily featured [confusion around the Delta variant, the efficacy of vaccines against it, and popular breakthrough case stories](#).
- Internal document leaks – from both the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and [Pfizer](#) – were once again manipulated to suggest the government is involved in cover-ups around vaccine development, efficacy, and distribution.
- Military officials weighed imposing a COVID-19 vaccine mandate after President Biden ordered the forces to [begin developing a plan to make the vaccine mandatory](#). In response, the CEO of the alt-social media platform Gab, Andrew Torba, spread [misinformation-laden documents for vaccine exemption](#).

## Events this week:

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

### Online discussion of breakthrough cases and vaccine efficacy confounds and worries the public

- Reports of vaccinated people contracting the virus, including a [widely-reported outbreak](#) in Provincetown, Massachusetts, **have helped aid the rise of an anti-vaccine narrative that breakthrough cases mean the vaccine is not working, which is *not true*.**
- Mainstream coverage of superspreader events and stories of [celebrities contracting](#) or [spreading the virus](#) despite full vaccination have gotten attention. These are often pro-vaccine stories that urge additional caution because of the high infectiousness of the Delta variant.
- Major anti-vaccine influencers, including Earthly and [Joseph Mercola](#), have used the opportunity to shed doubt on vaccine efficacy.
  - Mercola implied that breakthrough cases are actually “vaccine failures,” and that health communicators are using the term “breakthrough case” to prop up COVID-19 vaccines and pharmaceutical companies’ reputations.
  - Mercola’s posts regularly go viral; this one likewise received high traction, with a collective 4K interactions on Facebook and Twitter.
- With new information coming out regularly about the Delta variant’s effect on vaccine efficacy, different studies and news outlets have chosen to emphasize different numbers about efficacy: some efficacy rates show symptomatic infection, others show hospitalization, and others show severe illness. The overall “efficacy” of a vaccine can thus be confusing to the public.
  - [Anti-vaccine accounts](#) have picked up these varying numbers to highlight the ones that look the worst, using them to prove the vaccines are not effective whatsoever or not worth getting.
- In at least one conspiratorial Chinese-language Telegram channel that has repeatedly spread anti-vaccine content, users attacked Dr. Fauci and the CDC’s updated mask guidance, claiming that the Delta variant is a “fictional” ploy to mandate vaccines. The post was seen by at least 5.4K users.
- **Key Takeaway:** Breakthrough cases are happening, and they are of serious concern. Though they represent an important reason to get the vaccine, anti-vaccine activists use the term to suggest the opposite: that the vaccine is ineffective and that major public health institutions are deceiving the public about it. **Public health communication must include clear statistics and guidance around the Delta variant, its level of infectiousness, and rates of breakthrough cases broken down by symptoms, illness, and hospitalization.**

Media coverage lacking accompanying health guidance leaves room for anti-vaccine influencers to use leaked CDC internal slides to undermine confidence in vaccine efficacy.

- On July 29, internal slides from a CDC meeting, which were obtained by NBC and first published by [The Washington Post](#), contain still-unpublished data that reveals vaccinated people who

contract COVID-19 may have a similar viral load compared to unvaccinated people who contract the virus. The slides give a [justification](#) for the agency's change in [mask guidance](#) last week. **The agency now recommends unvaccinated and vaccinated people wear masks indoors in areas with high transmission rates.**

- The data has been reported within both mainstream and alt-social media platforms. On the alt-right platform Gab, some users have suggested that the COVID-19 vaccine itself spreads COVID-19.
- This has also gotten attention on anti-vaccine and right-leaning conspiratorial Telegram channels in Spanish. Their posts reached at least 100K users.
- Anti-vaccine channels and publications are using this data to undermine confidence in the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines by **leaving out important context that vaccinated individuals still have a [much lower likelihood of getting infected](#)**. Right-leaning Facebook accounts reshared a screenshot of a [USA Today article](#) that leaves out the same important context.
  - The screenshots also circulated on Instagram, where two posts re-sharing them amassed over 20K engagements.
- **Key Takeaway: Leaked public health information lacks trustworthy accompanying health messaging, and mainstream media reporting on the leaked information can likewise fail to include crucial guidance.** Anti-vaccine accounts can then more easily characterize the information as evidence that COVID-19 vaccines do not work.

## Gab CEO Andrew Torba claims military members are being forced to take the vaccine or face court-martial

- The posts come at a sensitive time for the military's vaccination plan. [Military leaders are racing to vaccinate troops without issuing an order](#), while the [White House called on the Defense Department](#) to look into "how and when" it might mandate a vaccine for military members.
- [Torba's post](#) claims he is "getting flooded" with text messages from military service members who are being forced to take the COVID-19 vaccine or else face court-martial as a consequence of their refusal.
- The main post has amassed around 10K engagements, which is very high for the platform. Subsequent posts containing screenshots of text messages also have engagement in the thousands.
- Torba also wrote a post on [Gab's news site](#) with **links to a variety of documents to help service members request vaccine exemptions on religious grounds**, citing the use of aborted fetal cell lines in the development of the "experimental" vaccines – an old, common anti-vaccine [talking point](#).
  - The documents include misinformation about the vaccines.
  - This post garnered around 10K interactions on Facebook.
  - The documents are being shared in the [QAnon community](#).
- **Key Takeaway:** Torba uses his position to combine anti-mandate rhetoric with vaccine misinformation for a large and dedicated audience. His posts are especially significant given the mainstream media's concurrent coverage of the unfolding debate and announcements about a potential vaccine mandate within the military.

## Leaked Pfizer contract prompts decontextualized claims regarding Ivermectin and vaccine injury

- Excerpts from a Pfizer purchasing agreement were leaked via a [viral tweet](#) “exposing” the company. Posts were often accompanied by the hashtag #PfizerLeaks.
- The documents appear to have been originally shared by [Ehden Biber](#), who allegedly obtained the document from the Albanian government. It is unclear how the documents were obtained. The original thread was removed, although a [URL](#) of an archived version of the thread has also circulated among anti-vaccine accounts.
- Joseph Mercola shared the excerpts in two tweets that emphasized two parts of the contract: the company’s [indemnification from harm](#) and that [long-term efficacy and adverse effects](#) of the vaccine are unknown. The tweets received over 3K engagements, with most comments discussing that the vaccines should not be mandated.
- **Key Takeaway:** Vaccine purchasing agreements, including price per dose, have long been the subject of anti-vaccine scrutiny. This leak, though new, does not represent a major shift in discourse.

## 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.*

### A small number of NFL players opposing vaccines are driving online debates about vaccine mandates among sports fans and right wing accounts

- The Virality Project has [repeatedly reported on stories of professional athletes](#), particularly Cole Beasley of the NFL, whose reluctance to get vaccinated has sparked online conversation.
- This week, [tweets from Arizona Cardinals wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins](#) and the announcement of the [Minnesota Vikings assistant coach stepping down due to vaccine requirements](#) both received significant attention online.
- Facebook posts about the NFL’s vaccine policies have received over 767K engagements in the past week.
- Online debate over vaccine mandates is mainly political in nature, and often emphasizes vaccination as a personal choice. Professional athletes have contributed to this culture by remaining secretive about their vaccination disclosure.
- This debate also can **provide a platform for misleading or false information about COVID-19 vaccines, including vaccine safety.**
  - Hopkins tweeted that his girlfriend’s brother [experienced heart problems](#) after receiving a vaccine.
- **Key Takeaway:** The ongoing amplification of news around athletes refusing to be vaccinated contributes to the framing of vaccination as a political issue rather than a health issue, ultimately giving way to more online space for vaccine safety misinformation and debates about “medical freedom.”



[Joseph Mercola's viral Facebook post calling breakthrough cases "vaccine failures"](#)

Dr. Joseph Mercola  
July 21 at 4:08 PM · 🌐

I am old enough to remember when 'breakthrough cases' were called 'vaccine failures!'

**PubMed.gov**

PUBMED.NCBI.NLM.NIH.GOV

Primary vaccine failure to routine vaccines: Why and what to do? - PubMed

Visit the COVID-19 Information Center for vaccine resources.  
[Get Vaccine Info](#)

1.8K 114 Comments 245 Shares

Tweet about a breakthrough case that includes information about heart problems

Deandre Hopkins  
@DeAndreHopkins

Follow

... @jalenramsey My girlfriend brother in the military got the vaccine and had heart problems right after. When you stand for something they hate you!

Jalen Ramsey @jalenramsey  
I know 2 people right now who got the vaccine but are covid positive.. I'm just saying. I wouldn't look at a teammate as bad if he don't get the vax, no pressure from [twitter.com/quincy\\_avery/s...](#)

1:24 PM - 22 Jul 2021

1,378 Retweets 6,930 Likes

1.0K 1.4K 6.9K

LeVon.Wild @Kszn\_wld · 1h  
Replying to @DeAndreHopkins @jalenramsey  
Adams better

2