



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #16

April 6, 2021 - April 13, 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 aims to support 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](mailto:info@viralityproject.org).

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## Key Takeaways

- Discussions about **vaccine passports continued to dominate online** spaces as states announced plans to roll out or ban using proof of vaccination for events and businesses. In response, people have used social media to share ways to **fake vaccination status**.
- **Concerns about AstraZeneca's vaccine and blood clots** continued to grow as the European Medical Association announced a possible causal link. Meanwhile, breaking news of the **suspension of the J&J vaccine** for blood clot concerns is already fueling vaccine safety concerns in the US. We will monitor online discussion around this event as it unfolds this week.
- The **high-profile deaths** of Prince Philip and rapper DMX were both falsely linked to their recent COVID-19 vaccinations. These deaths, along with **reports of more military members refusing to receive a vaccine**, have promoted vaccine hesitancy online.

## Events this week:

*This section contains key events from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners.*

### New York State vaccine passport program receives pushback among right-wing users

- [New York announced the Excelsior Pass](#) which would present digital proof of COVID-19 vaccination or negative test results at large venues. In a continuation of trends from past weeks, this move was **attacked by right-wing pundits as a way to facilitate government control and surveillance over the public**.
- Some right-wing commentators, [such as OAN](#), described the pass as the culmination of public-private sector surveillance tactics that have been trialed throughout the pandemic and suggested those that refuse this app might be “shut out from society completely.”
- This sentiment was echoed by Russian state-affiliated media outlet RT in a video titled “[NY Launches New Vaccine App Aimed At More Control Over Voters](#).”
- Meanwhile, the hashtag #StopVaccinePassports spiked this week on Twitter as conservative commentator [Liz Wheeler encouraged her audience to “Say NO to vaccine passports”](#) adding that the “only way to stop this abuse of power is to refuse to comply.”
- Other widely-shared content on the topic included an appearance by conspiracy theorist and anti-vaccine activist Dr. Naomi Wolf on Fox News, where [she deemed the rollout of vaccine passports the “end of human liberty in the West.”](#) Wolf and others have compared vaccine passports to a social credit system akin to China’s.
- **Takeaway:** Measures taken by states and businesses to verify vaccination status will be drawn into the “vaccine passport” debate fueled by anti-vax and right-wing personalities.

### Vaccine passports opposed and banned in several states

- While New York announced its state vaccine pass, other states banned vaccine passports. On April 6, Texas Governor Greg Abbott [signed an executive order](#) banning the use of vaccine

passports in the state, prohibiting agencies and businesses that receive public funds from conditioning the receipt of services on COVID-19 vaccination status.

- The order came a few days after Florida Governor Ron DeSantis [issued a similar order](#) in Florida. Similar executive orders were also issued in [Utah](#) and [Idaho](#). Georgia Governor Brian Kemp [announced his opposition](#) to vaccine passports, though did not issue an executive order banning them. A state senator from Minnesota [introduced legislation](#) that would ban vaccine passports in the state.
- While some comments on posts discussing these orders oppose these anti-vaccine passport stances altogether, many comments use news of opposition against vaccine passports to question the efficacy of the vaccine. Other comments do not necessarily take a position against the vaccine, but rather support the ability for businesses to decide for themselves whether to mandate COVID-19 vaccination.
- State vaccine passports bans were covered in [Russian state media](#) and [Chinese state media](#). These posts received low engagement, however, with less than 6K engagements combined.
- [California will be requiring proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test](#) within 24 hours at private indoor gatherings, like conferences and receptions. Indoor live events like concerts or sports won't require if capacity is under 1,500.
- Some universities are also making vaccines a requirement to attend, like [Fort Lewis College](#) in Colorado. These requirements are on the radar of local anti-vaccine organizations who aim to prevent these mandates before they become a widespread practice.
- **Takeaway:** The vaccine passport debate continues to provide space for groups to push misinformation and stoke fear about vaccine safety and government overreach.

## FBI warns of fake/forged vaccine cards leading to responses from online shopping websites

- In response to the discussion of vaccine passports, **posts have been circulating on multiple social platforms teaching users how to forge proof-of-vaccination cards** to circumvent vaccine passport rules.
- [People shared screenshots showing vaccine cards sold on the dark web](#), and [accessible sites like eBay and Etsy](#); however at the time of writing, analysts did not find evidence of active listings on these mainstream sites. [Several of the e-commerce sites have committed to acting against these fraudulent products.](#)
- The National Association of Attorneys General [has called upon](#) sites such as Twitter, eBay, and Shopify to ban any content advertising fake vaccine cards.
- The FBI also threatened up to 5 years of prison time for people who fake their vaccination status. One [post sharing this announcement from American Military News](#) received over 1K interactions and has gotten a primarily negative response, with commenters often believing that faking a vaccine card is far less serious than other crimes with a potential sentence of 5 years prison time.
- Overall, the reaction to fake vaccine cards is mixed, with some comments criticizing and shaming others for faking vaccine cards. Some users expressed interest in forging their own cards instead of buying fake ones while and others are seriously considering buying or have already bought them.

- **Takeaway:** Platforms have acted quickly to address the risk of fake vaccine cards, but continued vigilance is necessary, as new sellers continue to attempt to falsify vaccine statuses. Shopify, eBay, and Etsy, three sites that have had significant issues with the sale of fake vaccine cards, [have all indicated that these cards violate site policies and will be removed.](#)

## CDC and FDA recommend suspending Johnson & Johnson vaccine after side effects, prompting safety concerns

- On Tuesday, April 13, the CDC and FDA [recommended a pause in the administration of the J&J vaccine due to six cases of rare and severe blood clots](#), until the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) meets on Wednesday, April 14 to review these cases.
- This announcement follows several cases of mass vaccination sites suspending the administration of the vaccine due to side effects. On April 7, a mass vaccination center in Colorado [suspended distribution](#) after 11 recipients of the J&J vaccine reported adverse reactions, including nausea and dizziness. Another site in North Carolina paused J&J distribution on April 8, after an unspecified number of recipients had adverse reactions to the vaccine, [as did the Georgia Department of Public Health](#) after 8 people experienced adverse reactions.
- Prominent anti-vax groups [have spread the news of the J&J suspension](#) to further safety concerns. The breaking news of the suspension has received roughly [259K interactions on Facebook in the past six hours](#). Comments on posts about this news **promoted concerns about vaccine safety.**
- Some [health experts characterized](#) the announcement as “unfortunate” but “the right step.”
- **Takeaway:** This is a breaking story, so we will continue to monitor the online reaction to J&J suspension this week. [Based on previous suspensions of the AstraZeneca vaccine](#) in multiple European countries, we expect this event to have a large negative impact on vaccine trust for all vaccines in the US. This includes narratives around how vaccines are not safe/cause injury, how the vaccine is “experimental,” and criticisms around governments fast-tracking vaccines.
- **Our immediate recommendation to public health communicators** is to 1) emphasize that this pause **highlights how seriously public health officials take vaccine safety** 2) that 6 cases out of millions of shots is a **very small risk** and 3) the risk of this blood clot is **actually much lower than other things**, like birth control.

## Upcoming anti-vaccine conferences could spread vaccine misinformation

- As in-person gathering restrictions begin to decrease, we can anticipate that more in-person anti-vaccine conferences will occur.
- We have seen the ongoing use of virtual conferences and webinars to spread anti-vax messaging and provide a platform for anti-vax activists. Now, these in-person conferences and events attended by the anti-vaccination community can be potentially worrisome because of their potential to be vectors for both misinformation and COVID-19 spread.
- For example, there is [an event planned in Oklahoma in April](#) that will host notable anti-vaccine figureheads like Andrew Wakefield, Mike Adams, and Simone Gold. It is also hosting some right-wing and conspiracy leaders like Lin Wood and Mike Lindell.

- There is also a [conference that will take place in person in Ashland, Oregon in April](#) that features anti-vaccine leaders like Bob Sears, Paul Thomas, Jennifer Margulis, and Brian Hooker.
- **Takeaway:** In-person anti-vaccine events may be a hub for misinformation and disease spread.

## Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

*This section highlights 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.*

### Statement on Japanese Red Cross's website leads to confusion about donating blood after vaccine

- A statement on the [Japanese Red Cross's](#) website saying that individuals who have been vaccinated against COVID-19 “are not allowed to donate blood for the time being” has been seized upon by some as evidence of the vaccines’ danger.
- Blood donation [guidance](#) can differ between countries. In general, the Japanese Red Cross asks those who have recently been [vaccinated](#) to wait before donating blood. The American Red Cross says they are following FDA recommendations and for [most people](#) “there’s no deferral time if you receive a [COVID-19] vaccine.”
- This message [appeared](#) earlier in April but has continued to spread in [Spanish](#) and Chinese via Twitter. In Chinese, similar [messages](#) spread on [Twitter](#), some claiming that blood is “ruined” by the COVID-19 vaccine, but received low engagement. These messages use JRC’s statement as proof that the vaccine is harmful and could cause negative long-term effects.
- **Takeaway:** JRC’s precautionary measure regarding blood donation eligibility could cause confusion, despite the FDA’s stance that COVID-19 vaccine recipients are not subject to a deferral period.

### Concerns about fake vaccines and vaccine rollout issues in Mexico spur hesitancy

- In a since-removed tweet, a Mexican woman shared a video of her uncle being vaccinated. However, the video shows that the health care worker injected the man using an empty syringe. The government said this was a [mistake](#), and the “volunteer vaccinator” was fired. The original video received more than one million views before it was removed.
- This has received mainstream media attention in the U.S. via Univision’s morning show, [Despierta America](#). A conspiratorial independent journalist, [Ruben Luengas](#), also covered the “false vaccine,” garnering 7K views.
- This is not the first controversy regarding vaccine rollout in Mexico. In March, Mexican authorities found [possibly counterfeit](#) Sputnik V vaccines hidden in a plane bound for Honduras. Earlier this week, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said that he would not be vaccinated, after being told by his doctor that he had enough antibodies from being infected with COVID-19 previously. AMLO’s decision has been [praised](#) by pandemic skeptics.
- **Takeaway:** Ongoing stories about problems with vaccine rollout in Mexico, along with AMLO’s hesitancy, could lead to uncertainty or hesitancy, both within Mexico but potentially more broadly in U.S. communities engaging with the news coverage.

## Ongoing Themes and Tactics:

*This section highlights ongoing themes and tactics that we track each week including notable vaccine injury stories and overall key statistics about online vaccine discussions.*

### EMA announces AstraZeneca vaccine can cause blood clots, furthering safety concerns online

- On Wednesday, April 7, the [European Medicines Agency announced that blood clotting should be listed as a very rare side effect of the AstraZeneca vaccine](#). The regulators state that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the potential side effects, though. In the UK, authorities have announced that people under 30 should be given alternatives to the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- The story has gotten significant coverage, with about 212K Facebook and 160K Instagram interactions since April 6.
- The guidance comes in the wake of [30 cases of blood clots](#) after AstraZeneca vaccine use in the UK, suspension of the vaccine for those [under 55 in Canada](#), and suspension for those [under 60 in Germany](#).
- The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a group of doctors that has [regularly](#) taken stances in opposition to the consensus of the broader medical community on many issues, including vaccines, has [stated](#) that the risk of blood clots should be monitored for all COVID-19 vaccines.
- This story has gotten over 3K interactions on Facebook and over 600 on Twitter.
- **Takeaway:** The continued concern about blood clots related to the AstraZeneca vaccine, now validated by many public health officials, bolster broader claims that vaccines are unsafe and may increase hesitancy.

### Celebrity deaths: Rapper DMX and Prince Phillip pass away, some making links to vaccines

- Media Take Out News, an African American community-focused gossip site, claims that the fatal heart attack suffered by DMX was due to the vaccine he recently received rather than drugs, according to a family member.
- Media Take Out News [is known](#) for spreading gossip and false information. [Established news reports](#) indicate that DMX's heart attack was likely due to a drug overdose.
- From the article: "The grieving kin explained, 'He took that vaccine, and he had a heart attack. I'm not saying the vaccine did it, but he never had a heart attack before.'"
- This article is being spread by anti-vax and minority communities to argue that the vaccine is unsafe. Viral spread on Instagram (50k+ interactions) within a day of being published, significant spread on Facebook/Twitter as well.
- Prince Philip also [passed away](#) on Friday, April 9. He had been [vaccinated in January](#). Soon after, [in February](#), he spent several nights in the hospital as a precaution after feeling unwell. While the cause of his illness was unrelated to COVID-19, and he had multiple pre-existing health concerns, his death [fueled concerns regarding vaccine safety](#).



- **Takeaway:** High-profile deaths among those who have received vaccines continue to cause speculation that the vaccine was the cause of death, even if it was not related.

## Reports that 40% of Marines have declined the vaccine fuel vaccine hesitancy

- On April 10, media outlets such as [CNN](#) and [USA Today](#) reported that 40% of Marines have declined the COVID-19 vaccine; posts of this coverage received over 138K interactions on Facebook. Conversations in left-leaning groups express concern over this finding, blaming vaccine refusal on disinformation and arguing that the vaccine should be mandated in the Marine Corps.
- In contrast, anti-vaccine groups are applauding the decisions of the Marines who refused the vaccine, claiming that military personnel are “vaccine guinea pigs,” encouraging them to continue to resist the pressure to be vaccinated, and suggesting that the vaccine is unnecessary since the Marines are physically fit.
- On Instagram, a [post by the verified hip-hop account @rap](#) (7.6M followers) neutrally reported this statistic, and received over 300K likes, with many of the top comments supporting the Marines and suggesting that the soldiers know something, or don’t even trust their government.
- Content on this topic has appeared in English, Italian, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Dutch, Thai, and Spanish. This incident also relates to previous reports from February that a third of the US military is declining the vaccine, covered in [Virality Project Briefing #9](#).
- **Takeaway:** Notably, members of the military are not required to receive the COVID-19 vaccine unlike other vaccines because it is not FDA approved. Moreover, the 40% of Marines who declined the vaccine also includes [Marines who got the vaccine from other channels](#). **Without more context about the statistic, this claim may lend credibility to vaccine refusal and affect vaccine hesitancy in the military and in the general population.**

## Johns Hopkins hypothetical pandemic report gains significant traction through conspiracy theories

- A futuristic, hypothetical [scenario](#) proposed by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in 2017 has been used to justify conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. The scenario focuses on a pandemic called “SPARS” and is set in 2025.
- The original intention of this scenario, [as explained](#) on the Center for Health Security website, was to illustrate “communication dilemmas concerning medical countermeasures (MCMs) that could plausibly emerge in the not-so-distant future” and prepare public health communicators. While the website indicates the fictional nature of the SPARS pandemic, many have speculated that it demonstrates planning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Conspiracy theories surrounding the report originally surfaced in December 2020, they have gained new traction following [coverage by Alex Jones](#) on April 3 that has reached nearly three million viewers.
- [Subsequent coverage](#) by General Michael Flynn and General McInerney on April 5 has reached 170K viewers on YouTube.

- The report has attracted attention on social media as well, with 2.4K interactions on 740 Facebook posts, 11.5K interactions on 18 Instagram posts, and 400 interactions on 13 Reddit posts.
- **Takeaway:** Hypothetical, fictional, or futuristic situations can be taken out of context to promote narratives that COVID-19 is fake, planned, or that certain “elites” had warning of the pandemic.

## Key Statistics

*Here we contextualize the above narratives by examining the engagement of other posts from this week.*

- The top **Facebook post** from this week containing the word “vaccine” was from the WHO, with over 600K reactions. The post encourages followers to support [vaccine equity](#). A video included in the post emphasizes the importance of ensuring everyone has fair access to the vaccine.
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The post shares a photo of Modi being vaccinated. The caption notes that “Vaccination is among the few ways we have, to defeat the virus.” It has received over 2M likes.
- The top [post](#) with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** shares a photo of a nurse by the bedside of a hospitalized polio patient, holding up a newspaper article that announces the success of the polio vaccine. The tone of the comments is largely celebrating scientific achievement through vaccines. The post has 33.7K upvotes and over 500 comments.
- The top vaccine-related [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from Shiva Ayyadurai, who posted a 1.5-hour video of himself presenting an “Economic Systems Analysis” of “Big Pharma.” In the video, Ayyadurai makes false claims about the COVID-19 vaccine, including suggesting that it is correlated with rising COVID-19 cases. The video has received 15.4K views and 3K interactions.
- The top [Tweet](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was from Naomi Wolf’s account. Responding to a Tweet asking why she isn’t vaccinated, Wolf writes, “Because I understand what ‘clinical trials conclude in 2023’ means.” Her Tweet has received over 7.2K interactions.



# 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>Comments on posts about states banning vaccine passports from <a href="#">Russian state-affiliated media RT</a> indicate fears of tyranny and discrimination.</p>	
<p>A user <a href="#">posts a link to their Etsy shop</a>, where they are selling fake vaccination cards.</p>	

The top comments [on reports of the US's suspension](#) of the J&J vaccine express concerns with pharmaceutical companies and vaccine safety.

A screenshot of social media comments, likely from Facebook, showing four user profiles and their text. Each comment includes a profile picture, name, text, and interaction icons (like, reply, share) with a count.

- Daniel W Monroe**  
wait I thought the vaccine was the way to stop this pandemic and I thought they studied these vaccines exactly the reason I won't be getting one anytime soon noone knows what the long term effects are  
Like · Reply · 7h  
↳ 87 Replies
- Haley Burkhart**  
For those of you that will comment without reading the article this has happened to 6 out of 6.8 million j&j vaccines. It's great they are being cautious though!  
Like · Reply · 7h  
↳ 60 Replies
- Michelle Tokarczyk Jones**  
But I thought they were all safe. Our government and these companies said so... 😬  
Like · Reply · 7h  
↳ 57 Replies
- Lucy Turnbull**  
Hate to say but pharmaceutical companies making money. I still will wait. Even know I get the danger of the public. I work with everyday. Still don't think I am ready. Just waiting for my time