



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #15

March 31, 2021 - April 6, 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.

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Key Takeaways

- The debate around vaccine passports continues in the U.S. and around the world, with conservative and conspiratorial groups expressing concern over the proposals.
- Viral images of skin reactions after COVID-19 vaccines continue to further vaccine safety concerns.
- Announcements from Pfizer about their vaccine trials for children and six-month efficacy were met with largely positive responses, though some anti-vax users misinterpreted these headlines.
- Cases of people experiencing blood clots after AstraZeneca vaccinations continue to further safety concerns globally.

False anti-vax claims:

This section contains misinformation narratives from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners. We explain where these inaccurate stories emerged from, and how they have spread.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene describes vaccine passports as Biden’s “Mark Of The Beast,” amplifying an ongoing narrative in conspiracy and religious communities

- On March 29, U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene live-streamed an 18-minute video in which she framed [vaccine passports as Biden’s “Mark of the Beast.”](#) This alludes to a passage in the Book of Revelation in which only those who bear a particular mark on their body are permitted to buy and sell (meaning, generally participate) in society.
- Associating vaccines with the Biblical reference “mark of the beast” is a longstanding narrative from conspiratorial and religious groups. Rep. Greene’s comments have significantly elevated this narrative in popular awareness.
- Connections between vaccines or vaccine passports and the “mark of the beast” [have been around for over a decade](#) while [conspiracies about microchips also predate the pandemic](#). Fears of the “mark of the beast” have also [baselessly alleged that Bill Gates plans](#) to create “digital tattoos.”
- **Takeaway:** Rep Greene’s statement has received major traction in the past day. Her comments received significant attention, with about 500K interactions across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. **The ‘mark of the beast’ claim is in line with Rep. Greene’s history of promoting conspiratorial claims and ideas, including QAnon.**

Viral image of man developing severe rash after J&J vaccine prompts safety concerns

- Four days after receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Richard Terrell, 74, developed a severe rash throughout his body. In the emergency department, a doctor [determined that the rash was a reaction to the vaccine](#). The reaction is extremely rare and medical experts emphasized that it should not deter the public from vaccination.

- The incident described in this story is not misinformation, but the framing of the story in social media shares does have the potential to elevate concerns among the general public that they could develop a similar condition, when in fact it is an extremely rare condition.
- The story has been reported by outlets including the [New York Post](#), [Business Insider](#), and [Fox News](#), with over 157K interactions in total since the first article was published on March 29. It has been shared [widely in anti-vax communities](#). Content has spread on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, and in additional languages including Arabic, Portuguese, Thai, and Japanese.
- This story also spread in Chinese via WeChat. A [public account](#) on the platform shared Terrell's story, as well as the [story](#) of a British woman, Leigh King, who developed a rash after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine. The article has been viewed more than 16K times.
- **Takeaway:** We have seen numerous concerns about skin conditions after vaccines, including images of [blood blisters](#) and [Stevens-Johnson syndrome](#). These images often elicit strong reactions due to their disturbing nature. **Health communicators should be proactive in contextualizing the likelihood of developing a skin reaction as a result of a COVID-19 vaccine.**

Online reactions to major vaccine stories:

This section contains key stories from this past week that have fueled vaccine hesitancy as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners. We provide findings on the online conversations surrounding these events.

Report of ruined Johnson & Johnson vaccine batch creates doubt around safety

- On March 31, [the New York Times reported](#) that J&J had a batch of ruined vaccines after ingredients were mixed up. Workers in the factory confused noninterchangeable ingredients in the production process and contaminated 15 million J&J doses, none of which ever left the plant.
- J&J clarified that the manufacturing facility where this happened [was not yet authorized to produce their vaccine](#).
- The original New York Times article has 21K interactions on Facebook. Comments on the post criticize J&J for their mistake, calling it a mess up which “jeopardizes the health of millions” and suggest that J&J's vaccine was “already ruined” because it was unsafe or not as good as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines
- A large portion of online comments also refers to the J&J baby powder and ovarian cancer scandal in the past, asking how people could trust such a company again.
- **Takeaway:** The reporting by the New York Times on the ruined batch of J&J vaccines, even though it specifically did not imply safety concerns with the vaccines, still fed anti-vax narratives and concerns about vaccine safety. **Vaccine manufacturing stories are important to report for transparency purposes, ideally with additional care taken to reduce the possibility of furthering fears about safety.**

Pfizer announcement of six-month efficacy misinterpreted as need for repeated vaccines

- On April 1, Pfizer released the results of a study showing that the [protection provided by their vaccines lasts for at least six months](#).
- Online discussions [in anti-vaccine spaces](#) and top comments of news outlet posts have misinterpreted the announcement to mean that people will need [a booster shot after that](#) period.
- As of April 5, there are 327K interactions on Facebook for posts that mention the keywords “Pfizer six months.”
- **Takeaway:** The results of the Pfizer study, though providing positive evidence about the vaccine’s efficacy, appear to have been misinterpreted by the broader public. **Public health communicators should make clear that Pfizer’s announcements about six-month efficacy are a minimum, not a maximum amount of time based on current evidence.**

Pfizer concludes vaccine trial for children, largely positive online response

- On March 31, Pfizer-BioNTech announced that its COVID-19 [vaccine was found to be 100% effective in children aged 12-15](#). While mainstream coverage has been largely positive, anti-vax and right-wing users argue that children are less susceptible to COVID-19 and should not be vaccinated.
- The top posts on Facebook and Twitter about Pfizer’s preliminary results are from news sources celebrating these findings, including [NPR](#), the [New York Times](#), and [Occupy Democrats](#). These posts have gotten roughly 15-40K interactions on Facebook and 1-2K interactions on Twitter.
- Stories from right-wing outlets such as [Fox News](#) and [The Daily Wire](#) garner many concerned comments. Users are worried about the speed of the trials and question the necessity of vaccines for younger populations.
- Anti-vaccine groups echoed these [same concerns](#). Ongoing concerns about trials on younger children have similarly spiked with the [announcements of Moderna’s](#) and [J&J’s trials for children](#).
- Overall, posts from anti-vaccine accounts and right-wing news sources have received minimal engagement as compared to general news coverage and celebration of these results.
- **Takeaway:** People are unsure why children would need vaccines given the understanding that they are less susceptible to COVID-19. **Any rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations for younger children should address this concern.**

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.

Norwegian journalist Linn Wiik statement that she “would love to die from the AstraZeneca vaccine” furthers safety concerns

- In an [op-ed published on Mar. 14](#), a Norwegian journalist, Linn Wiik, explained that she would take the AstraZeneca vaccine because the benefits to the public health of the country outweigh the medical risks to her. Translated into English, the title of the article reads, “I would love to die from the AstraZeneca vaccine.”
- The article has been picked up by [RT](#) and [anti-vax groups](#) who focused on her descriptions of “self-sacrifice” in choosing to take a vaccine to promote safety concerns. Linn Wiik’s article has over 14K total interactions on Facebook, and RT’s article has around 3K interactions on Facebook.
- **Takeaway:** It appears that Wiik’s attempt at vaccine advocacy has instead furthered vaccine hesitancy due to her choice of wording for her article. **Influencers attempting to share pro-vaccine content should be careful with their choice of words to ensure it cannot further vaccine hesitancy.**

Anti-vaccination clips from conservative Spanish news channel spread across platforms

- Clips from two programs on El Toro TV, a conservative Spanish news channel, are spreading anti-vaccine misinformation across multiple platforms.
- A clip from El Toro TV program El Gato Al Agua was posted to TikTok on March 24, claiming the COVID-19 vaccine is a genetic experiment, that it is not a vaccine, and mentions that it could alter DNA, [which is false](#). The clip received more than 72K views before being removed.
- A clip from El Toro TV program La Inmensa Minoría spread on [Twitter](#), gaining more than 19K views on the platform. El Toro TV published the full episode on [DailyMotion](#), where it has been viewed more than 33K times. The interviewee in the clip claims the pandemic is a lie, calling it a “circus.” He says vaccines are a part of the larger pandemic lie.
- **Takeaway:** While El Toro TV has a relatively small reach in Spain as traditional television programming, they reach 154K followers globally on [YouTube](#), [DailyMotion](#), [Instagram](#) where they share clips and full episodes of programming. The clips described above come from El Toro’s two most viewed episodes on DailyMotion, which have received more than 58K views.

Claims about vaccine passports spread in Chinese and Spanish in conservative, QAnon spaces

- We have seen [conversations about vaccine passports](#) spike in recent weeks. This past week, conservative Chinese and Spanish private messaging groups described vaccine passports as dangerous government overreach.
- Conservative Chinese Telegram and WeChat groups have shared anti-vax posts that promote fears of vaccine passports. For example, one message associated [vaccine passports with a “global cabal”](#) while another called passport [a serious threat to American civil liberties](#). These posts have been shared in groups with more than 7K members.
- Spanish-language QAnon Telegram channels have amplified concerns about [vaccine passports being used to determine work eligibility](#). Another video compares [vaccine passports to China’s social credit system](#). The telegram posts have been viewed more than 24K times while the video has been viewed more than 84K times.
- **Takeaway:** These concerns about vaccine passports are similar to the discussions we are seeing among other far-right accounts in the US. **Individuals in these groups fear having their rights limited and getting tracked by the government.**

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.

AstraZeneca blood clots and subsequent deaths continue to fuel vaccine safety concerns

- The UK’s medicines regulator announced on Thursday, April 1 that [at least 30 people in the United Kingdom had experienced rare types of blood clots](#) after receiving the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, but warned it was too early to know whether the shot itself triggered the clots. Seven of these people have died.
- As a result, concerns about AstraZeneca vaccine safety spiked primarily among anti-vax and conservative users. For example, Craig Kelly, a conservative Australian politician, [has posted about the seven deaths](#) to claim that the AstraZeneca vaccine is not safe. Comments responding to his post emphasized concerns over the “experimental” nature of vaccines and that they are “all part of a mass agenda.”
- [Concerns about AstraZeneca vaccine safety](#) also spread after Canada suspended the vaccine for people under the age of 55.
- **Takeaway:** Doctors still agree that the benefits of getting the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh the risks, and the EMA is expected to release new guidance on April 7. **However, concerns about AstraZeneca and blood clots continue to elevate safety concerns globally.**

Repeat Offenders: America's Frontline Doctors and Physicians for Informed Consent push false claims about vaccines and depopulation

- Recently, both America's Frontline Doctors and Physicians for Informed Consent (PIC) have continued to spread misinformation about vaccine safety, [following their pattern of COVID-19 misinformation throughout the pandemic](#).
- On March 25, [America's Frontline Doctors posted an article interviewing Dr. Michael Yeadon](#), an [anti-vax and anti-lockdown activist](#) who was formerly a Pfizer Vice President. In the interview, Yeadon warns that vaccines can lead to large-scale depopulation. Coverage of the interview has received roughly 10K Facebook interactions, primarily in [COVID-19 misinformation groups](#).
- A Facebook post by PIC from March 29 echoed the specific claim that antibodies as a result of COVID-19 vaccines can bind with human proteins to [suggest that vaccines will lead to autoimmune disorders](#).
- PIC appears to cite [an unsubstantiated scientific article](#). According to Fact Checker Flora Teoh of Science Feedback, PIC claimed that the article showed antibodies to the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein "strongly bind with over 10 proteins in the human body," but the experiments conducted do not measure antibody binding strength.
- **Takeaway:** These repeat offenders continue to emphasize their medical credentials to push unsubstantiated scientific claims with pseudo-scientific backings. **Their use of jargon can create the false impression that their views reflect the scientific consensus. Health communicators should continue to put out material to clarify these false claims.**

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 official page for the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The post announces that an official within the ministry, Dr. Harsh Vardhan, and his wife received the second dose of the vaccine. In a [press release](#) linked in the post, Dr. Vardhan emphasizes the safety and necessity of the vaccine. The post has received 888K interactions (reactions, comments, shares).
- This week's top **Instagram post** containing the word "vaccine" is from Greta Thunberg, in which she discusses her Asperger syndrome diagnosis. In the post, Thunberg states that vaccines do not cause autism. The post has received over 1M interactions.
- The top **post** with the word "vaccine" on **Reddit** is from [r/news/](#). The post shares an [NBC News](#) article reporting on the 100% efficacy of the Pfizer vaccine in adolescents. The comments share anecdotal experiences with the vaccine and discuss the meaning of the results. The post has 39.3K upvotes and 2.5K comments.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from [Erin at Health Nut News](#). In the post, Erin links to an [NPR article](#) discussing Florida Gov. DeSantis's rejection of vaccine passports. It has over 8.3K interactions.
- The top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was from [Alex Berenson](#). Claiming that lockdowns, school closures, and masks were ineffective despite promises from officials, the Tweet asks why we are now confident that vaccines will end the pandemic. The Tweet has about 10K 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 images of a man’s skin peeling off after a J&J vaccine linked the condition to Steven Johnson syndrome. Rashes after vaccines are a recurring concern.</p>	
<p>After the New York Times reported that a J&J batch had been ruined, users commented their disappointment and noted previous safety hazards in J&J products.</p>	

Messages in conservative Chinese telegram groups have pushed fears that vaccine passports will prevent people who have not been vaccinated from engaging in commerce.

