



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #8

February 9, 2021 - February 15, 2021

This report was created by analysts from the [Virality Project](#), a coalition of disinformation research entities focused on real time detection, analysis, and response to COVID-19 anti-vaccine 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).

## Key Narratives and Updates

- The Virality Project [published an evaluation of 9 different social media platform policies](#), reviewing the extent to which they address specific types of vaccine-related content, to better understand how social media companies are likely to moderate.
- Facebook removed two prominent anti-vaccine activists from Instagram, [citing its new policies](#).
- The alternative social media site Parler is back online after Amazon, Google, and Apple had previously declined to host it. Thus far, there appears to be little vaccine-related content, but as mainstream platforms moderate anti-vaccine content more stringently, this platform may become an important vector to host future conversations.
- A [New York Times article](#) discussing mRNA COVID-19 vaccines and a rare blood disease has sparked discussions in anti-vaccine online spaces about vaccine safety concerns. Russia and Iranian [state media have shared articles](#) to further amplify fears that vaccines cause this rare blood disease.
- The [death of a man in federal prison](#) after he had received the COVID-19 vaccine sparked conversations of vaccine safety concerns among Black Lives Matter-focused accounts.
- After a doctor announced she had had a miscarriage, an anti-vaccine website discovered from her previous Tweets that she had received a COVID-19 vaccine less than a week prior prompting further concerns about vaccine side effects for pregnant individuals. **Physicians who are active on social media should be aware of incidents like this where anti-vaccine activists use doctor-originated content to spread doubt about the vaccine.**

## The Virality Project Launched with Our Evaluation of Platform Policies

- **Virality Project is officially launched: organizations can now submit tips for rapid response analysis from our analyst team.** For more information, email [info@viralityproject.org](mailto:info@viralityproject.org). For ongoing updates, [follow our Twitter](#) and [visit our website](#).
- Our team [evaluated the vaccine misinformation policies of nine social media platforms](#). We found that only a few platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) have somewhat comprehensive policies, while others such as TikTok, Nextdoor, Pinterest, and Reddit have generic or no policies at all. We also discuss Facebook's recent policy changes and the overall challenges platforms will face when addressing first-person accounts of vaccine misinformation.
- From our analysis, we recommend that platforms be more transparent in how they apply their policies and lay out clear response thresholds for those that violate the platforms' policies.

## Prominent Anti-Vaccine Activists Removed from Instagram

- Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Del Bigtree, two large anti-vaccine accounts, were removed from Instagram on February 10th after Facebook announced updates to its vaccine information policies. Facebook announced last week that they would [expand their efforts to remove false vaccine information](#) across both Facebook and Instagram.
- Account takedowns have dominated anti-vaccine conversations this week. Remaining influencers and Pages are [newly advocating](#) for users to move off Facebook to apps such as Telegram, or email lists and blogs. We will continue to track the movement of these conversations to non-mainstream apps.
- Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is still active on Facebook where [his response to Instagram's removal of his account received 6K reactions](#). None of his other posts this week received more than 3.8K interactions.
- As Kennedy was being de-platformed from Instagram, his Children's Health Defense Facebook page was live-streaming a summit that included COVID-19 denialism claims (some speakers disputed the extent to which viruses made people ill in general). Despite appearing to be a policy violation, links to the video remain up and have [received 1.2K interactions on Facebook](#). The webinar, which was hosted through Zoom and Facebook Live has supposedly over 10,000 viewers through Zoom and over 1,000 viewers through Facebook.

## Parler Back Online

- Parler is back online after being shut down over a month ago. The alternative social media site was launched in 2018 and became popular in the fall for its lack of content moderation.
- Amazon Web Services had dropped the platform after the US Capitol riots due to unmoderated violent speech by users. Parler is [now hosted by SkySilk](#). Previous accounts are active again, though all old posts have been removed.
- An initial analysis of Parler's changes to their community guidelines indicates that [Parler has loosened content restrictions](#) while enabling a ["sensitive content" designation](#).
- So far, there appears to be little vaccine-related content on the platform, but we will continue to monitor this space as mainstream platforms clamp down on vaccine misinformation. Prior to Parler being de-platformed, anti-vaccine content was prevalent on the site.

## New York Times Story Links COVID-19 Vaccines and Thrombocytopenia

- A New York Times article discussed [some vaccine recipients developing thrombocytopenia, a rare blood disorder](#), but clarified that "[a] link to the vaccines is not certain, and investigations are underway in some reported cases."
- Children's Health Defense, a prominent anti-vaccine website, published a piece [incorrectly citing the New York Times article as evidence of a link](#) between the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and thrombocytopenia. The **CHD article received 8.9K interactions** on Facebook while the original **New York Times article received only 3.4K interactions** on Facebook.
- Foreign state media has also highlighted concerns about Pfizer/Moderna vaccines and this rare blood disorder on Facebook. RT, a Russian state media Page, [received 1.4K likes on their post](#), though other non-vaccine-related posts on their Page received up to 19K interactions this week.

## Case Study: Death of Edwin Segarra generates outrage among New York BLM Pages, sparking subsequent conversation about vaccine safety

- Edwin Segarra, an inmate in a Brooklyn federal prison, [died of COVID-19 on February 5th](#). He was vaccinated in January but tested positive for COVID-19 four days later.
- The Greater NY Black Lives Matter Instagram account posted this week, [demanding information about medical conditions in the federal prison](#). The post highlights that Segarra “was given the vaccine and died”. [Additional posts](#) about Segarra’s death [mention the vaccine with little context](#).
- Conversation in the comments and in subsequent shares of this information **expressed concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines**, linking Segarra’s death with the vaccine dose.
- **Takeaway:** Edwin Segarra’s death was presented alongside long-term frustration within BLM activist communities about prison conditions during COVID. **Though most of the conversation was not explicitly anti-vaccine in sentiment**, without proper contextualization, some comments moved into more conspiratorial claims regarding ‘testing’ of the vaccine on incarcerated populations. **Though this specific case was low in total interactions**, it demonstrates an important dynamic as the vaccine is distributed to historically marginalized populations.

## Ongoing Theme: Pregnancy Safety Concerns

- On February 5, Dr. Sara Beltran Ponce from Milwaukee, WI [tweeted that she had had a miscarriage](#). On February 8, “The Covid Blog,” an anti-vaccine website, posted an article pointing out that the [miscarriage occurred less than a week after Dr. Ponce received the Pfizer or Moderna](#) COVID-19 vaccine. Dr. Ponce’s Twitter account had been public, so the website determined that Dr. Ponce had received a vaccine based on a Tweet she had posted on January 28th expressing her excitement to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Despite Dr. Ponce subsequently making her Twitter account private, anti-vaccine accounts [have shared screenshots of these Tweets as evidence that the vaccine is not safe for pregnant women](#). Additional articles have [begun using a different woman’s image of receiving the vaccine while holding up her ultrasounds](#). A fact-checking website associated with La Republica, a Peruvian newspaper [determined that the woman in the image is a different woman](#).
- The original article from “The COVID Blog” was posted in multiple languages including Italian, Polish, Spanish, and English. In total, the article has received 1.5K interactions on Facebook.
- Separately, on February 9, [@cv19vaccinereactions](#) posted [a compilation of VAERS reports about miscarriages after the COVID-19 vaccine](#). The post highlights 10 miscarriages that happened after receiving the vaccine and emphasizes that Pfizer excluded pregnant women from its trials and targets doctor influencers for claiming that the vaccine is safe during pregnancy. Posts about this compilation received as many as 22K likes, which we consider high engagement.

## Ongoing Theme: Notable Vaccine Side Effect/Adverse Event Stories

- The teenage son of English media personality Katie Price [experienced a severe reaction to the Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine and was admitted to the hospital](#) around February 6th. He has since recovered, and Price has emphasized that his reaction should not dissuade others from getting the vaccine. Still, [the news has spread in anti-vaccine and COVID-19 conspiracy groups](#). Some popular posts focus on the son’s disabilities, claiming that the vaccine wasn’t tested on people with disabilities or implying that he couldn’t consent to the vaccine.
- An article from the New York Post with the headline [“Elderly man collapses, dies shortly after getting COVID-19 vaccine at Javits Center”](#) was published on February 7th. It does not provide the name of the man but indicates that he was in his 70s. The article received roughly 13.3K interactions and [additional screenshots were posted in anti-vaccine Facebook groups](#).

- Memphis surgeon [Dr. Burton Williams died around February 10 of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome](#), a COVID-19 related illness, despite receiving the vaccine weeks before. [An article on this death from Children’s Health Defense](#) received 4.8K interactions while [a news article from a local news channel received over 20.2K interactions](#).
- A [78-year-old woman died](#) on February 12 shortly after receiving the vaccine in Los Angeles, CA. Despite NBC News updating their headline to emphasize that the death was likely unrelated to receiving the vaccine, the article has been [shared on Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) in posts expressing concerns about vaccine safety.

## Key Statistics

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

- The top public **Facebook post** from this week containing the word “vaccine” is from UNICEF, as with previous weeks. The post, which garnered over 800K interactions, encouraged users to share the post with their loved ones to encourage them to get vaccinated.
- This week’s top public **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is from Rawan Bin Hussain, a Kuwaiti influencer. Translated in English and Arabic, the post expresses toward the United Arab Emirates for providing vaccines to all its residents and includes a picture of Bin Hussain receiving the vaccine. It has over 173K likes.
- The top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is from [/r/WorldNews/](#). The post links to a Reuters article reporting on an Israeli study that found that the Pfizer vaccine led to a 94% drop in asymptomatic COVID-19 cases. It has received nearly 50K upvotes.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine activist on Facebook** was from [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), who posted a link to his statement in response to Instagram’s decision to remove his account. The statement argues that the content posted by the account was not misinformation and accuses Instagram of censorship. It has received 6K reactions and 2.3K shares.
- The top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vaccine activist on Twitter** was from [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#)’s account. The Tweet shares a video clip from 60 Minutes previewing an episode about Bill Gates discussing mistrust in science, which ends on a sponsorship notice from Pfizer. It has received over 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>Deplatforming of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. <a href="#">received significant attention this week</a> from anti-vaccine pages that shared their Telegram and personal emailing list sign-ups.</p>	
<p>Parler is back online with a new hosting service after a month of being shut down.</p>	

A New York Times article reported on [vaccine recipients developing a rare blood disorder](#), and Children’s Health Defense cited it [as evidence of a link between the two](#). Posts using this headline have appeared on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Reddit](#). [Russian](#) and [Iranian state media](#) also promoted the story online.

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## Doctors Link Pfizer, Moderna Vaccines to Life-Threatening Blood Disorder

A second New York Times article quotes doctors who say the mRNA technology used in COVID vaccines may cause immune thrombocytopenia, a blood disorder that last month led to the death of a Florida doctor after his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

By Children's Health Defense Team

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Instagram posts covering the death of Edwin Segarra after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine [raised concerns about the safety of the vaccine](#).

Edwin Segarra and his son Eddie. (Courtesy of Segarra family)

dondivamagazine · Follow

I took the shot (sic) crazy I was bad for 10 days but I'm doing better, love you," Segarra wrote in a jailhouse message to his sister, Wendy Sanchez.

6d

suckafree\_world They just experimenting on ppl smh... 25 likes Reply

manzito914 RIP mv bov a Legend

1,522 likes 6 DAYS AGO

Add a comment... Post

The COVID Blog used tweets from a doctor’s account to piece together the fact [she had had a miscarriage less than a week after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine](#).

### THE COVID BLOG

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Featured Vaccines adverse effects

#### Sara Beltrán Ponce: Wisconsin resident doctor has miscarriage days after COVID "vaccine"

February 7, 2021 3 min read admin

TheCOVIDBlog.com February 7, 2021 (updated February 8, 2021)

#### RECENT POSTS

- Sara Stickle: 28-year-old has brain aneurysm, dead five days after second Pfizer mRNA shot
- Greek hospital administrator faces criminal prosecution for reporting nurse's paralysis after second mRNA shot
- UC Berkeley, UMass campus lockdowns called "misguided" by Harvard epidemiologist
- Peer-reviewed manuscript concludes that CDC massively inflates COVID-19 case and death numbers with creative statistics

Further articles and posts about Dr. Ponce [used a different healthcare worker's image](#). According to a fact-checking website, [this other woman had no relation to the original story](#) and did not have a miscarriage.



### Doctor suffers miscarriage one week after vaccine

February 9, 2021 4:48 pm 4 Comments