



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #6

January 26, 2021 - February 1, 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-vax 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 Events

- An in-person protest, initiated by a right-leaning anti-mask Facebook group, [shut down a vaccine center](#) in Los Angeles, CA and illustrated the real-world organizing potential of online anti-vax and anti-mask groups. This event has primarily been condemned, with some opposition even in anti-vax and conservative spaces.
- After Merck discontinued its vaccine trials, [anti-vax groups spread a false claim](#) that Merck believed herd immunity is more effective than a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Rep. Stephen Lynch (D-MA) [reportedly contracted COVID-19](#) despite getting a second vaccine dose. [Foreign state media amplified this event](#) to claim that Pfizer vaccines are ineffective.
- Prominent anti-vax speakers, including a number involved in the January 6th Health Freedom Rally outside of the Capitol, have [assembled an anti-vax documentary series](#) that is already spreading anti-vax misinformation and conspiracy theories.

## We Will Be Following:

- Efforts by anti-vax groups to organize in-person rallies at vaccine distribution sites.
- Stories on vaccine efficacy as more public figures receive their second dose.
- The impact of the upcoming 9-week long *Vaccines Revealed* documentary series which is already pushing conspiracies and misinformation.

## LA Dodger Stadium Vaccination Site Shut down by Protests

- On January 28, the [“Shop Mask Free Los Angeles” Facebook Page](#) announced a “Dodger Stadium All Things COVID-19 Protest/March” that would take place on the afternoon of Saturday, Jan. 30, [in a post](#) that received a few hundred reactions. Additional organization of this event may have occurred through [private groups on Telegram](#).
- On January 30, around 50 protesters [gathered at the entrance of the Dodger Stadium](#) vaccination site, forcing the LA Fire Department to temporarily shut down vaccine distribution for about an hour as a precaution.

- Organizing groups [explicitly messaged attendees](#) to “refrain from wearing Trump/MAGA attire as we want our statement to resonate with the sheeple.”
- The actual protest received widespread coverage in multiple media outlets and social media. Overall, [online reaction to the protests](#) largely condemned these actions. In anti-vax and conservative-leaning communities sentiment was divided between support for the protest and belief that infringing on others' decisions to take the vaccine was not a good channel for expressing frustration.
- We will be looking out for future efforts in anti-vax online groups to organize in-person rallies at vaccine distribution sites.

## Merck Discontinued Vaccine Trials

- On January 26th, a day after [Merck announced](#) it was discontinuing its vaccine development, an article from [a far-right conspiracy news site](#) ran the headline: “Merck Scraps COVID Vaccines; Says It’s More Effective To Get The Virus And Recover.”
- The quote, along with screenshots of the misleading headlines, was shared across multiple major platforms [to question why a COVID-19 vaccine is necessary](#).
- The current interaction rate is roughly 75K reactions on Facebook, with a potential audience of 3.9M users, which we consider to be **high**.
- This content was most concentrated in alternative health and wellness parenting groups. Facebook is currently labeling all incidents of this content as “Partly False Information.”
- As other pharmaceutical companies continue their vaccine development, trial failures like Merck’s may easily be spun online to discredit other COVID-19 vaccines.

## Congressman Tests COVID-19 Positive After Second Dose

- Democratic Representative Stephen Lynch of Massachusetts [tested positive for COVID-19](#) on January 29, after receiving his second dose of the Pfizer vaccine earlier that month.
- This story is being cited as [evidence that the Pfizer vaccine is ineffective](#) against COVID-19, despite the fact that it may take up to two weeks after the second dose for the Pfizer vaccine to reach its 95% efficacy. Additionally, the 95% efficacy includes only symptomatic disease, and Rep. Lynch remains asymptomatic.
- Russian state media posted an article with the caption [“Pfizer’s second dose doesn’t help”](#) which received 5.7K engagements. It has been the third highest shared article about the event on Facebook.

## *Vaccines Revealed* Documentary Series

- On January 26th, prominent anti-vax Facebook Pages began advertising a 9-part documentary series titled [“COVID-19 and the Vaccine: Truth, Lies, and Misconceptions Revealed.”](#) to be released February 9th. The trailer, which is hosted on the alt-video platform Rumble, promotes conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine safety and efficacy from some of the most vocal anti-vax speakers.

- The event features several prominent anti-vax speakers including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Del Bigtree, and Andrew Wakefield. Del Bigtree [live streamed](#) the January 6th Health Freedom Rally outside the US Capitol.
- While the overall content spread [on Facebook](#) and Twitter is low, speakers have had more success sharing the event using their personal [Instagram accounts](#).

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

- Healthcare worker Tim Zook died in CA four days after getting his second dose. His wife spoke out calling for an investigation, while still urging others to take the vaccine.
  - The [Orange County Register](#) coverage gained the most traction, with 707K FB engagements, largely from core anti-vax and right-leaning communities.
  - [RFK Jr.'s / Children's Health Defense coverage](#) of the incident gained 25.3K FB engagements, with a focus on the anti-vax angle.
  - The [LA Times](#), which used the most pro-vaccine framing in emphasizing the family's exhortation to still get vaccinated, only picked up 3.4K engagements.
- Nurse aide Janet Moore of Huron, Ohio, died 48 hours after receiving the Pfizer vaccine. Though this death occurred on December 31, 2020, the story re-gained traction this week (totaling 14.7K Facebook Interactions) due to a [LifeSite news article](#) which claimed this vaccine was required by Janet's employer to keep her job at a nursing home.
- On January 30, a [PSA by a nurse featured on News 5 Cleveland](#) aimed to clarify a side effect that women have experienced after receiving the Moderna vaccine that "mirrors breast cancer symptom[s]," in which swollen lymph nodes under their armpits resembled potential tumors. Anti-vax activists have taken this out of context to push the narrative that the side effects of a COVID-19 vaccine are as bad as breast cancer.

## Key Statistics


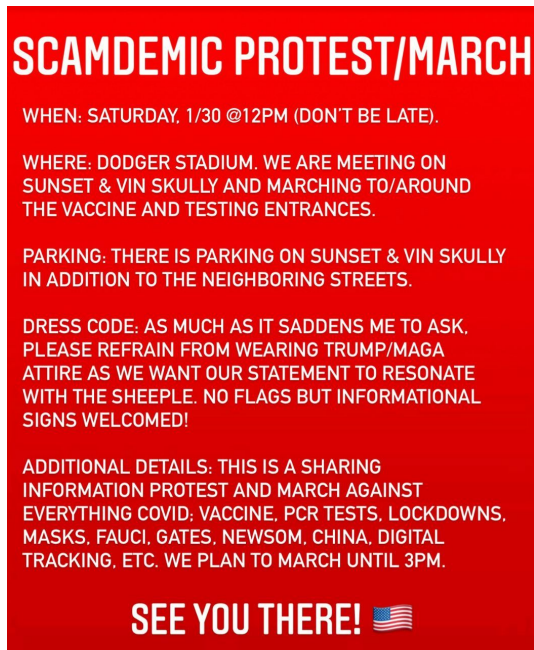
*Here we contextualize the above narratives by examining the engagement of other posts from this week.*

- As with last week, this week's top **Facebook** post containing the word "vaccine" was from [UNICEF](#), with over 1.8 million interactions (likes, comments, shares). The post encourages followers to share a picture of themselves receiving the vaccine along with their reason for choosing to vaccinate on social media and to tag it with #Vaccinated.
- This week's top **Instagram** post containing the word "vaccine" was from the account [@theshaderoom](#), a celebrity news company with a largely Black audience. [The post](#) shares a tweet in which the rapper Plies states that he is not concerned by the ingredients of the COVID-19 vaccine and will be vaccinated as soon as possible. The top comments on the post express distrust in the vaccine, with one referencing the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The post has 232K likes and 20.4K comments.
- This week's top **Reddit** post containing the word "vaccine" was on [r/worldnews](#) and shared an [article](#) from The Guardian about a Canadian couple that received a COVID-19 vaccine that was intended for members of the Indigenous community. The post has 86K upvotes and 3K comments.

- This week’s top [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook**, Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai, was a video in which he explains mRNA vaccine technology and discredits vaccine safety. The post received 10.5K interactions.
- This week’s top [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter**, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., contained an [article](#) from the Children’s Health Defense covering the healthcare worker, Tim Zook, who died following the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The post received 6.5K 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>LA Protest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Announcement from Shop Mask Free Los Angeles on the Dodger Stadium Protest</a></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Poster announcing the Dodger Stadium Protest</a></li> </ul>	

Merck Discontinued Trials

- This [conservative news site headline](#) ripped across parenting FB groups this week.



Rep. Stephen Lynch Tests Positive

- [RT News](#)' article on the story received the 3rd highest engagement on Facebook.
- It was also pushed by [SputnikNews](#), another Russian state-controlled media agency.



Vaccines Revealed Documentary Series

- The [Vaccines Revealed documentary series](#) features prominent anti-vaccination speakers.

