



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #7

February 2, 2021 - February 9, 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 Narratives and Updates

- Facebook announced it is taking a more aggressive moderation approach against health misinformation. Anti- vax communities are responding by reiterating that their audiences should follow them to encrypted or less moderated platforms.
- The Vaccine Revealed Docuseries is set for release at 6PM PT on February 9th. It has achieved limited distribution on mainstream platforms which have removed or otherwise actioned the content.
- An interesting incident appeared related to ‘Covid Arm’ prebunk terminology taken out of context: catchphrases developed to identify common vaccine side effects should be monitored for potential weaponization into anti-vaccine content.
- We tracked updates to several ongoing anti-vax narratives, and highlighted incidents which may push these claims towards a mainstream audience. These narratives and themes included:
  - mRNA vaccines are experimental, should be considered “genetic therapy”.
  - Elderly people are too fragile to receive the vaccine (a narrative connected to the recent elderly deaths following vaccination)
  - A continued use of databases of vaccine reactions, such as VAERS, to imply that the COVID-19 vaccines are unsafe.
- The Facebook account of the Russian state media outlet RT continues to post polarizing content related to COVID-19 in the US, including stories about Bill Gates, vaccine passports, and the wealthy getting vaccines early.

## Facebook Updates its Vaccine Policies

- On February 8th, 2021 [Facebook announced it would expand the list of false claims it would remove from its platform](#). This list was created in consultation with leading health organizations, such as the WHO. This update is a stricter approach to health misinformation than Facebook has shown in the past and we expect more content and large anti-vaccine accounts to be removed compared to previous more moderate actions such as labeling or downranking misinformation content in newsfeeds.

- Facebook’s policy update and [the New York Times coverage sparked conversations in wellness and anti-vaccine communities](#) about the effect of these policies on their own Facebook Pages and the content that they post. Some Pages have advised their followers to move to platforms such as Telegram, continuing a trend of moving audiences off mainstream, moderated platforms.
- The Virality Project is expecting to release a comprehensive analysis later this week of the current state of platform policies on COVID-19 related content.

## Incident Follow-Up: Vaccines Revealed Docuseries Released February 9th, Achieves Limited Impact on Mainstream Platforms

- As we noted in last week’s briefing, 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.
- Overall, engagement with the sign up site for this documentary series appears to be low (< 2,000 total interactions) across mainstream platforms, despite the [highly marketed docuseries release](#).
- Platforms have responded to the content strongly: according to the documentary creators, Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram have actioned their content. This is in line with our team’s observations of the low engagement with the content on major social platforms.
- According to the documentary creators, over 100,000 individuals signed up to watch the documentary. Individuals who signed up for the launch receive a series of emails with instructions on how to best promote the documentary within their circles.

## Case Study: Terminology in Pre-bunk Taken Out of Context

- On January 27, 2021, USA Today reported on a series of “annoying but harmless” reactions to the Moderna vaccine—which it [dubbed the “Covid arm” rash](#). The article was shared over 2,000 times on Facebook and picked up by other, more local outlets.
- While most of the posts were sharing USA’s pre-bunked framing of the side effect, vaccine-skeptical communities also shared the article. On February 5, 2021, the wellness Page “Earthley” posted a screenshot of another FB post in which someone shared an [image of their mother’s badly bruised arm](#). [Earthley described this as “COVID v@xxyne arm”](#) declaring that no one knew what the side effect was due to and likening vaccine recipients to guinea pigs. The post from Earthley received over 3K interactions and was shared on 3 other pages.
- **Takeaway:** while USA Today proactively tried to temper overreaction to the side effect, its use of the term “Covid arm” may have provided inadvertently helpful framing for future anti-vaccination stories if the term becomes synonymous with a negative health risk removed from its original context. **Distinct phrases related to side effects should be tracked over time for potential subsequent weaponization into anti-vaccine content.**

## Ongoing Theme: mRNA Vaccines are Experimental/Genetic Therapy

- A video hosted on an alternative video hosting platform BrandNewTube [features a number of conspiracy theories about the vaccine](#). Claims focus on the perceived “experimental” nature of the

vaccine and alleged that public figures are coerced by the government to advocate for it. The video has received 29.9K interactions on Facebook primarily on [Pages with a target audience in the UK](#).

- Anti-vax groups have pushed an article from the alternative health site Mercola that reiterates the popular anti-vax claim that [mRNA vaccines can alter human DNA](#). The article has received over 10K interactions on Facebook, primarily [among anti-vax](#) and health freedom groups.
- The language of posts that claim vaccines are experimental often emphasize that by receiving the vaccine, individuals are “[taking part in an experiment](#)” and are “[human guinea pigs](#)”.

## Ongoing Theme: Elderly Deaths Used to Indicate that Vaccine is Unsafe for Older Populations

- Dr. Hooman Noorchashm, a cardiologist with largely pro-vaccine views, wrote a letter to the FDA warning them of cardiovascular risks in elderly populations, which was [picked up by prominent anti-vaxxer Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) Dr. Noorchashm [attempted to gain traction for the #ScreenB4Vaccine hashtag](#), with little success.
- An alternative health site combined [previous stories of elderly deaths](#) after receiving the vaccine to suggest that [the vaccine is killing seniors](#). A related Instagram post [received over 8K likes](#), overperformed the account’s regular engagement by between 2-4x.
- *Erin at Health Nut News*, a popular alternative health influencer, shared the headline “[Reports of seniors falling ill or dying after getting a dose of COVID-19 vaccine don’t tell the whole story.](#)” The post has gotten 2.2K reactions, and the top comment equates the vaccine to “genocide.”

## Ongoing Theme: Databases of Adverse Events Fuel Safety Concerns Safety

- Following an ongoing trend for the past several weeks, the anti-vaccine community continued to use reaction databases to fuel claims that vaccines are unsafe.
- This past week, we saw posts referencing Europe’s [EUDRA](#), WHO’s [VigiAccess](#), and CDC’s [VAERS](#). Such posts typically report the number of adverse events to vaccination without the context of the data quality and confounding factors.
- **Contextualizing this Trend:** The highest interaction counter-narratives on Facebook associated with the term ‘VAERS’ in the past week came from writer [Leah Campell](#), a [VICE](#) article, and a [Full Fact](#) fact check. The combined engagement of these three counter-narratives was just over 7K interactions. In comparison, the most shared anti-vaccine VAERS-related article this week, from [Children's Health Defense](#), received **35,653 interactions** on its own.

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

- The death of Drene Keyes, an elderly Black woman, after receiving the Pfizer vaccine in Virginia has received attention in [anti-vax groups](#) alongside reporting in [local news outlets](#). The story, with the headline “Gloucester grandmother dies within hours of receiving COVID vaccine”, has received over 14.8K interactions. The majority of top comments on the story are anti-vaccine.
- Kristi Simmonds, a registered nurse from North Carolina, shared videos of herself supposedly experiencing neurological adverse effects after receiving the Moderna vaccine. Her original video

on Facebook [showed her shaking](#) and has 5.3K interactions. She also [has a GoFundMe to pay for medical expenses which has raised over \\$3,000](#).

- Toby Turner, an online comedian and YouTube personality with almost 1M Twitter followers, [Tweeted that his uncle died soon after receiving the vaccine](#). Over 21.6K people liked the tweet. Turner followed up with an [additional vaccine questioning post](#), which received much less attention.
  - This example was notable as the hesitancy concerns were not picked up. User replies and commentary around this incident **largely affirmed the overall benefits of the vaccine**, despite potential risks.

## Foreign State Media Highlight: Russian Media Continues to Post Highly Polarizing Vaccine Topics

- Russian state media channel RT continues to report on highly controversial topics related to COVID-19 and the vaccine. RT regularly posts polarizing articles on its social media pages so this is not irregular. This week, RT posted on Facebook that social media users are [“recoiling at Bill Gates' call for a global disease alert system.”](#) This post received 3.5K reactions and 1.1K shares, which is not particularly high engagement for RT content.
- RT also posted on Facebook about public resistance to a [vaccine passport](#) (which received around 500 reactions) and how the rich [“cheat” their way](#) to an early COVID vaccine (which received around 100 reactions).

## 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 again from UNICEF. The post garnered over 1.7 million reactions and encouraged users to post a V-sign with what the vaccine means to them.
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is from the Bleacher Report Instagram [page](#). The post quotes Bill Russell, a former NBA player, saying that the COVID-19 vaccine is “One shot I won’t block.” It has nearly 450,000 likes.
- The top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is from [/r/TikTokCringe/](#). The TikTok is of a (apparent) doctor refuting misinformation that the needle from the COVID vaccine stays inside your body after the shot. It has over 50k upvotes and over 1000 comments.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from [Robert F. Kexnnedy, Jr](#) who posted that a 58-year-old woman died after receiving the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine. It received 6.2k reactions and 2.8k shares.
- The top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was from [Robert F. Kennedy Jr](#)’s account. The tweet alleged that a 58-year-old woman Drene Keyes died hours after getting the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine. It garnered nearly 2.8k likes and 1.8k retweets.

# 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Earthly, a wellness/anti-vax Facebook Page, <a href="#">posted about the recent Facebook vaccine policy updates.</a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Top comments on the post discussed users' experiences with Facebook's content moderation policies in the past. Many expressed frustration with uncertainty about what speech exactly was allowed.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Article stating that the vaccine does not prevent COVID-19 and <a href="#">potentially alters DNA.</a></li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tweet alleging that <a href="#">the vaccine is a “gene therapy”</a> and not actually a vaccine.</li> </ul>																
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. Hooman sharing a tweet <a href="#">from Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and spreading #ScreenB4Vaccine.</a></li> </ul>																
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instagram post <a href="#">using WHO VigiAccess to claim COVID-19 vaccine is unsafe.</a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Twitter thread <a href="#">using EUDRA data in similar way.</a></li> <li>○ Florida focused <a href="#">Facebook post using VAERS data.</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Vaccine Type</th> <th>Year Released</th> <th>Adverse Events</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Smallpox</td> <td>1968</td> <td>6,866</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Flu</td> <td>1968</td> <td>260,473</td> </tr> <tr> <td>MMR</td> <td>1976</td> <td>156,700</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Covid-19</td> <td>December 2020</td> <td>74,248</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Vaccine Type	Year Released	Adverse Events	Smallpox	1968	6,866	Flu	1968	260,473	MMR	1976	156,700	Covid-19	December 2020	74,248
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- Robert F. Kennedy Jr. sharing the story of [Drene Keyes' death as cause for vaccine safety concerns](#).

- Images of “[COVID v@xxyn arm](#)” posted to Facebook.
  - Not to be confused [with an actual phenomenon of mild rash](#).

- Erin the Healthnut News and other wellness / anti-vaccination Pages share concerns over Facebook's new policy updates.

**Erin at Health Nut News**

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T.me/erinhealthnutnews

we almost always post main stream now and now you know why. Please please join us at Telegram today. And read this article carefully. " In the past, Facebook had said it would only "downrank," or push lower down in people's News Feeds, misleading or false claims about vaccines, making it more difficult to find such groups or posts. Now posts, pages and groups containing such falsehoods will be removed from the platform entirely!"



NYTIMES.COM

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**Facebook says it plans to remove posts with false vaccine claims.**

783

282 Comments 152 Shares

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vaccines Revealed launch emails and registration thank you site both push users to quickly share the content within their networks, given the blockers these communities are now facing on 'mainstream' platforms.</li> </ul>	<p>Just share with your friends and family via email or social media. Whenever someone uses your link to register to watch for FREE with you - you get credit!</p> <p><b>SHARE WITH 2</b></p> <p>Share and just TWO people register to watch with you for free and we'll thank you by sending you the exclusive downloadable ebook:</p> <p><u>"1200 Studies, To Vaccinate or Not To Vaccinate" A Critical Expose on Vaccines"</u></p> <p>\$47 Value (FREE)</p>  <p><b>SHARE WITH 5</b></p> <p>Share and just FIVE people register to watch with you for free, and we'll thank you by sending you: The Exclusive Downloadable Guide, (Not available anywhere else)</p> <p><u>The Parent's Vaccine Exemption Playbook. An essential for every parent navigating their state vaccine requirements for their children.</u></p> <p>\$97 value - FREE</p> 
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Stanford | Internet Observatory  
Cyber Policy Center

NYU | TANDON SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON