

Virality Project Weekly Briefing #5

January 20, 2021 - January 26, 2021

This report was created by analysts from the <u>Virality Project</u>, 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 both 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.

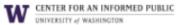
Key Narratives

- <u>California's pause on using a batch of Moderna vaccines</u> has fueled both the anti-vaccine online community's concerns over the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and foreign state media's efforts to undermine confidence in US vaccination efforts.
- Currently, the most vocal group driving concerns about receiving a COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant are health freedom Facebook Groups who are using the lack of data about pregnancy and mRNA vaccines as their loudest argument against vaccine mandates.
- The high profile death of Hank Aaron, who received the vaccine 2 weeks prior, as well as detailed descriptions of nurses experiencing paralysis and anaphylaxis after receiving COVID-19 vaccines were used to sow doubt about the vaccine's safety in wellness and anti-vax groups.

California Moderna Allergic Reaction Story

- <u>Reports</u> from health officials about a cluster of allergic reactions associated with a batch of
 Moderna COVID-19 vaccines have received attention among <u>anti-vaccine influencers</u> and groups,
 who perceived the event as validating their claims that the <u>Moderna vaccine is experimental</u> and
 unsafe.
- Foreign state media outlets have leveraged the event to undermine confidence in the vaccines and
 processes in place in the United States, in contrast to alleged successes in China, Iran, and Russia.
 However, this content did not seem to have received high engagement nor was it shared widely
 outside of their own Facebook Pages.
- Expected Impact: Thus far, the California Moderna narrative has had medium engagement (around 10,000 cumulative likes, comments, and shares on Facebook and Instagram); its spread peaked around January 18th and has mostly been contained within anti-vaccine communities, with some continued spread on Instagram. We expect similar narratives around vaccine safety to surface in the future.











mRNA Vaccines and Pregnancy Concerns

- Producers of **accurate information** about mRNA COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy are receiving the highest engagement on FB, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.
 - Notably, <u>ACOG's recommendation</u> has been cited in these posts as reason to believe that receiving the COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant is safe.
- Currently, the most vocal group driving concerns about receiving the vaccine while pregnant are
 <u>health freedom Facebook Groups</u> who are using the lack of data about pregnancy and mRNA
 vaccines as their loudest argument against vaccine mandates.
- Two specific VAERS anecdotes of pregnant women having pregnancy complications after receiving the vaccine had high engagement in the last week in natural parenting groups on Facebook and from an anti-vaccine account on Instagram.
- Expected Impact: While individual, unverifiable anecdotes of pregnancy will continue to drive vaccine safety concerns in health freedom and anti-vaccine online communities, the successful spread of accurate information among mainstream channels on Facebook and Instagram is an optimistic finding.

Hesitancy in Tier 1 Populations

Among groups included in Tier 1 vaccination programs, stories of individual adverse events continue to be used by anti-vaccine groups to push doubts about safety, however this content **has stayed mostly in wellness and anti-vax communities.**

Healthcare/Essential Workers

- As in previous weeks, personal <u>anecdotes</u> of healthcare workers having adverse reactions to vaccination continued to spread in wellness and anti-vax communities.
- An article about <u>health care worker vaccine hesitancy</u> has been shared by high profile <u>anti-vaccine Facebook accounts</u> in efforts to legitimize COVID-19 vaccine safety concerns.
- Positive stories about the vaccine on medical Facebook pages received high engagement.
- The most visible content around essential workers and vaccines discuss the speed of the vaccine rollout. This includes posts from official sources <u>communicating</u> local vaccine rollout plans. We did not observe much negative or false content about the vaccine and essential workers.

Seniors

- The death of MLB star Hank Aaron weeks after his high-profile publicized vaccination was used by <u>some</u> prominent anti-vaccine influencers to cast doubt on the safety of the vaccine for <u>African-Americans</u> and <u>seniors</u>.
- The announcement of dozens of deaths in Norwegian nursing homes following vaccination subsequently led to the Norwegian government recommending "frail" citizens hold off on getting a vaccine. This was spun by <u>some</u> in the anti-vax community to cast doubt on vaccine safety for seniors.
- However, counter-narratives dispelling this doubt received <u>high engagement</u>, such as the Mayor of Atlanta's post on Instagram.



Key Statistics

One key piece of understanding the above narratives is putting them into context of the wider information ecosystems. We hope this section provides some context about vaccine conversations more generally, along with some reference for the relative scale of different narratives.

- Top post on **Facebook** this week containing the word "vaccine" was from <u>UNICEF</u>, with close to 500k interactions (likes, comments and shares). The post encouraged people to share a photo of themself receiving their COVID-19 vaccine with #Vaccinated. **We intend to track the success of this hashtag.**
- Top posts on **Instagram** this week containing the word "vaccine" were from <u>Potus</u>, followed by a video of <u>Arnold Schwarzenegger</u> receiving the vaccine, followed by <u>Bill Gates</u> receiving the vaccine. The posts received 743.5k interactions, 3 million views and 459.9k interactions, and 409k interactions, respectively.
- Top post on **Reddit** this week containing the word "vaccine" was a <u>post on r/politics</u> about how the Biden admin discovered that "Trump had zero plans for the COVID-19 distribution." It received 126.3k upvotes and 8.3k comments.
- Top post this week from a **known anti-vax influencer on Facebook**, Erin at Health Nut News, was a <u>post asking people if they will receive the vaccine</u>. The post shared a <u>CBS News article</u> about health care workers refusing the vaccine. The post received 7.3k interactions (likes, comments, shares).
- Top post this week from a **known anti-vax influencer on Twitter**, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., was a <u>post about Hank Aaron's death</u> after he received the Moderna vaccine as part of a "wave of suspicious deaths among elderly." The post received 19.5k interactions (likes, comments, shares).



Appendix

Links Screenshot **CA Moderna Pause** RT posted a video to playlist COVID-19 Pandemic — in USA. Russia state-controlled media · January 19 at 12:00 PM · 🔇 Examples of state media California has become the first state in the US to top three million cases, and as if that using to highlight US weren't bad enough, the mass vaccination program there has not been without its challenges. State officials have now called for a temporary halt of a particular batch of failure. Articles from state the Moderna vaccine over a 'higher-than-usual number of adverse events.' media emphasize adverse effects from Moderna/Pfizer vaccines, such as the California incident, and high number of US COVID-19 cases. China Daily on Facebook RT on Facebook CALIFORNIA TO HALT MODERNA BATCH OVER NUMBER OF ADVERSE REACTIONS Foreign state media outlets ALMOST HALF OF FRENCH TEACHERS SELF-CENSORING ON RELIGIOUS ISSUES - POLL are simultaneously publishing articles on the **△**175 42 Comments 121 Shares successes of their own state's vaccination efforts. China Daily 🥏 China state-controlled media · January 19 at 1:00 PM · § o China state media As the overall #COVID19 death toll in the #US neared 400,000, health officials in article on Serbia rnia reported that a second variant of the virus has appeared across the state and also have halted one lot of vaccine doses due to allergic reactions. using Sinopharm vaccine. Iran state media describing Iranian and Cuba vaccine efforts despite US sanctions. This content did not seem to receive high engagement nor was it shared widely outside of the state media's own Facebook Pages. 4 Comments 4 Shares Comment Share மி Like Most Relevant • Write a comment..

to assist the corporations.

Inhumane barbaric society.

US corporate pharma just wants to maximize profit, and the govt only exists



Pregnancy Concerns

- Accurate pregnancy info receiving high engagement.
 These cite the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in their recommendations.
 - o <u>Facebook</u>
 - o <u>Instagram</u>
 - o <u>Twitter</u>
 - Reddit





- Health freedom Facebook groups push "unknowns" about pregnancy and COVID-19 vaccine as reasons against vaccine mandates.
 - o <u>Georgia Coalition</u> for Vaccine Choice
 - Minimal engagement (10 reactions, 6 shares)



https://www.fda.gov/media/144245/download

■ And the briefing material provided by the FDA for the Moderna CV states:

"8.4 Unknown Risks/Data Gaps Safety in certain subpopulations

There are currently insufficient data to make conclusions about the #safety of the vaccine in subpopulations such as children less than 18 years of age, #pregnant and lactating individuals, and immunocompromised individuals.

EDA review of a combined developmental and perinatel/postnetal reproductive toxicity

- VAERS instances of fetus death and early delivery after vaccine received high engagement in anti-vax parenting accounts.
 - o Facebook
 - Instagram



From VAERS: "I was 28 weeks and 5 days pregnant when I received the first dose of the COVID19 vaccine. Two days later (12/25/2020 in the afternoon), I noticed decreased motion of the baby. The baby was found to not have a heartbeat in the early am on 12/26/2020 and I delivered a 2lb 7oz nonviable female fetus at 29 weeks gestation. I was 35 years old at the time of the fetal demise and the only pregnancy history for this pregnancy included a velamentous cord insertion that was being closely monitored by a high risk OB. My estimated due was March 12, 2021."



223 Comments 352 Shares

Tier 1 Hesitancy

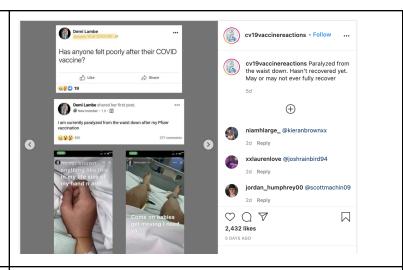
- Personal accounts continue to drive safety concerns.
 This week, a number of long form stories went viral
 - <u>Instagram</u> anaphylaxis
 - <u>Instagram</u> paralysis



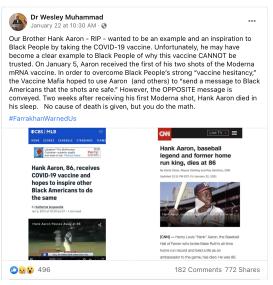
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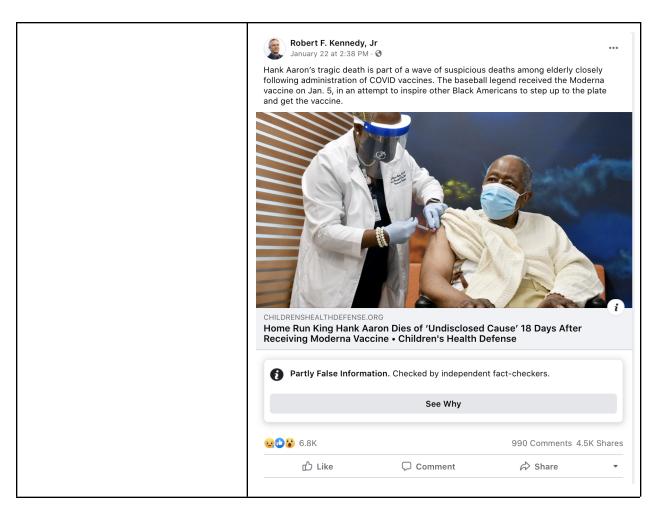


- Concerns about Hank Aaron's death after receiving the vaccine
 - <u>Facebook</u> Black author and influencer arguing this reinforces racial concerns
 - Facebook Robert
 Kennedy J. (6.7K
 reactions);
 Facebook has
 applied a fact check
 label to the post.



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