



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #12

March 10, 2021 - March 16, 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 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](mailto:info@viralityproject.org).

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## Key Takeaways

- This week, the prominent anti-vax organization Children’s Health Defense released a video titled “Medical Racism: The New Apartheid” which **combines discussion on the legitimate history of medical racism with vaccine misinformation to promote anti-vax narratives**. The video has not spread significantly on major social media platforms, but it has been shared on private Telegram channels. **Trusted medical professionals need to continue to be proactive in addressing concerns about medical racism in vaccine rollout so that anti-vaxxers cannot exploit this distrust first.**
- We continue to see **some medical professionals use their credentials to legitimize anti-vax concerns**. This week, a vaccine scientist’s concern about “escape mutants” was shared widely within anti-vaccine spaces and used to drive further fear about vaccines. Scientific-sounding communication from purported experts remains an ongoing challenge.
- **Concerns that COVID-19 vaccines are “experimental” continue to drive online discussions about vaccine hesitancy**. This has been reinforced by news stories of the suspensions of AstraZeneca’s vaccine across European countries after recipients experienced blood clots. Some anti-vax and conspiracy theorists falsely believe vaccination efforts violate the Nuremberg Code on medical experimentation.

## Incidents this week:

*This section contains key events from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners.*

### Medical Racism documentary spreads misinformation about vaccine safety concerns, primarily through private groups

- On March 11th, the prominent anti-vax organization Children’s Health Defense released a documentary titled “[Medical Racism: The New Apartheid](#).” **The video connects a legitimate discussion of medical racism with misinformation about the safety of vaccines more generally**, focusing in particular on links between vaccines and autism.
- The video does not focus entirely on COVID-19 vaccines but instead **seeks to spread distrust in government institutions and vaccine science using individual stories** of Black children being diagnosed with autism after receiving other vaccines.
- A large portion of the video **focuses on the WHO’s work in Africa, framing Big Pharma and the WHO as part of a neocolonial agenda** to “enslave” Africans through drug testing. The video uses conspiracies about Bill Gates as well as connections to the history of slavery in Africa to further this message.
- Additionally, **the video suggests that Black people possess a “superior immune system”** that produces higher antibody responses to vaccines in general, eliminating the need for vaccines.
- This video was available for early viewing March 1-7th through the Jubilee Film Festival, an event focusing on civil rights. According to internal data from that streaming platform, the video had only 13 views. It is no longer available on that platform.

- The video, which is [now viewable on the film's website](#), **had extremely low engagement on major platforms**. The link to the video has only 30 interactions on both Facebook and Twitter. [The Facebook posts are labeled with a fact-checking article](#), while the Tweets have no label though are receiving limited to no engagement. However, **the video is circulating in anti-vax Telegram channels**. We have seen this link shared in six Telegram channels we monitor with a combined audience of roughly 60K members and 5K views of this video among them.
- **Takeaway:** People fact-checking or attempting to counter the film should be careful to not spread the link to the video or amplify its messaging; reach is still low. This is the most [thorough fact-checking article](#) EIP researchers have seen to date. **Overall, this video symbolizes the distrust minority communities may rightly hold towards the medical establishment. Trusted medical professionals need to continue to be proactive in addressing these concerns so that anti-vaxxers cannot exploit this distrust.**

## Repeat offenders: “Coalitions” of doctors use their medical credentials to further doubts about COVID-19 vaccines

- We continue to see **coalitions of doctors leveraging their medical credentials to lend credibility to vaccine misinformation**. This week, a number of these groups were particularly active in spreading doubts about the safety and lack of testing around vaccines.
- For example, on March 10, a group by the name of “Doctors for Covid Ethics” released a letter [arguing that the safety of mRNA vaccines was not sufficiently tested](#). The letter, which has received more than 11K interactions across anti-vax and medical freedom Facebook Groups, masks vaccine misinformation in medical jargon to attempt to add legitimacy to unsubstantiated claims. The signees are European doctors who have [made debunked claims about COVID-19 in the past](#).
- On March 8th, “[Liberty Coalition Canada](#),” a group that has previously lead campaigns to re-open churches, worked with “Canada Health Alliance,” which describes itself as an organization of medical professionals, to spread a 12-minute video [with inaccurate COVID-19 claims](#) such as the false idea that many people are already protected due to “pre-existing circulating T-Cells.”
- The video “Canadian doctors speak out” has 18.9K views on YouTube, and has been shared [among anti-vax](#) and [wellness accounts](#).
- A recording of a lecture given by Dr. Simone Gold of America’s Frontline Doctors, [a group that has continuously spread COVID-19 misinformation](#), spread among Chinese-Americans. The video, which has been subtitled in Chinese, [spreads false information about the COVID-19 vaccine](#). The video of Dr. Gold’s lecture has previously appeared in Chinese-American Telegram groups and is now surfacing on New York and California-based WeChat groups. The video has more than 46K views.
- **Takeaway:** Groups of doctors continue to use their medical titles and jargon to further COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccine misinformation.

## Case Study: Former Gates Foundation vaccine scientist raises vaccine concerns which spread among anti-vaxxers to fuel anti-vax narratives

- In contrast to deliberate attempts to spread medical misinformation, we also saw **comments from a vaccine scientist who had previously worked at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation go**

- viral within anti-vax groups.** [Dr. Geert Vanden Bossche's efforts to raise concerns about how mass vaccination](#) may lead to increased “escape mutants” are being interpreted [as legitimizing anti-vax fears about mass vaccinations](#). Anti-vaxxers have emphasized his credentials [to validate their pre-existing concerns about vaccines generally](#). Meanwhile, other credentialed virologists have begun attempting to address the claims directly, including [in tweets](#) responding to concerns.
- There have been over 2.5K posts on Facebook about Dr. Bossche's statements with over 73K interactions. These primarily anti-vax posts highlight Dr. Bossche's work history [to frame him as a whistle-blower](#). A [recent YouTube interview](#) with Dr. Bossche has over 500K views.
  - **Takeaway:** Given the eagerness of anti-vaxxers to share headlines from medical sources to bolster false claims, **even nuanced scientific discussions about vaccine concerns on social media may be leveraged to fuel hesitancy. Science communicators should be aware of these challenges.**

## Safety concerns about AstraZeneca vaccine as countries suspend batches of the vaccine after some recipients experienced blood clots

- True stories of people experiencing blood clots after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine [have prompted multiple governments to temporarily suspend vaccinations](#). This has drawn global attention, including among vaccine-hesitant and anti-vaccine communities.
- [Austrian authorities have suspended inoculations](#) with a batch of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine as a precaution while investigating the death of one person and the illness of another after the shots, [neither of which are confirmed to have been caused by vaccination](#). An [Instagram post](#) by prominent conservative British media personality Katie Hopkins, who regularly questions the Pfizer vaccine's safety, saw 5000 likes. Public Facebook posts mentioning “Austria, AstraZeneca” saw over 500K interactions last week.
- Some countries have only banned a specific batch, such as ABV5300. These countries include Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Austria, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Thailand.
- A tweet from Naomi Wolf, author and conspiracy theorist, was [picked up](#) by an Australian anti-lockdown page and was [reposted](#) to a Spanish language alternative news channel on Telegram (5,000+ members) that reaches Latinos in the U.S. The tweet reads “updated AGAIN” and lists countries that have suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- This event received attention within numerous [anti-vax Facebook Groups](#). The suspensions also received [widespread global news coverage](#) and therefore saw spread beyond anti-vaccine communities.
- Foreign state media from [Russian](#) and [Chinese](#) has also covered these suspensions.
- **Takeaways:** The suspensions of AstraZeneca vaccines in European countries are getting significant international coverage. **Increased doubts in one manufacturer's vaccine may lead to hesitancy about vaccination overall.** We will continue to monitor discussions of these suspensions.

## Fake New York Times Vaccine Safety Ranking in WhatsApp Message

- A WhatsApp message containing a fake New York Times-attributed ranking of vaccines by safety elicited a [counter-message by the Times](#) on Twitter Mar. 10th. The false ranking places Chinese vaccines at the top of the safety list.
- The message appears to be referencing a NYT op-ed on Feb 5, titled “[It’s Time to Trust China’s and Russia’s Vaccines](#),” though the ranking is fabricated and not mentioned in the article.
- It is difficult to assess the spread of this content on WhatsApp, and likewise where the message originated from. Across other social media, this text has low engagement, with several hundred interactions on [Facebook](#) and several [shares on Twitter](#).

## Anti-vaxxers claim vaccination efforts break the Nuremberg Code, pushing concerns about experimentation

- Anti-vax posts are claiming that vaccination efforts break the Nuremberg Code, a set of research ethics principles focused on medical consent. This is a longstanding trope that is being applied to COVID specifically.
- For example, a Tweet thread from March 7th claims that [Pfizer has been found guilty of breaking the Nuremberg Code](#) for unlawful experimentation, as well as lying to regulators about the safety of their products. Other recent posts [on Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) have claimed that mass vaccine rollouts violate the code, and sometimes extend that to a claim that this will result in “Nuremberg 2.0,” in reference to a supposed Nuremberg-esque trial that anti-vaxxers hope will take place to prosecute those involved in COVID-19 response.
- A [Facebook group](#) for Spanish-speaking Latino Donald Trump supporters re-shared the text of an old article claiming a second Nuremberg trial is being prepared to prosecute those who pushed the “scam” of COVID-19. The text shares falsehoods about vaccines, including that they are an experiment on humans.
- **Takeaway:** [The Nuremberg Code does not address vaccines](#), and there is no evidence that Pfizer has been found guilty of breaking the Nuremberg Code. Still, comparison to the Nuremberg Code is used to elicit fear about the vaccination process. **Concerns about the “experimental” nature of mRNA vaccines continue to get highlighted in online anti-vax misinformation.**

## Right-wing influencers doubt necessity of vaccines after CDC guidelines recommend that people still wear masks after getting vaccinated

- After the CDC put out guidelines on March 9th for fully vaccinated individuals, **some right-wing influencers online have spread doubt in the necessity of the vaccine due to the need to still wear a mask and social distance.**
- Right-wing Pages such as “Trump 2020” have posted articles with the headline, “[The CDC Issues Warning To Those Who Have Already Received The Coronavirus Vaccine — Claims You Should Still Wear Masks, Social Distance.](#)” A majority of the comments on these posts question the safety and efficacy of the vaccines.

- This headline has been shared in articles on websites run by [Sarah Palin](#), [Ben Shapiro](#), and other prominent right-wing influencers. These articles have a combined reach of 4.3K interactions on Facebook.

## 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.*

### Actor Eugenio Derbez interviews Anthony Fauci using anti-vaccination framed questions

- Mexican actor [Eugenio Derbez interviewed Anthony Fauci on Derbez's Instagram](#), where he has 15.9M followers. Derbez called himself a “vaccine skeptic,” saying he is not against vaccines but has a lot of doubts and questions. **Despite intentions for positive public messaging among Spanish speakers, Derbez's questions amplified vaccine hesitancy and had an overall negative effect on public discourse.**
- Derbez, **who at the beginning of the interview admitted he is a “vaccine skeptic,”** asked Fauci several questions popular in the anti-vaccine community, enquiring about pharmaceutical companies' liability, the likelihood of long term negative effects, if injecting humans with mRNA is an experiment, why some bishops have told Catholics to avoid certain vaccines and the possibility of vaccine mandates.
- The original interview with Fauci was in English. This interview is spreading in both English and Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S. Derbez also shared a version of the interview with Spanish subtitles. The [original video](#) has received more than 2.1M views; the [subtitled video](#) has more than 1M.
- Univision's morning show, [Despierta America](#), also covered the interview, asking Derbez softball questions, uncritical of Derbez's admitted doubts about vaccine safety, before telling the audience that they should be vaccinated. A clip of the interview on Despierta America's Instagram garnered 158,000+ views.
- Mexican media outlet [Milenio](#) (also popular in the U.S. with Spanish speakers) uncritically reported that Derbez questions the efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine and repeats many of the doubts he expressed in the video, but not Fauci's responses. The Milenio article generated 12,000+ Facebook engagements.
- Anti-vaccine activists have picked up the original interview and are promoting it to their audiences. This includes [Del Bigtree](#) and [several](#) accounts that publish [anti-vaccination](#) content.
- **Takeaway:** Despite Anthony Fauci's efforts to respond with true, trustworthy information to Derbez's questions, some media outlets uncritically amplified Derbez's doubts about the vaccine, which risks furthering vaccine hesitancy. Communicators should be well aware of the challenges as well of the benefits in engaging, and the potential for how even well-intentioned engagement may be selectively cut or reframed.

## WeChat headline suggests Merck drug means “no need” for a vaccination

- An experimental COVID-19 treatment from Merck received coverage from a [WeChat](#) public account. Though the reporting on the drug’s development is correct, the headline translates in part to “no need for a shot.” The new [antiviral drug](#) molnupiravir is a treatment for COVID-19 -- it does not prevent the illness or replace a vaccine. The article has been viewed 33.4K+ times.

## 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.*

### Ongoing Theme: Deaths after vaccines used to further safety concerns

- Kassidi Kurill, a 39-year-old mother from Utah, [passed away in early February four days after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine](#). Coverage of her story has received over 146.2K interactions on Facebook in the past week.
- Haley Brinkmeyer, a 28-year-old physical therapist from Indiana, passed away in late January two days after receiving a vaccine. Discussion about her death resurfaced this week [after a clickbait news site published a story on it](#). Mentions of her death have received 5.4K interactions in the past week on Facebook.

## 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 UNICEF, with 750K interactions (comments, shares, reactions). The post celebrates the success of COVAX, an initiative to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine globally co-led with organizations including the WHO and Gavi.
- This week’s top **Instagram** [post](#) containing the word “vaccine” was a photo of Michelle Obama receiving the vaccine. In the caption, Obama expresses her gratitude for being vaccinated and encourages others to do the same. The comments express mixed views about the vaccine, and the post has received over 2.8M likes.
- The top **Reddit** [post](#) from this week containing the word “vaccine” shares the news that the president of Italy was vaccinated along with other members of his age group, rather than through a special process because of his position. The post, shared on [r/pics](#), has received 72.6K upvotes.
- The top [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook**, [Erin at Health Nut News](#), shares an [article](#) reporting that a mother in Utah died days after receiving the vaccine. The article has received over 47K interactions on Facebook, including 7.6K from Erin’s post. In the article, the woman’s father emphasizes that others should still be vaccinated, although they should be aware of side effects.
- The top [Tweet](#) from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from [Alex Berenson](#). In the Tweet, Berenson asks whether COVID-19 vaccine stories that previously received widespread attention, including the deaths of Hank Aaron and Marvin Hagler, have now been forgotten. The post has received over 7.9K 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>The majority of the spread of “Medical Racism: The New Apartheid” that we have been aware of has occurred in Telegram groups.</p>	
<p>The limited number of posts of the documentary on Facebook are labeled <a href="https://factcheck.org">with a fact check from factcheck.org</a>.</p>	

The letter this week from “Doctors for Covid Ethics” received over 11K interactions on Facebook.

Comments from Dr. Geert Vanden Bossche were used to legitimize anti-vax concerns.

UK media personality Katie Hopkins [posted a headline about the suspension in Austria of the AstraZeneca vaccine.](#)

<p>Coverage of AstraZeneca suspensions on social media created space for people to express their vaccine concerns. The most liked comments on this Fox News article <a href="#">referred to COVID-19 vaccination as “human experimentation”</a> similar to Nuremberg claims.</p>	<p>FOXNEWS.COM Ireland latest country to suspend AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine</p> <p>20K 4.9K Comments 14K Shares</p> <p>Like Comment Share</p> <p>Most Relevant</p> <p>Write a comment...</p> <p><b>Linda Rea Camarota</b> Human experimentation. This is the tip of the iceberg. Like · Reply · 23h 464</p> <p>37 Replies</p> <p><b>Donna Karalunas</b> The so- called vaccines you are all getting is how the Builder Burg people " The richest people in the world" get to lower the world population and you sheeple all complied to this, I truly wished you all did further research, this is not what you all ... <b>See More</b> Like · Reply · 1d 18</p> <p>6 Replies</p> <p>View more comments 2 of 2,137</p>
<p>A WhatsApp message circulated this week with a fake “safety” ranking falsely attributed to the New York Times.</p>	<p>Report by The New York Times on Feb 5, 2021.</p> <p>In the safety ranking, the top four are all Chinese vaccines:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sinopharm (China)</li> <li>2. Sinopharm (China)</li> <li>3. Kexing (China)</li> <li>4. Can Sino (China)</li> <li>5. AstraZeneca (UK)</li> <li>6. Pfizer (United States and Germany)</li> <li>7. Modena (United States)</li> <li>8. Johnson &amp; Johnson (United States)</li> <li>9. Novavax (United States)</li> <li>10. Satellite 5 (Russia)</li> </ol> <p>Sinopharm has two vaccines, ranking first and second respectively.</p> <p>China has exported more than 500 million doses of vaccines to more than 50 countries around the world, and it is estimated that hundreds of millions of people have been vaccinated. And China's vaccine accident rate is lower and safer.</p> <p>As reported by Western media, many wealthy people in Britain fly to the UAE to vaccinate Chinese national medicine.</p>

A post from conservative commentator Ben Shapiro emphasizes [outrage that people still have to wear masks after getting vaccines](#).

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### CDC Issues New Guidance for Vaccinated People

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday relea...

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Most Relevant

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**James Swanson**  
Very apparent that we're being manipulated. First, if we are obedient we reduce the risk of infection and will be able to resume a portion of our lives. Time to raise the bar. If you get vaccinations you will be able to travel and resume a portion of o... [See More](#)  
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**Kristin Alexander**  
I never stopped hanging out with people so there's really no reason to get this experimental gene therapy.  
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