



# Virality Project Weekly Briefing #10

February 24, 2021 - March 2, 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 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

- **We applaud Twitter for announcing clear, concrete policies** that we believe will equip Twitter with effective tools to combat mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 vaccines. We will continue to observe how these policies are enforced.
- **Continued confusion about vaccine efficacy statistics can be used to reduce confidence in the Johnson and Johnson vaccine**, so proactive efforts to clarify these numbers are important.
- Anti-vaxxers continue to **exploit confusion about pharmaceutical companies’ COVID-19 vaccine liability to fuel doubts about COVID-19 vaccine safety**. This effort attempts to make people believe that manufacturers are not incentivized to ensure the vaccine is safe.
- **Celebrity influencers** have a reach that extends far outside the vaccine-skeptic and conspiratorial spaces, though their messages often contain less concrete forms of misinformation. This week, we

observed **Spanish-speaking celebrities and influencers spread conspiracies to large audiences.**

- Online discussions about “Vaccine Passports” have had a significant uptick globally as governments consider programs such as Israel’s new “Green Passport” initiative. **Narratives about passports and governments pressuring people to take the vaccine increase the resonance of anti-vax narratives related to ‘medical freedom’.**
- A host of **state actors continue to use ‘Vaccine Diplomacy’** narratives for geopolitical influence. For example, this week Russian state media continued to tout Sputnik V while pushing safety concerns about Moderna and Pfizer vaccines.

## Events this week:

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

### **Policy Update:** Twitter announces labeling Tweets that contain misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines

- On Monday, March 1, Twitter [announced updates to its COVID-19 vaccine misinformation policy](#). This policy update is notable for two reasons:
  - It **expands the scope of content that Twitter will take action on** from not only false claims related to the COVID-19 but also tweets that may contain “misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines.”
  - It announced a **new clear strike system for accounts** that repeatedly violate their policies. Twitter’s Head of Site Integrity noted, “many types of harmful misinformation are disproportionately spread by small groups of dedicated bad-faith actors.”
- **Takeaway:** These are clear, concrete policies that we believe will equip Twitter with effective tools to combat mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 vaccines if properly enforced.

### Coverage of Johnson and Johnson’s “66% efficacy” raising concerns among individuals looking for most effective vaccine

- Since the [FDA released its analysis of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine last week](#), users responded to news coverage with **concern that the J&J vaccine is 'only' 66% effective** at preventing moderate COVID-19 illness, failing to include that it is [85% and 100% effective at preventing serious illness or death](#), respectively.
- These doubts have been expressed in comments and Tweets responding to news coverage of the FDA analysis. In some of the top posts of articles discussing the J&J vaccine, [about half of the top comments expressed hesitation](#) towards the lower efficacy rate than the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.
- This dialogue appears to be **genuine confusion from people who want to receive a “more effective” vaccine rather than an effort from anti-vaxxers** to undermine confidence in the vaccine.

- Additionally, we have seen several posts from people of color who are **concerned that J&J will only go to people of color, which may, due to the vaccine's perceived lower efficiency, further racial inequities** in COVID-19 response. The [Washington Post reported on this](#) on March 1, and this story has had [limited spread among left-wing groups](#).
- **Messaging efforts to boost confidence in the J&J vaccine have received significantly more engagement than Tweets or comments expressing concern.** While Tweets doubting J&J's efficacy have received 0-100 engagements, a [fact-checking Twitter thread](#) that describes why the vaccine is better than this '66%' number implies has received over 1.5K likes. Meanwhile, [a video featuring Dr. Anthony Fauci](#) discussing the effectiveness of the J&J vaccine has been viewed over 300K times on Twitter.
- **Takeaway:** Continued confusion about vaccine efficacy statistics can be used to cast doubts about the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, so proactive efforts to clarify these numbers are important.

## Pfizer negotiations over liability with other governments casting doubts about the U.S. vaccine regulatory system

- As Pfizer seeks authorization for its vaccine in other countries, **U.S.-based anti-vaxxers are leveraging stories about obstacles in the negotiating process to cast doubts on U.S. vaccine regulations and the vaccine's safety.**
- On Feb. 5, [Pfizer withdrew its application for approval in India](#) because it decided not to meet the Indian government's requirements for running local clinical trials. This news has been picked up by anti-vax groups to cast doubt on the Pfizer vaccine's safety.
- [America's Frontline Doctors](#) and [LifeSiteNews](#), two sites that have previously spread misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines, have driven this narrative with headlines that suggest Pfizer did not want to test its vaccine's safety, such as, "[Pfizer bails out of India after country demands safety testing for COVID vaccine](#)." These articles have received roughly 7K combined interactions from mainly right-leaning users [who are supportive of the vaccine being banned](#) in other countries.
- An Instagram post from an anti-vax account claims that the reason the Pfizer vaccine is not yet available in Brazil is that the [Brazilian government will not accept responsibility for potential side effects](#), which Pfizer requires for the vaccine deal. This has received 5.2K likes with comments applauding the Brazilian government for "standing up for humanity."
- **Takeaway:** Anti-vaxxers continue to exploit confusion about pharmaceutical companies' COVID-19 vaccine liability to fuel doubts about COVID-19 vaccine safety. People believe that because vaccine manufacturers are not held responsible for vaccine injuries, they are not incentivized to ensure the vaccine is safe.

## Spike in Activity Around Alternative COVID-19 Treatments

- As vaccine rollouts continue around the world, there were spikes in activity promoting alternative treatments for COVID-19. This included a network of websites collecting research and meta-analyses on the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, Vitamin D, Zinc, Remdesivir, PVP-I, and other alternative COVID-19 'cures'. These sites present and aggregate questionable external studies on the effectiveness of each treatment, and use infographics to summarize their

supposed benefits. A Twitter account associated with the network was suspended. In the last week, domains in this network have been shared 216 times in public Facebook Groups and Pages.

- A product called ‘VAXXGUARD’ which claims to limit side effects related to the COVID-19 vaccine was also shared by anti-vaxxers this week. The [website](#) claims the product can, among other benefits, bind “aluminum safely and gently so that it will prevent its caustic effects while allowing for it to remain effective as an adjuvant” and appears to be marketed specifically for children and newborns.
- Fact-checkers [have debunked claims about the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine](#) and have warned against following posts that suggest it can be homemade as a safe treatment. The supposed treatment was referenced 44.5K times on Twitter this week, a 7% increase from the previous week.
- **Takeaway:** As vaccines become available to a larger percentage of the global population and individuals need to make an active choice to get a vaccine, alternative treatments continue to gain traction.

### Case Study: Death of American Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti after vaccine NOT successfully tied to vaccine

- A popular tactic for anti-vaxxers has been exploiting the death of famous people who died shortly after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine to sow doubts about vaccine safety, notably including the [death of Hank Aaron](#) ten days after receiving a vaccine.
- On Feb. 22, [American Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti died](#) a week after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. Despite nearly half a million engagements on posts discussing his death on Facebook, [only one headline from a local news network](#) noted that he had recently received a COVID-19 vaccine. There were [only 387 interactions on that post](#), and no comments discussed the vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** Despite this being a case of a prominent person dying soon after receiving a vaccine, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s death was not leveraged by anti-vaxxers. There are a couple of possible explanations for this, including the announcement of a **clear cause of death** (Hank Aaron’s death was announced without a cause of death), **better reporting practices** in which journalists did not mention the vaccine, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s **smaller following** as compared to other celebrities.

### 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.*

### Celebrities and Influencers Spreading Conspiracies to Large Audiences in Spanish

- During a [press conference](#) with 371K views on Twitter, actress Victoria Abril said the COVID-19 vaccine was a dangerous experiment. Her sentiments have been echoed and supported by other [pandemic deniers](#). Abril hails from Spain and lives in France, but her statement is spreading in Spanish-speaking WhatsApp communities in the U.S.

- Anchor Wendy Castillo of Estrella TV, a Spanish-language American broadcaster, said in a [TikTok video with 249K views](#) that she would rather stay in her country than have a “vaccine passport.”
- Ruben Luengas, a former Telemundo anchor who now bills himself as an independent journalist, is [spreading conspiracy theories about Bill Gates’](#) involvement with the COVID-19 vaccine and the false notion that Gates’ and other elites will [use vaccines to reduce the global population](#).
- A popular Mexican singer and actor, Christopher Uckerman, has said he will not get the vaccine, instead favoring “natural” treatments. [His statements have received coverage](#) in the U.S. and Mexico and have 5.9K interactions on Facebook.
- **Takeaway:** Celebrity influencers have a reach that extends far outside the vaccine-skeptic and conspiratorial spaces, and though their messages are often less concrete forms of misinformation, they represent a significant threat due to their reach.

## Reject a Vaccine in Sign Language

- A video circulating on Telegram in Spanish and Mandarin-speaking groups [instructs viewers to decline the COVID-19 vaccine in sign language](#) in various countries.
- The Mandarin video came from the Chinese American Alliance’s private Telegram channel, a group that was formed by conservative Chinese-Americans during the 2016 presidential election and has over 3.2K members. The Spanish video was found in a public alternative news group with over 5.2K members that discusses the pandemic.

## Ongoing Narrative: Vaccine causing Breast Cancer symptoms

- A message spreading in a Spanish-language alternative news Telegram channel with over 5.2K members [warns women that the COVID-19 vaccine side effects mimic symptoms of breast cancer](#). Included in the message was a link to an English-language blog post on junk news site [Great Game India](#). The original [message came from Telegram](#) channel Altavoz Libre e Independiente and received 34,600 views.
- Numerous legitimate English language local news sources are also covering the swollen lymph nodes symptom that can lead to a “false breast cancer diagnosis.”
- **Takeaway:** coverage of the risks of a false cancer diagnosis can be misinterpreted because the proximity of “COVID-19 vaccine” and “cancer” in any headlines may induce fear.

## Anti-Vaxxers in Israel Link Vaccine Programs to ‘Creeping Authoritarianism’

- Anti-vax groups and influencers are painting Israel's aggressive vaccination campaigns and ‘Green Passport’ initiatives as a violation of human rights by a government rapidly accelerating towards authoritarianism.
- Two of the popular anti-vax Facebook groups disparaging vaccine programs have over 54K combined members.
- Oshrat Kotler, a popular journalist on the Israeli left and frequent critic of PM Benjamin Netanyahu, wrote [a long Facebook post decrying the “fascist” vaccination program](#) and urging Israelis to “disobey the green passport,” which was widely shared across platforms. On Facebook alone, the post was shared 117 times.

- **Takeaway:** as vaccines become more widely available, narratives about passports and governments pressuring people to take the vaccine may increase the resonance of anti-vax narratives related to ‘medical freedom’.

## Russian State Media Continues to Promote Sputnik V, Elevate Controversy over European Vaccine Passports

- Russian state media continued to cover the authorization of the Sputnik V vaccine in various foreign countries such as San Marino, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, and Honduras, while also undermining the efficacy of Western-produced vaccines.
- Sputnik News [also presented Sputnik V as the solution for rapid vaccination](#) campaigns in Europe, taking the opportunity to criticize the European Union for "politicizing" the vaccine.
- In the last week, Sputnik News articles related to the Sputnik V vaccine have been shared 960 times on Facebook and had over 33K interactions.
- While [praising Russia for registering its third COVID-19 vaccine](#), Russian media also continued to [allege that Western vaccines carry ‘adverse side effects’](#). RT covered Vladimir Putin's statement that there is [a media "information campaign" originating from the US](#) and targeting Russia and Sputnik V.
- Russian state media also continued to amplify fears about potential “vaccine passport” requirements in the UK and Europe, emphasizing government overreach.
- **Takeaway:** a host of state actors continue to use online ‘Vaccine Diplomacy’ as a proxy tool for geopolitical influence.

## 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: Notable vaccine injury stories

- A [Breitbart article published last week misleadingly claimed that dozens of Italian teachers](#) fell ill after receiving AstraZeneca’s COVID-19 vaccine. The article has received high engagement across [anti-vax](#) and [right-wing users](#) of Facebook and Twitter, with over 10.6K interactions on Facebook and a tweet with over a thousand likes and retweets.
- A post in the anti-vax Facebook Group “Vaccine Injury Stories” from February 28 gives a personal anecdote of someone [experiencing kidney failure](#) immediately after receiving his second vaccine dose. The post has received over 800 interactions, which is high for posts in that group. We have previously seen no spread of discussions about kidney failure after a COVID-19 vaccine beyond this story, but we will monitor for future discussions about kidney failure.
- Last week, a Tweet described [five people who had suffered strokes](#) after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. A screenshot of this Tweet also spread on the alternative social media site Gab. The Tweet received roughly 3.7K likes and 33 likes on Gab.

## Ongoing Tactic: Misusing scientific articles to advance vaccine distrust

- Anti-vax activists suggest that “antibody-dependent enhancement” (ADE) is a potential side effect of COVID-19 vaccines. In one recent post, the anti-vaccine page Children’s Health Defense (CHD) [claimed vaccines could cause more severe symptoms](#) for COVID-19. The article cites a June 2020 paper that [warns of ADE in theory but does not support](#) CHD’s argument.
- Using a recent [scientific journal article](#), anti-vaccine accounts are claiming that a vaccine ingredient in Johnson and Johnson’s vaccine, [polysorbate 80, causes anaphylactic reactions](#).
- A pseudo-health blog claimed mRNA vaccines can change human DNA using a [scientific journal article](#) that describes the possibility of COVID-19 RNA inserting itself in human DNA. While the scientific article makes no connection to mRNA vaccines, [the author inappropriately extrapolates findings](#) to add false scientific evidence to the claim that mRNA vaccines can change human DNA. The article has 5K interactions on Facebook [among anti-vax pages](#).
- **Takeaway:** We continue to observe anti-vaxxers using scientific jargon and inappropriately cited scientific literature to further misleading claims about COVID-19 vaccines.

## 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 the WHO, with over 747K interactions (likes, comments, shares). The post celebrates the arrival of vaccines in Ghana, calling it a “big first step towards achieving vaccine equity.” Notably, the top comment on the post states that the people of Ghana do not want the vaccine.
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is from Jonathan Van Ness, the host of Queer Eye, with over 519K likes. Van Ness encourages HIV+ individuals to sign up for the vaccine and notes that he experienced no side effects.
- The top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is from /r/News/. The post links to a [Reuters article](#) in which Dr. Fauci affirms that he would get the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The post has received about 43.9K upvotes.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from [Erin at Health Nut News](#), which shares a [news article](#) reporting that a proposal to require first responders to receive the vaccine was rejected by a county commission in Florida. The post has received 4K interactions.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was from [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#) The post links to a [Children’s Health Defense article](#) that raises fears about the White House partnering with social media companies to remove COVID-19 vaccine information. The post has received 4.8K interactions.

## Appendix

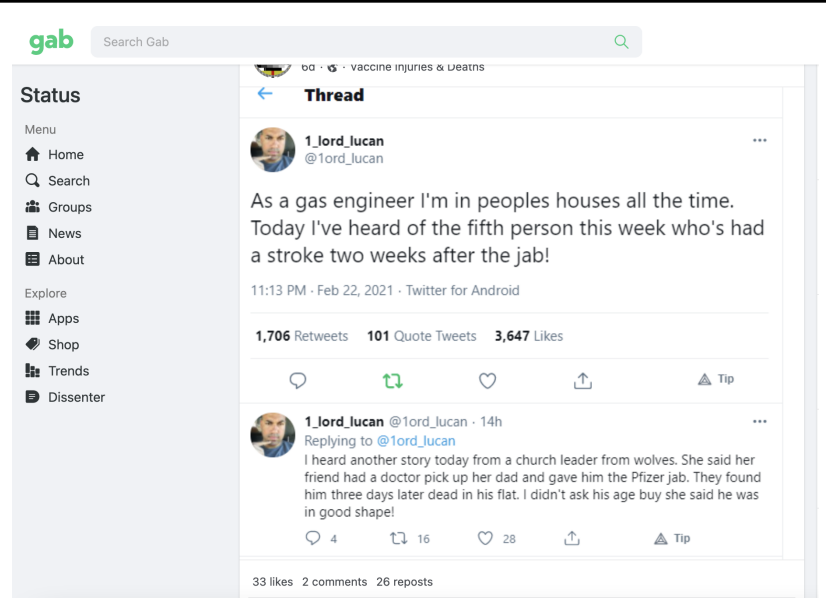
We have included some notable screenshots from the above incidents. More screenshots and assets can be made available, upon request and as needed.

Links	Screenshot
<p>Various Tweets with low engagement express general concern about the Johnson and Johnson COVID-19 vaccine being “only 66%” effective.</p> <p>Meanwhile, fact-checking posts, such as <a href="#">this Twitter thread</a> and the <a href="#">video of Dr. Fauci discussing the vaccine</a>, have received high engagement.</p>	
<p>Additionally, Tweets are expressing concerns about furthering racial inequities in quality COVID-19 access. These have gotten low engagement</p>	



<p>Users respond to a LifeSiteNews story of Pfizer withdrawing its application from use in India. The comments support India's decision in opposition to Pfizer's vaccine and perceived US corruption.</p>	
<p>Only one news story linked Lawrence Ferlinghetti's death to the COVID-19 vaccine. Comments on the post called out the article. From one user:</p> <p>“Why did you feel it necessary to mention that he had recently received his 1st COVID vaccine in your intro/summary of the article/post itself, yet neglect to state in that intro that he actually died of LUNG DISEASE? Clearly, it was intentional. As per usual, your agenda is obvious and your intro is deceptive and misleading. Typical.”</p>	

A Tweet describing anecdotal cases of people experiencing strokes after getting a COVID-19 vaccine has also been shared on the [alternative social media site Gab](#). Gab, like other alt-sites including Parler, is preferred by far-right and conspiracy users for its lack of content moderation.



A tweet sharing a news story debunking the claim that the “Covid Vaccine Makes People Gay” leads with the false claim and only shows part of the debunk due to the truncated description.



Factual news items about the risks of false-positive breast cancer diagnosis resulting from minor COVID-19 vaccine side effects are being shared in conspiratorial channels without context that risk reinforcing a non-existent link between the vaccine and cancer. This post on Telegram in Spanish had almost 35K views.

**Altavoz Libre e Independiente**

MUJERES VACUNADAS DE COVID ESTÁN MOSTRANDO EFECTOS SECUNDARIOS TÍPICOS DE CÁNCER DE MAMA

Los médicos de Intermountain Healthcare's Breast Care Centre de Utah, USA, anuncian nuevas pautas de mamografías para las mujeres vacunadas contra Covid-19 recientemente.

Los médicos han observado inflamación de los ganglios linfáticos en las mamografías de detección de mujeres que se vacunaron recientemente contra COVID-19.

"Siempre que los vemos en una mamografía de detección normal, llamamos a esas pacientes porque puede significar cáncer de mama metastásico que viaja a los ganglios linfáticos o linfoma o leucemia".

"Con la vacuna Moderna están habiendo estos síntomas aproximadamente un 11% después de la primera dosis y un 16% después de la segunda dosis. Creemos que también es comparable para la vacuna Pfizer "

Altavoz Libre e Independiente en Telegram:  
<https://t.me/altavozlibre>

Fuente en inglés  
[t.me/altavozlibre/366](https://t.me/altavozlibre/366) 34.6K edited Feb 24 at 14:04

Anti-vax video using sign language to reject the vaccine is getting shared across languages in closed platforms.

**RESURGENTE 2020**

AMERICA PAKISTAN

Las personas sordas de todo el mundo dicen NO A LA VACUNA DEL COVID.

[t.me/resurgente2020/13616](https://t.me/resurgente2020/13616) 5.0K Feb 24 at 04:27

EMBED VIEW IN CHANNEL CONTEXT