



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #13

March 17, 2021 - March 23, 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.

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Key Takeaways

- The fallout from the suspension of the AstraZeneca vaccine in European countries and comments opposing mass vaccination efforts from virologist Dr. Bossche continue to dominate online anti-vax conversation. These cases have both furthered concerns about vaccine safety.
- This week, anti-vaxxers manipulated quotes and data from the chief medical officer of Moderna's 2017 TedTalk, leaked documents from the European Medical Association, and FDA research on Johnson and Johnson's vaccine to further vaccine safety and efficacy fears.

Narrative Updates:

This section contains key updates on events covered in our previous briefing.

Update: Fallout from suspension of AstraZeneca vaccine for safety concerns continues to grow, despite safety declarations

- Last week, [we discussed the suspension of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine across Europe](#) due to concerns that it caused blood clots. Since then, more countries suspended the use of AstraZeneca's vaccine and conversation related to the vaccine's safety spiked.
- Several countries that investigated the issues, including South Korea and Australia, [found no problem with the vaccine and have since continued deployment](#). WHO, the European Medical Association, and AstraZeneca all put out announcements stating that the vaccine is safe, and some countries including Spain resumed deployment of the vaccine.
- Despite these reassurances, since our last briefing, a broad mix of narratives surrounding AstraZeneca vaccines and vaccine safety have continued to spread. For example, Children's Health Defense posted an article [warning that the suspensions are an indication it is unsafe](#). [A tweet from prominent anti-vax activist Robert F. Kennedy](#) sharing this article has 3.2K engagements.
- Some anti-vax groups have searched VAERS data for additional instances of blood issues to cast doubt on vaccines in the US, publishing posts that [claim there were 99 cases of blood issues in the U.S. post vaccinations](#).
- [Other conspiratorial posts reference a "gag order"](#) supposedly preventing doctors from speaking out about the vaccine, to suggest that elites are covering up problems with the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- Meanwhile, medical influencers have gotten significant reach in their efforts to explain this situation. For example, ZDoggMD, a medical influencer on Facebook, [released a factually correct video on March 19 explaining how the AstraZeneca vaccine works](#). It has 310.9K views, which is significantly higher than any post questioning the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The outstanding question, which is often challenging to assess with Facebook data, is whether the clarifications are reaching "fence-sitter" or vaccine-hesitant communities.

Update: Dr. Geert Vanden Bossche's comments on mass vaccination efforts causing escape mutants spread further and in multiple languages this week

- [As we discussed in our briefing last week](#), Virologist Geert Vanden Bossche recently released a letter to the WHO requesting a debate on COVID-19 vaccines and claiming vaccination is leading to a “coming Covid catastrophe.” Bossche was amplified by anti-vax influencers and set up social media accounts this week to spread his argument.
- The letter was originally shared on his [LinkedIn page](#) and he has since [tweeted](#) it. Bossche was subsequently [featured on anti-vax influencer Del Bigtree's show the HighWire](#). Bigtree featured a 42-minute interview of Bossche which he claims “may be the most important interview in the history of mankind.”
- On Bossche's website and in the profiles featuring him, his Ph.D. in virology, time as a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Health Discovery team Senior Program Officer and Senior Manager at the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization are highlighted. He has used his new social media accounts and trappings of expertise and authority on vaccines to promote a series of letters on our “[natural immunity to COVID-19](#)” and the “[catastrophic consequences of thoughtless human intervention in the COVID-19 pandemic](#).”
- The open letter has been translated into Chinese by at least three public WeChat accounts. Two of the three translated articles have been removed by the platform. Two articles received more than 100K views before being removed (WeChat does not log views beyond 100K). The third article remains up and has been viewed 56K times.

Incidents this week:

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

False claim that the Chief Medical Officer of Moderna admitted mRNA vaccines alter DNA fueling concerns about vaccine safety

- Multiple conspiracy websites published articles this week using a 2017 TED talk by Dr. Tal Zaks, Chief Medical Officer of Moderna, [to support the false narrative that mRNA vaccines change human DNA](#). In reality, COVID-19 vaccines [cannot change human DNA](#).
- Dr. Zaks' talk, titled “[The disease-eradicating potential of gene editing](#),” discussed research on mRNA vaccines using the metaphor of mRNA as the “software of life”. [Conspiracy articles took quotes from the talk out of context](#) to falsely frame Dr. Zaks' remarks as an admission that mRNA vaccines change DNA.
- Articles with the title “[Bombshell: Moderna Chief Medical Officer Admits MRNA Alters DNA](#)” and other posts taking Dr. Zaks' comments out of context have received 14.7K engagements across [conspiracy](#), [far right](#), and [anti-vax Facebook groups](#).
- This content has been shared widely across anti-vax Telegram groups. We have seen it shared in six anti-vax Telegram groups with a combined total of roughly 26K users, as well as in foreign Groups.

- **Takeaway:** This instance is similar to how conspiracy theorists use the analogy on Moderna's website of mRNA vaccines as "software platforms" to push claims that mRNA vaccines change DNA. This analogy continues to sow confusion among those who may not understand mRNA vaccine technology and may be concerned about mRNA vaccine safety.

Leaked documents from European Medical Association cyberattack reveal concerns about mRNA instability issues with Pfizer vaccine, casting doubts on efficacy

- In December 2020, [the European Medicines Agency \(EMA\) suffered a cyberattack which led to a data leak](#) involving email correspondence about the approval process of Pfizer's mRNA vaccine; these documents were later published on the dark web and anonymously sent to a variety of journalists and academics.
- On March 10, 2021, the BMJ, a medical journal, [reported that the documents mentioned concerns from regulators](#) about the instability of the mRNA included in the vaccines, leading some batches to only have 55-78% of intact mRNA remaining. The article emphasizes that the data leak indicates the integrity of mRNA vaccines should be examined more rigorously.
- The EMA has stated that although the content of individual emails is authentic, some of the data [have been manipulated to present a biased perspective](#). Additionally, a response to the article written by [a group of researchers criticized BMJ for promoting baseless concerns](#) given the unverifiability of the hacked data and the real-world results that seem to demonstrate the effectiveness of the vaccine.
- Anti-vax websites, [including Children's Health Defense](#), reprinted the article on Mar. 16. Various anti-vax articles covering this have received 1.1K Facebook interactions combined and have been shared across anti-vax Telegram groups with at least a combined total of 82.6K users.
- One tweet thread [published pictures of the hacked emails](#) to push a narrative that the FDA and EMA regulators were pressured into rushing the sale of the Pfizer vaccine without properly considering adverse effects or trial data.
- **Takeaway:** While the reach is not substantial on major platforms, this is a case of a credible source unintentionally furthering anti-vaccine concerns. This is also noteworthy as it is a novel example of a hack in which the material was leveraged to deliberately foster distrust in the vaccine and medical research institutions.

Moderna begins vaccine trials with children, prompting backlash among right-wing communities

- On March 16, [Moderna announced that they began vaccine trials for children](#) from 6 months to 11 years old. Participants are only receiving one dose, and researchers significantly lowered the dosage. The researchers will administer a second dose depending on side reactions.
- While this story has been discussed widely, right-wing influencers have been particularly vocal in sharing this story. Posts on Facebook from [Ben Shapiro](#), [Glenn Beck](#), and [other right-wing commenters](#) sharing news articles describing the trial have received over 7.6K reactions this

week. Commenters responding to the posts express outrage at vaccine manufacturers and push vaccine safety misinformation.

- We have seen little discussion on Facebook from anti-vax communities. On Telegram, anti-vax groups are criticizing parents who allow their children to be a part of the study. Some people on Bitchute, a video hosting platform used by conspiracy theorists, have folded this news into narratives around [elites testing genetic code injections on children](#).
- In comparison to Johnson and Johnson's prior [announcement of their vaccine trials for children](#), we saw significantly more discussion in online conservative communities as opposed to anti-vax groups, though both had similar concerns about experimenting on children.

Article targeting Native communities discourages taking the J&J vaccine

- An opinion piece in Indian Country Today from March 10 cites FDA research that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was not as effective for Native Americans and Alaskan Natives compared to other racial groups. [This is false as the article misrepresents the FDA's statistics](#) according to the vice president of the Indian Health Board.
- It's been shared on Facebook 25 times and has received 1.5K interactions primarily from [Facebook groups covering Native American news](#). The Facebook comments on these posts are mixed; where some comments encourage taking other vaccines, others point out that this is misinformation. The story has also been [tweeted by prominent anti-vax activist account Erin at Health Nut News](#).
- This was followed up with a press release on March 15 in Indian Country Today from the vice-president of the Indian Health Board and president of the Association of American Indian Physicians which [called out the original op-ed as irresponsible and reckless](#). This press release with factual information has had much less engagement with only 1 post on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) each.

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.

World Wide Rally for Freedom took place on March 20 after online organization

- The Worldwide Rally for Freedom, which we [initially discussed in Briefing #11](#), took place on March 20, with mass protests in cities across the world, including London, Kassel, Calgary, and Sydney. These protests turned violent in several cities, with 33 arrests in London alone.
- The marches, which were intended to protest COVID-19 restrictions, were organized via a [central Facebook page](#) (that ran 36 Facebook events concurrently) and a [Telegram channel](#), both of which remain online.
- Protesters used the hashtag #wewillALLbether to broadcast from the various locations. [Researchers](#) have assessed that the Telegram network was coordinated by a group of individuals in Kassel, Germany, who set up 30+ locally-based channels on February 28 within an hour of each other.

Epoch Times op-ed manipulated to promote fear of blood clots, AstraZeneca vaccine in multiple languages

- Parts of an Epoch Times [op-ed pushing unsubstantiated vaccine safety concerns](#) by Lawrence Solomon, an Epoch Times columnist and climate change denier, were translated into Mandarin by a public WeChat account that has previously spread pro-Trump misinformation.
- Solomon's original op-ed uses decontextualized and outdated survey data from Gallup to argue that 51% of medical professionals will refuse the COVID-19 vaccine. The survey was conducted in December 2020 and found that 49% said they would take the vaccine, with 34% saying no and 18% unsure.
- [The Mandarin WeChat article](#), published under Solomon's name, contains parts of Solomon's original op-ed, along with additional reports of the AstraZeneca vaccine allegedly causing blood clots. The information about blood clots is not part of the original op-ed and appears to have been added by the WeChat account.
- The translated article received 12.2K views in two days and has been picked up by other WeChat public accounts, [one of which](#) gained more than 4K views.

Vaccine misinformation clips recirculating on TikTok claim Mark Zuckerberg is a vaccine skeptic

- A video from the [Epoch Times en español](#) that attempts to expose Facebook has been cut into clips and reposted to TikTok in three parts ([part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#)). The video clips show coverage of a Project Veritas leak in which Mark Zuckerberg expresses concern that the COVID-19 vaccine could change people's DNA.
- [Epoch Times](#) has also reported that Zuckerberg has since said, "my understanding is that these vaccines do not modify your DNA or RNA," but that is not expressed in the video clips.
- While this clip originally emerged in mid-February, as we [covered in Briefing #9](#), the three TikTok videos have gained 23K views since being posted on March 12 and were found by our analysis team this week via TikTok's 'For You' page.

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.

Injury after Vaccine Stories: Images of blood blisters on hands allegedly after receiving Pfizer vaccine used to further safety concerns

- This week, an image circulated of an older man's hands with dark blisters on them. The text in the image states "Blood blisters that appear on the body of a senior after inoculation with Pfizer."
- While the oldest instance of the image on Facebook [is from March 12](#), the image seems to have [been circulating on the internet since at least February 5](#) where it was posted on the prominent Russian social media site VK.

- The image has been shared on Facebook 18 times with a total of 1.1K interactions and 3 times on Instagram. Of the total engagement on all the archived posts, (50~ comments) 60% were people talking about their own experience, which was sometimes similar to the blisters. The other 40% dismissed the posts saying things like “weird”.

Death after Vaccine Stories: Marvin Hagler’s Death Used to Legitimize Fears About COVID-19 Vaccine

- The unexpected death of boxer Marvin Hagler on March 13 was reported by news outlets and prominent figures in the boxing world as connected to his COVID-19 vaccination a few days prior, prompting a new wave of concerns over potential side effects. [This claim has been determined to be false](#), as Hagler died of natural causes.
- The supposed connection with the COVID-19 vaccine appears to have been perpetrated by a former opponent of Hagler’s, Thomas ‘Hitman’ Hearn, who [encouraged his followers to pray for Hagler in a post on Instagram](#). By the time the post was removed and Hearn had issued an apology to the Hagler family, the message had been reposted by several verified accounts across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.
- These verified accounts included retired mixed martial artist Nick Catone (who has a history of anti-vaccine activism) and former baseball player Aubrey Huff, both of whom have opposed to COVID-19 vaccine in recent months and have a combined Twitter following of around 215K.
- **Takeaway:** Similar to the death of baseball player Hank Aaron in January, and local news anchor Karen Hudson-Samuels in February, Hagler’s death has been leveraged to issue warnings to Black communities about supposed vaccine dangers.

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” is from the World Health Organization. WHO Executive Director of Health Emergencies Dr. Mike Ryan spoke about the importance of “bringing together vaccine equity and comprehensive public health measures.” The post garnered 417K reactions.
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is from celebrity Sarah Hyland, who celebrated receiving her first vaccine dose. The post has received 360K likes.
- The top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is from subreddit r/HolUp/ in which a user compared a cartoon of parents poisoning their children to get them to take medicine to the vaccine. The post received over 69 thousand upvotes.
- The top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from Erin at Health Nut News, with over 6.8K interactions. The post shares an article that reports on an announcement from Gov. DeSantis of Florida that vaccine passports won’t be required in the state.
- The top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** was from Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. The Tweet shares an article from Children’s Health Defense covering Dr. Geert Vanden Bossche’s claims that the vaccine will wreak havoc on global health. The Tweet has received over 5.8K interactions.

Appendix

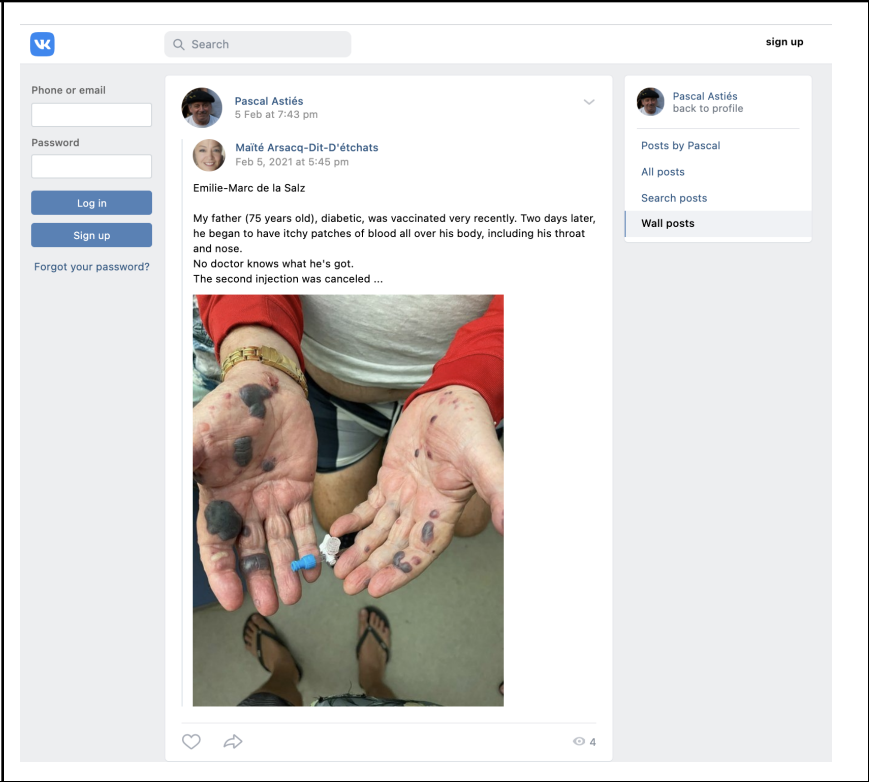
We have included some notable screenshots from the above incidents. More screenshots and assets can be made available, upon request and as needed!

Links	Screenshot
<p>Conspiracies that Moderna’s chief medical officer admitted that mRNA vaccines change human DNA spread across anti-vax telegram groups like this one pictured here.</p>	
<p>Posts from right-wing influencers on Moderna’s vaccine trials for children fueled heated comments expressing concern for vaccine safety.</p>	

Conspiracies emerged from the Moderna children vaccine trials. One video on Bitchute claimed that these trials were part of the “New World Order.”



The earliest post we identified that purported to show a person’s blood blisters after receiving a Pfizer vaccine came from VK.com, a popular Russian social media website, and was from February 5, 2021.



A post from boxer Thomas Hearn on the hospitalization of Marvin Hagler claimed he was experiencing vaccine side effects just before he died. This fueled anti-vax safety concerns.

