



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #11

March 2, 2021 - March 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.

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Key takeaways

- As vaccine rollouts continue globally, **anti-vax activists emphasize false safety concerns using a variety of misinformation** including purported links between mRNA COVID-19 vaccines and cancer, and vaccine deaths in other countries.
- **Online anti-vax communities amplify criticism** from U.S. Catholic Church leaders about the use of fetal material in the J&J vaccine, and updates from J&J about **vaccine trials for pregnant women and infants outrage anti-vaxxers**.
- **China and Russia use social media to promote vaccines developed in their countries**, while criticizing and undermining confidence in U.S. efforts.

Virality Project update: expectations and action plan for health communicators

- Last week, we [published a blog post](#) detailing what to expect in upcoming mis- and disinformation narratives about the safety, efficacy, & distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and suggested strategies for public health communicators to pre-bunk these themes before they take hold.
- First, we adapt to the COVID-19 context the “three C’s” of vaccine hesitancy as established by contemporary vaccine hesitancy literature: **complacency, confidence, and convenience**. We then dive into the **four major categories of vaccine disinformation** which we defined in our earlier policy post: safety, efficacy & necessity, development & distribution, and conspiracy.
- **As additional communities become eligible for the vaccine, misinformation narratives will shift to target different audiences**. We identified four groups that are becoming vaccine eligible in many states and possible disinformation narratives that may target them.
- Moving forward, health officials and other trusted voices should **tailor messaging to communities as they begin to gain access to vaccination**, proactively communicating within communities about how the vaccine works and discussing what to expect when getting the vaccine by showcasing stories from community members.

False anti-vax claims:

This section contains misinformation narratives from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners. We explain where these inaccurate stories emerged from, and how they have spread.

Medical research distorted to falsely suggest mRNA vaccines cause cancer

- An article published across multiple conspiracy websites on March 2nd [claimed that mRNA vaccines can promote cancer](#). These false claims misinterpret research conducted at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center on [mRNA in cancer](#), but that research from 2018 addressed a type of mRNA that is not included in [mRNA COVID-19 vaccines](#).
- The article has spread among anti-vax and conspiracy users across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube. Posts using this article to spread false narratives of safety concerns have received [2.4K likes on Instagram](#) and [3.5K views on Youtube](#). Additionally, articles and screenshots of the articles have 410 likes on Twitter and roughly 272 likes on FB. We consider

this to be moderate engagement as **it is primarily limited to discourse in specific anti-vax and conspiracy communities.**

- A similar message has also spread on Telegram among followers of American QAnon influencer [Jordan Sather](#). Sather’s message was viewed more than 61K times and was re-shared in at least one private Chinese language Telegram group.
- **Takeaway:** The association of mRNA vaccines and cancer spread quickly, as we have seen previously with stories about mRNA vaccines and “breast-cancer-like symptoms” that were interpreted as mRNA vaccines causing breast cancer. Confusion about mRNA technology has led anti-vax and conspiracy communities to inappropriately apply irrelevant research findings on mRNA in other contexts to mRNA vaccines.

False claims that Pfizer vaccines are killing people in Israel spreads vaccine safety concerns in US

- An article from a conspiracy health website resurfaces claims from early February [that death rates in Israel are "skyrocketing" from the Pfizer vaccine](#). The article cites a French doctor claiming that the Pfizer vaccine causes “mortality hundreds of times greater in young people compared to mortality from coronavirus without the vaccine.” [The claims misrepresent data about hospitalizations](#), and deaths in Israel from COVID-19 have been falling since vaccine distribution began.
- This article’s claims are [based on a debunked story from February 2nd](#) which suggested that COVID-19 vaccines are killing people in Israel. It resurfaced this week amidst discussions of Israel’s Green Pass system. The article has over 2.5K interactions on Facebook and has been shared among anti-vax and conspiracy Facebook Pages.
- A far-right website posted another article about this on March 4th which aggregated additional narratives from the U.S. and U.K. to suggest an individual’s risk of contracting [COVID-19 would increase in the weeks after receiving a vaccine](#). This article generated almost 3.5K interactions on Facebook.
- This story has also spread on a Spanish language [alternative news blog](#) and was promoted by filmmaker [Fernando López-Mirone](#), who has [previously](#) spread anti-vaccination content. The blog post received more than 2.9K engagements across Twitter and Facebook.
- **Takeaway:** U.S. anti-vaxxers continue to use this false story of Israeli vaccination efforts leading to deaths as evidence that vaccines are unsafe. Israel has additionally become a focus of anti-vax narratives as it has rolled out its Green Pass system.

Conspiracy communities spread false story about Bill Gates using mosquitoes for vaccines and population control

- Claims that Bill Gates is funding a project that would release genetically modified mosquitoes as “flying syringes” has spread amongst conspiracy groups who commonly allege that Gates created the pandemic for population control. This narrative was in circulation before the COVID-19 pandemic, notably around the Zika virus epidemic.
- While Gates did provide [\\$100,000 to scientists in Japan](#) to study how mosquitoes could be used to deliver vaccines, the funds were awarded in 2008 alongside 104 other grants intended to

encourage research into innovative medical ideas that would otherwise have little chance of development.

- Since the publication of [the story last week by GreatGameIndia](#), it has been copy-pasted by other websites and promoted by prominent conspiratorial figures such as David Icke and Dr. Naomi Wolf. This narrative has been shared by at least 17 Facebook pages and five groups over the past seven days, with a combined audience of almost 300K users. However, this narrative has not broken out of conspiratorial communities.

Online reactions to major vaccine stories:

This section contains key stories from this past week that have fueled vaccine hesitancy as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners. We provide findings on the online conversations surrounding these events.

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ statements calling the J&J vaccine “morally compromised” receive online criticism

- On March 2, the [Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement](#) stating that “if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s” due to the use of abortion-derived cell lines in the development, testing, and production of the vaccine.
- This story has gone viral online [among major news networks](#). The majority of responses on Facebook criticize the Church statement’s potential impact on vaccine uptake and point out potential discrepancies with [Pope Francis’s pro-COVID-19 vaccine statements](#).
- In religious and anti-vax communities, the story has been leveraged to discredit all COVID-19 vaccines. A Facebook post from [a prominent anti-vax activist received 3.4K likes](#), while Facebook [posts across religious Facebook groups](#) have received hundreds of interactions.
- There was a small amount of engagement with this narrative in a Chinese Telegram group where a user advised others to choose another vaccine, if possible. Similarly, a tweet in Chinese, not specific to the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, advised how to [“legally decline a vaccine”](#) that contains the cell line MRC-5 or “fetal material.”
- **Takeaway:** Certain religious groups may be hesitant to receive the J&J vaccine due to the use of aborted fetal cell tissue. We will continue to monitor how core anti-vax communities leverage this divide.

#WeAreTheControl spreads among anti-vaxxers, driven by doubts in unblinded vaccine trials

- Anti-vaccine activists and some wellness/lifestyle influencers who occasionally participate in anti-vaccine activism are using the hashtag #WeAreTheControl to promote the claim that the results of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccine trials are not valid because they were unblinded due to ethical concerns (i.e. the placebo group was offered the vaccine later in the trial).
- The individuals using this hashtag suggest that since the placebo groups for these trials were unblinded and allowed to receive an actual vaccine dose, **they will serve as the control group by**

refusing the vaccine. A [website provides instructions on how to spread the hashtag](#) and text to use as a caption.

- The hashtag has been mainly used by wellness/parenting/natural health influencers on Instagram. The use of this hashtag peaked on March 4th and [has the most reactions on Instagram](#), where there have been 123K interactions for the hashtag in the past week. There have been only 144 unique mentions of this hashtag across Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, which we consider to be low.
- **Takeaway:** This hashtag both casts doubts on the ethics of vaccine safety trials and promotes avoiding taking a COVID-19 vaccine. While it seems this may not be gaining immediate traction, we will continue to monitor its spread.

Concerns about Johnson & Johnson trials on infants and pregnant women

- The announcement that Johnson & Johnson [plans to enroll infants and pregnant women](#) in its clinical trials has raised fears and outrage within anti-vax groups. Online conversations focus on the unknown risks of the vaccine in these populations, with some labeling the trials as child abuse. Some argue that, since COVID-19 is rarely severe in children, [the benefits of the vaccine are not worth the risks](#).
- Some have [suggested that J&J should not be trusted](#) with pharmaceuticals in children because the company was found in 2020 to have [failed to disclose that the talcum powder](#) they produced contained potentially carcinogenic amounts of asbestos.
- Anti-vax discussions have revolved around an [article](#) from Children’s Health Defense, which has received over 18K interactions on Facebook. Reiterating concerns expressed by parents, the article implies that J&J is financially motivated by the large market for childhood vaccines. It additionally argues that herd immunity is not a valid justification for vaccinating children, falsely claiming that herd immunity has not been achieved for any childhood illness.
- **Takeaway:** While the inclusion of infants and pregnant women was welcome news in pro-vaccine groups, anti-vax communities have weaponized the announcement. The anti-vax community’s historical focus on child vaccination will almost certainly come into renewed focus as COVID-19 vaccine distribution to children is approved.

UK lawyer shares COVID-19 exemption letter templates

- Numerous conspiratorial and COVID-19 skeptic Telegram channels have shared letter-writing templates from a UK lawyer who is [providing language for citing exemptions](#) from various virus safety measures such as masks and vaccines.
- While the templates appeal to individual statutes such as laws discriminating against those with hidden disabilities, the letters have been marketed within conspiracy-focused Telegram channels as a form of resistance against governments supposedly using COVID-19 as an opportunity for societal control.
- One link to the templates on Telegram amassed over 120K views and the documents also gained [modest traction on Twitter](#).
- **Takeaway:** The popularity of these letters represents a continuation of the trend for templated mask and vaccine [exemption material](#), and an appetite to protest current restrictions.

Upcoming events:

This section highlights upcoming online and offline events among notable anti-vax activists.

Upcoming: video from Children’s Health Defense targeting Black community

- On March 11, Children’s Health Defense will [release a documentary titled “Medical Racism: The New Apartheid,”](#) which will discuss the history of medical abuse of Black people and instill fears about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.
- The announcement and trailer connect the Tuskegee Experiment, a suggestion made by a doctor to test the vaccines in Africa, and COVID-19 racial disparities to suggest the existence of a pharmaceutical and medical scheme against Black people that includes COVID-19 vaccines. The trailer implies that Black people will be coerced into being vaccinated, and it includes clips of Black community members discussing their vaccine hesitancy.
- Thus far, the documentary has [mainly been promoted by the prominent anti-vax site Children’s Health Defense](#) and the [Nation of Islam](#). The trailer has received 43K views on Instagram, with many affirming its message.
- The documentary shares a similar title and logo to [“Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present”](#) by Harriet Washington, a popular book on medical racism that is not anti-vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** Anti-vax activists continue to exploit the existence of medical racism combined with misinformation about vaccine safety to cast doubt on vaccines. We will monitor the release and spread of this film, and any narratives that may emerge from it.

“World Wide Rally for Freedom” scheduled for March 20th

- Anti-vax channels on Telegram, including the World Doctors Alliance, are promoting a ‘World Wide Rally for Freedom’ which is scheduled to occur in multiple cities around the world on March 20, 2021. In the US, there is an indication such events will be organized in [Kentucky, Florida, Washington State, California, New York, and Hawaii](#).
- Promoters of the events have called for groups to organize locally. Messages from the organizers of the London march gave specific instructions to avoid social distancing and wearing masks.
- While details of the event are still unclear, organizing Telegram channels have over 25K followers. We will continue to assess the spread of these events leading up to March 20.

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.

Chinese state media focus: "fair" vaccine distribution

- Chinese State Media accounts have recently focused on the “fairness” of vaccine distribution efforts around the world. This involves the following narratives:

1. Trumping up the “fairness” of Chinese vaccine diplomacy efforts around the world, in both developed and developing regions. This includes elevating [calls](#) for [fair vaccine distribution](#), promoting the [social good](#) of Chinese vaccine diplomacy, and [lauding](#) Chinese and non-Chinese contributions to COVAX.
 2. Pointing out [inequities](#) in other states’ vaccine distribution regimes. In recent weeks, this narrative has focused on negative public reactions to “VIP” scandals, or instances of graft or self-dealing by politicians in vaccine delivery, particularly in [Argentina/South America](#).
- On Facebook, these narratives are seeing standard levels of user engagement for posts by Chinese state media pages. We consider roughly three of these posts high-engagement, with only one [post](#) denying “narrow-mindedness” in China’s vaccine rollout considered “overperforming” by Facebook’s analytics tool.

Russia continues online efforts to undermine confidence in US-administered vaccines

- On March 7, the Wall Street Journal reported that the State Department’s Global Engagement Center ([GEC](#)) [has identified four publications linked to Russian intelligence services](#) that are actively engaged in attempting to undermine confidence in Western-produced Covid-19 vaccines.
- While some of these outlets were included in a previous report on Russian disinformation, the [State Department had not before clarified the attribution](#) of these outlets as controlled or guided by Russian intelligence agencies.
- The outlets have aimed to exploit anxieties about the efficacy and side effects of vaccines produced by Pfizer and others, often repeating actual news reports while overlooking information about the general safety of the vaccines.
- This strategy appears to be very similar to that of overt Russian state-sponsored media outlets, who over recent months have increasingly propagated stories of adverse side effects of Western-produced vaccines while promoting the efficacy of Sputnik V and its authorization for use in countries around the world.

Chinese dissident Guo Wengui highlights questions of vaccine efficacy

- Dr. Yan Limeng, a dissident Chinese virologist who has claimed the coronavirus was created in a Wuhan lab, was interviewed by LUDE Media. LUDE Media is affiliated with a network run by Guo Wengui, a Chinese dissident who spread disinformation about the 2020 presidential election. Dr. Yan questioned the efficacy of vaccines and suggested people may need booster shots every three months. The [YouTube video](#) of the interview has received more than 85K views.
- [Guo Wengui](#), also known as Miles Kwok and Miles Guo, is a colleague of Steve Bannon. Together, they launched [GTV Media Group](#), which came to some prominence in 2020 for spreading stories about the contents of a laptop supposedly belonging to Hunter Biden. GTV-affiliated content reaches US-based Chinese people, as well as those abroad.

Key statistics

Here we contextualize the above narratives by examining the engagement of other posts from this week.

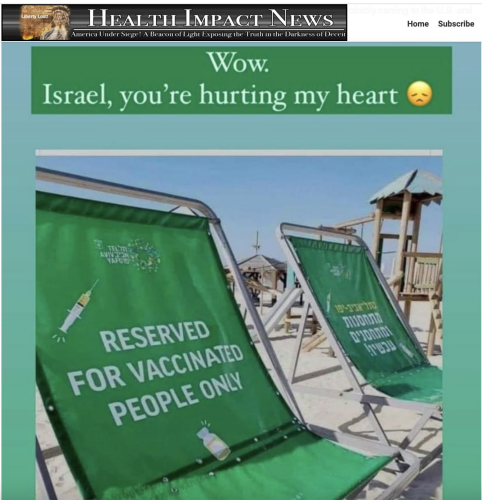
- The top **Facebook** [post](#) from this week containing the word “vaccine” was from UNICEF, with over 950K interactions (reactions, shares, comments). The post celebrates the protection that COVID-19 vaccines have given to teachers, healthcare workers, and loved ones, emphasizing that their immunity will benefit the children they care for.
- This week’s top **Instagram** [post](#) containing the word “vaccine” was from the Brazilian football player Pelé, which shares a photo of Pelé receiving the vaccine. The caption encourages followers to continue to practice social distancing to protect their communities. The post has received over 613K interactions.
- The top **Reddit** [post](#) from this week containing the word “vaccine” shares photos of a couple before and after the vaccine on the subreddit r/funny. In the after photo, the couple is wearing Microsoft hats, presumably satirizing conspiracy theories about Bill Gates’ involvement in the vaccine rollout. The post has received 116K upvotes.
- The top vaccine-related [post](#) from an **established anti-vax influencer on Facebook** was from Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. The post announces the latest reported adverse reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine in [VAERS](#), which include over 1,000 deaths between December and February. The Children’s Health Defense [article](#) that it links to provides a deeper analysis of the reports but admits that causal conclusions cannot be drawn from the data.
- The top vaccine-related [post](#) from an **established anti-vax influencer on Twitter**, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., shares a Children’s Health Defense [article](#) about plans to begin clinical trials in infants for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, discussed above. The article implies that Johnson & Johnson is financially motivated by the large market for childhood vaccines. It also suggests that the unknown risks of the vaccine should outweigh the benefits of preventing a disease that is rarely severe in children.

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 headline of legitimate research from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (right, above) provided the basis for a false story that connected mRNA vaccines to cancer (right, below).</p>	<p>The screenshot shows the top of a news article from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The main headline is "In a Twist, Scientists Find Cancer Drivers Hiding in RNA, Not DNA". Below the headline, it says "By Matthew Tontono, Monday, August 27, 2018". There is a red banner with the text "A FINAL WARNING" and a sub-headline "MEDICAL SHOCKER: Scientists at Sloan Kettering discover mRNA inactivates tumor-suppressing proteins, meaning it can promote cancer".</p>
<p>The above story has spread in private Telegram groups, a platform that allows anti-vax activists and conspiracy theorists to communicate securely to their following.</p>	<p>The screenshot shows a social media post from NaturalNews.com. The text of the post reads: "MEDICAL SHOCKER: Scientists at Sloan Kettering discover mRNA inactivates tumor-suppressing proteins, meaning it can promote cancer". Below this, it says "Big Tech is trying VERY HARD to suppress this article, it's getting wiped from all over Twitter". The post includes a link to the article and a video thumbnail showing a woman in a hospital hallway. The video has 61.5K views and 109 comments.</p>

A false story about Israeli citizens dying after receiving COVID-19 resurfaced as anti-vaxxers discussed Israel's Green Pass system. Anti-vaxxers are amplifying fears about vaccine safety along with pictures like this one to spread concerns about government overreach in the vaccination process.



[This story about Bill Gates using genetically modified mosquitoes to vaccinate people](#) gained traction this week among anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists.

After major news sites reported on the Catholic Church's statements about the J&J vaccine, top comments (by likes) disagreed and pointed out Pope Francis's support for COVID-19 vaccines.

The same story, posted by a prominent anti-vaxxer, received less attention on Facebook. The top comments were frustrated that the Catholic Church had not issued statements on more vaccines in the past.

A screenshot of three Facebook comments. The first comment is from Stephanie Prentiss Houston, dated 4 days ago, with 200 reactions. The second is from Jennifer Kelly, also 4 days ago, with 217 reactions. The third is from Natalie Burkley LoPrete, 4 days ago, with 145 reactions. Each comment includes a 'Like · Reply · 4d · Edited' line and a '2 Replies' or '17 Replies' indicator.

A cartoon [posted by China state-controlled media](#) emphasizes global inequities in vaccine distribution in an effort to elevate China's image.

A cartoon from China Daily, dated March 2 at 6:00 PM. It depicts a large, portly man in a suit carrying a massive tray of vaccines, while a small, thin man in a hoodie carries a single vaccine. The caption reads 'Inequality #ChinaDailyCartoon #vaccine #covid_19'. The post has 878 reactions, 109 comments, and 56 shares.