



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #28

June 30, 2021 - July 7, 2021

This report was created by analysts from the [Virality Project](#), a coalition of research entities focused on real-time detection, analysis, and response to COVID-19 anti-vaccine mis- and disinformation. The Virality Project supports 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

- Anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists are exploiting [online discussions about the delta variant](#) to push **misinformation about vaccine efficacy** and **claims that the delta variant is being overblown to scare people** into getting vaccinated.
- Scientific journal articles have recently been misquoted and misrepresented to **falsely suggest that vaccines are killing two people for every person saved** and **vaccines are decreasing**

[people's antibody levels](#). Inaccurately citing journal articles gives false narratives the appearance of having scientific backing.

- After the ACIP announced that there is an exceedingly rare link between vaccines and mild myocarditis, the [FDA added warning labels to Pfizer and Moderna vaccine inserts](#). Right-wing and anti-vaccine accounts have used this story, [along with a story of a 12-year-old girl who was allegedly wheelchair-bound after her second dose of Pfizer](#), to continue to push back about vaccine mandates and vaccinations for children.

Events this week:

Key events from this past week as identified by our analysts and stakeholder partners.

Uncertainty about delta variant fuels conspiracy theories used to undermine confidence in vaccine efficacy and public health authorities

- Last week the hashtag #DeltaVariant was used at an increasing rate among accounts that Graphika has identified as members of the anti-vaccine and/or the QAnon movement.
- The majority of posts on this topic have leveraged the delta variant to contend that the COVID-19 vaccines do not work.
 - An article from mid-June stated that [close to 30% of the people dying of the Delta variant have been fully vaccinated](#). However, this came from a small sample size of only 42 patients.
 - In Chinese and Spanish, posts to Twitter and Telegram claimed [that vaccines are useless](#), as they did not stop the rise of the Delta variant, though these posts received relatively low engagement.
- Second, anti-vaccine and conspiracy theory accounts have spread claims that the delta variant is dramatized to incite panic and encourage vaccination, often denouncing purported collusion between health authorities and pharmaceutical companies.
 - An [Instagram post from an unofficial Republican party](#) news account called the delta variant fake. The post has nearly 50K likes. Additionally, [a quote from Senator Rand Paul](#) warning people to not let “fear mongers” win has spread online.
 - One Telegram post from an [Australian channel that regularly shares anti-lockdown posts](#), claimed that the delta variant was [being used as a plot to restrict movement](#) and force “poison death jabs” on people.
 - Posts commonly include a [YouTube video](#) claiming that the delta variant is just scaremongering and that it has had no real-world impact.
 - Another [Telegram](#) post in Spanish, garnering more than 4K total views, suggested that the delta variant is not real, but was invented to scare unvaccinated people into taking the vaccine.
- Other conspiracies about the delta variant also spread in Spanish. Posts on [Telegram](#), which received more than 40K views total, claimed that vaccines are behind the rise in deaths, not the Delta variant.
- **Takeaway:** There is an information void surrounding the delta variant which anti-vaccine and conspiracy theory accounts have exploited to further distrust in vaccines.

After FDA adds warnings about rare risk of heart inflammation to Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, coverage in right-wing media used to undermine vaccine safety

- We previously covered the ACIP's conclusion that there is an [exceedingly rare and mild link between vaccines and myocarditis](#).
- The [agency announced that it revised](#) patient and provider fact sheets for the vaccines to include warnings about an increased risk of myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) and pericarditis (inflammation of the tissue surrounding the heart) after vaccination.
- It is important to note that the risk of inflammation is low. There have been [just 12.6 heart inflammation cases per million doses](#) for both vaccines combined.
- Facebook posts discussing these labels received more than 423K interactions since the announcement.
- This has largely gained traction from [right-wing publications](#) and [influencers](#) who have used it to justify claims that COVID-19 vaccines are experimental and to object to potential vaccine mandates.
- For example, a [headline from Breaking911](#), a conservative news site, noting that the heart inflammation warning has been added (a true claim) has been shared multiple times on Instagram with captions that in turn allege that this is just one of many safety concerns. The headline has received roughly 300K engagements.
- **Takeaway:** For a large number of vaccine-hesitant social media users, the FDA's warning appears to support their safety concerns despite the rarity of this condition. Health communicators should **continue to contextualize the rarity and mild nature of vaccine-induced heart inflammation**.

Retracted journal article leveraged to suggest that vaccines are killing two people for every three deaths prevented

- [A now-retracted article published on June 24](#) in the scientific journal Vaccines concluded that "For every three deaths prevented by vaccination we have to accept two inflicted by vaccination."
- [Social media users have coined](#) the meme 'For Every Three Saved, We Kill Two' to further the discredited claim that COVID-19 vaccines are more dangerous than the virus.
- The article attempted to calculate the proportion of vaccine side-effects in the vaccinated population but cites the European Medicine Agency's [Adverse Drug Reaction \(ADR\) database](#) as their source of data.
- EU's ADR, like the CDC's VAERS database, has been used by COVID-19-skeptic and anti-vaccine communities to falsely suggest vaccine side effects are more prevalent and dangerous than the data supports.
- Conservative commentator Liz Wheeler covered this article in her [June 30th podcast](#), which has 38K engagements on Facebook and over 1K on Reddit. The podcast is live on [Apple Podcasts](#).
- This phrase has also appeared in Chinese via at least one public WeChat account, which covers American news.
- **Takeaway:** Reporting databases such as the ADR and VAERS continue to be leveraged to support claims denigrating the safety of vaccines. In some cases, the traditional gatekeepers including scientific journals publish research using these data sources, adding further legitimacy to questionable research.

Research from the Lancet about vaccine efficacy for different variants misinterpreted to suggest Pfizer vaccine lowers antibody levels

- The [original study from early June](#) found that the “Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine produces lower levels of antibodies against the Delta variant” and recommended periodic booster shots to maintain the required level of antibodies.
- The anti-vaccine community misinterpreted these findings to suggest that “[recipients of the Pfizer vaccine have 5x-6x LOWER amounts of neutralizing antibodies](#),” implying that the vaccine is responsible for lowering antibodies.
- In reality, the quote from the original research compares the vaccine response to different variants.
- Anti-vaccine accounts have also shared [selectively edited videos showing one of the researchers](#) appearing to make the same claim.
- The study was also used to argue that if you are vaccinated, your immune system will [no longer be able to handle the common cold](#).
- **Takeaway:** Legitimate research continues to be selectively quoted by anti-vaccine activists. Researchers should think critically about how their work might be weaponized by opportunistic groups and present their findings accordingly.

Ongoing Themes and Tactics:

Ongoing themes and tactics that we track each week including notable vaccine injury stories and overall key statistics about online vaccine discussions.

Children Injury Stories: 12-year-old child Maddie De Garay Alleged to Be Wheelchair-Bound From Pfizer Vaccine interviewed on Tucker Carlson

- De Garay and her two older brothers all participated in the Pfizer vaccine trial. After the second Pfizer shot, De Garay experienced a neurological disorder that made her unable to walk.
- The mother has been outspoken about her daughter’s experience, and De Garay’s story has gotten roughly 151K interactions on Facebook.
- The top posts are from [Fox News](#) and [Tucker Carlson](#), who had De Garay’s mother on his show. The Tucker Carlson video on Facebook has amassed roughly 48K engagements so far.
- Senator Ron Johnson, who held an event on adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines that included De Garay’s mother, [tweeted a video of the mother’s testimony](#). The video has been viewed 574K times on Twitter and has been [viewed over 700K](#) times in [repostings on Instagram](#).
- **Takeaway:** De Garay’s side effects have not been verified to be a result of a vaccine. Still, the tragic and emotional appeal of this story has helped it reach viral attention.

Repeat Offender: Sen. Ron Johnson hosted an event on adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines on June 28

- Senator Ron Johnson [held an event on June 28th](#) in Wisconsin, featuring five individuals who claim to have had adverse reactions following their COVID-19 vaccine.
- Senator Johnson was subject to [criticism from medical professionals](#), who cited the event as irresponsible and a continued campaign from Johnson to undermine the COVID-19 vaccine program.
- When asked about this event on Friday, June 25th, Johnson stated that he is not anti-vaccine and is “just asking questions.”
- Footage from the event, especially testimony from the mother of Maddie de Garay, has spread in Spanish on Telegram. At least eight posts have achieved nearly 200K views.
- **Takeaway:** Senator Johnson and other Republican leaders continue to amplify individual, difficult to verify stories of individual injuries after receiving vaccines. Their tactic of “just asking questions” is often used to avoid social media moderation when spreading COVID-19 vaccine mis- and disinformation.

Key Statistics

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

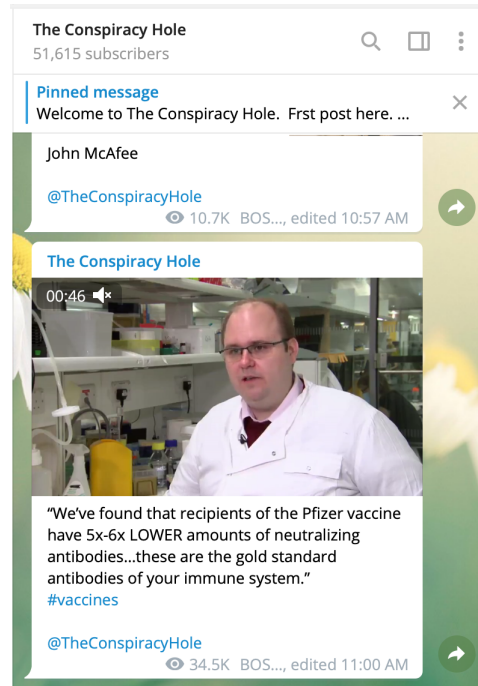
- The top COVID-19 related English-language **Facebook post** containing the word “vaccine” this week is by the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The post shares an interview with Dr. Gitanjali Batmanabane, who claims vaccines and other preventative measures can decrease hospitalization rates. The post received 112.5K interactions (107.6K reactions, 1.6K comments, 3.3K shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by Tamil actor Vijay TV Pugazh documenting his first shot of the Covishield vaccine. The post received 288.7K likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** shared a CBS article reporting that Sandra Lindsay, nurse and the first person to receive a COVID-19 vaccine in the US, will have her vaccination card displayed in the Smithsonian Museum. The post received 76.1K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Facebook** is by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. highlighting CDC's latest guidance on booster shots and hinting that booster shots are driven by profitability motives. The post received 2K interactions (1.4K reactions, 140 comments and 480 shares).
- This week’s top **tweet** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Twitter** is by Dr. Simone Gold, founder of America's Frontline Doctors (AFLDS), supporting anti-lockdown and pro "medical freedom" demonstrations. The tweet received 12.2K interactions (3K retweets, 202 quote tweets and 9K likes).

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>Some posts in Chinese and Spanish claim that vaccines are useless because they have not stopped the spread of the delta variant.</p>	<p>SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern under investigation in England Technical briefing 17 25 June 2021</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Age group (years)</th> <th>Total</th> <th>Cases with specimen date in past 28 days</th> <th>Unlinked</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>All cases</td> <td>92,029</td> <td>79,336</td> <td>11,015</td> </tr> <tr> <td><=50</td> <td>82,458</td> <td>71,311</td> <td>9,892</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>50</td> <td>9,571</td> <td>8,025</td> <td>1,123</td> </tr> <tr> <td>All cases</td> <td>2,406</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>33</td> </tr> <tr> <td><=50</td> <td>2,013</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>25</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>50</td> <td>393</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>All cases</td> <td>3,460</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>51</td> </tr> <tr> <td><=50</td> <td>2,728</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>40</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>50</td> <td>732</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>11</td> </tr> <tr> <td>All cases</td> <td>745</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>11</td> </tr> <tr> <td><=50</td> <td>564</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>50</td> <td>181</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>3</td> </tr> <tr> <td>All cases</td> <td>1,320</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>22</td> </tr> <tr> <td><=50</td> <td>902</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>16</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>50</td> <td>418</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>6</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Age group (years)	Total	Cases with specimen date in past 28 days	Unlinked	All cases	92,029	79,336	11,015	<=50	82,458	71,311	9,892	>50	9,571	8,025	1,123	All cases	2,406	N/A	33	<=50	2,013	N/A	25	>50	393	N/A	8	All cases	3,460	N/A	51	<=50	2,728	N/A	40	>50	732	N/A	11	All cases	745	N/A	11	<=50	564	N/A	8	>50	181	N/A	3	All cases	1,320	N/A	22	<=50	902	N/A	16	>50	418	N/A	6
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<p>A podcast on Apple Podcasts from conservative commentator Liz Wheeler falsely claims that vaccines are killing two people for every one person they save.</p>	<p>Ep. 17: The Vaccine Study You're Not Allowed To See The Liz Wheeler Show Politics</p> <p>Listen on Apple Podcasts</p> <p>Here's the big question today, Will Big Tech censor this peer reviewed study about the COVID vaccine, or will they let you hear the science? You won't believe what this study shows. Also, Republicans in Congress are being idiots about infrastructure, Democrats are trying to destroy America's suburbs as we know them, and, apparently, minority communities have fewer trees—but we can't plant more for them? Plus, you have to see this "oppressive language" list from Brandeis University. This is The Liz Wheeler Show.</p> <p>Become a Liz Wheeler Show VIP to get the full uncensored segment: https://lizwheelershow.com/locals.</p> <p>Never go online without using ExpressVPN. Protect your online activity today with 3 FREE months at https://expressvpn.com/liz.</p> <p>Grow thicker, healthier hair with Nutrafol. Get \$15 off your first month's subscription with the promo code LIZ: http://nutrafol.com.</p> <p>Lila Rose's new book, "Fighting for Life" is playbook for how to truly make a difference in a wounded world. Get your copy today at http://fightingforlifebook.com.</p>																																																																

A Telegram post spreading a false claim that vaccines lower antibodies. This was misinterpreted from a Lancet article discussing relative antibodies for different COVID-19 variants.



Senator Ron Johnson held an event on June 28 highlighting five stories of people who experienced injuries after receiving vaccines. Maddie De Garay's story has received particularly viral attention, though a link between her symptoms and a COVID-19 vaccine has not been established.

