



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #29

July 7, 2021 - July 13, 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.

Upcoming Virality Project Event: This Thursday, July 15th at 10am Pacific Time, join us for a conversation with US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., where he will discuss slowing the spread of health misinformation, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. You can [register for the event here](#).

In this briefing:

Events This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online outrage sparked over “government overreach” after White House press secretary announced door-to-door vaccine outreach. • Vaccine conspiracies develop from persistent uncertainty around the rise of the delta variant • Preliminary responses to FDA’s recent announcement that J&J vaccine can lead to increase in Guillain-Barré syndrome • “Fact check” website and podcast aggregates popular anti-vaccine content
Non-English Language and Foreign Spotlight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RT partners with American conservative talk show to share video alleging that “anti-vaxxers” will be forcibly vaccinated • Chinese-language tweets claim paper warns against organ donations from vaccinated people • Private vaccination centers in India distribute fake vaccines, fomenting mistrust
Ongoing Themes and Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaccine ingredients: narrative spreads suggesting vaccines contain a toxic compound called graphene oxide • Key Takeaways • Appendix

Key Takeaways

- As vaccination rates plateau in the US, the Biden administration's pledge to begin [door-to-door vaccine outreach](#) sparked outrage over “government overreach” particularly among right wing influencers.
- COVID-19 cases and deaths are again rising due to the spread of the Delta variant. Yet as the Virality Project [reported](#) last week, **skepticism about the existence and origins of the Delta variant, its risks, and the vaccine's ability to protect against it, all continue to spread on social media.** This week, we saw skepticism across platforms, driven by a lack of clear scientific information that has been plugged with older conspiracies about the vaccine.
- Capitalizing on [routine concerns](#) that COVID-19 vaccines are somehow poisonous, a Spanish organization spread faux research that the vaccines contain a compound called graphene oxide. The claim was picked up by anti-vaccine and conspiracy circles online.
- **Emerging news:** The FDA issued a warning that the J&J vaccine can lead to an increased risk of Guillain-Barré syndrome. Our analysts are [monitoring the spread of this news](#) and any backlash it creates.

Events this week:

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

Online outrage and concerning jokes about violence sparked over “government overreach” after White House press secretary announced door-to-door vaccine outreach.

- [Jen Psaki announced last week](#) that the administration was focusing on door-to-door vaccine outreach in targeted communities, as well as setting up workplace clinics and urging employers to offer paid time off for vaccination.
- President Biden said that the administration was going to “put even more emphasis on getting vaccinated in your community, close to home, conveniently, at a location you’re already familiar with,” but has not yet disclosed when the initiative will begin or who will administer the shots.
- After the announcement, both “HIPAA” and “HIPPA [sic]” began to trend online, referring to US health privacy laws.
- Users became outraged by what they called “government overreach.” [The Alex Jones Show](#) posted a video referring to the push as a government “strike force” sent in to forcibly vaccinate children. The video garnered over 106K views.
- **Right-leaning media spread content about the vaccine push**, garnering over 425K interactions over multiple posts. Top posts from major sites included [Fox News](#), the [Babylon Bee](#) and the [Daily Caller](#).
- Notably, far-right [Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) (R-GA) compared the push to “Nazi Brownshirts” during World War II, while [Representative Lauren Boebert](#) (R-CO) called vaccine distributors “needle Nazis.”
- **Some of the posts even condoned physical violence.** On [TikTok](#), users acted out scenarios where they assault and chase a worker off their property. On Instagram, several [posts](#) spread a

theme implying residents should shoot federal officials from vaccine programs who knock on their doors.

- Prominent anti-vaccine influencers also responded to the announcement by criticizing the administration: [Dr. Joseph Mercola posted a meme](#) of an armed police squad on Twitter and Facebook (1.4K interactions) and [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s tweet](#) on the subject received over 7K interactions.
- **Key Takeaway:** As seen within the ongoing discussion about vaccine passports, anti-vaccine activists and right wing influencers are using the online discussion about the Biden administration's vaccine outreach strategy to fuel **repeat narratives around "government overreach" and medical freedom. Some of this content is particularly concerning because of its encouragement of physical aggression.**

Vaccine conspiracies develop from persisting uncertainties around the rise of the delta variant

- Last week, the Virality Project [reported](#) on **rising skepticism about the vaccines' efficacy against the delta variant**. This week, we saw the information void on the issue plugged with old vaccine conspiracies and the misuse of scientific research.
- **Some posts focus on the claim that the variant itself is "fake."**
 - Conservative television hosts, including [John Cardillo](#) from the cable show NewsmaxTV and actor Kevin Sorbo, expressed skepticism over the variant, implying that the variants came "out of nowhere" "once the vaccine was out." Together, Sorbo and Cardillo's posts garnered over 44K engagements.
- **Other posts focus on new information from public health institutions about the efficacy of the vaccines against the variant.** This information flow has contributed to initial confusion and concerns.
 - A preliminary study from Israel's Ministry of Health concluded that the spread of the delta variant has resulted in a [drop in the efficacy of the Pfizer vaccine to 64%](#) for preventing infection and symptomatic disease. **The vaccine remains 93% effective in preventing serious disease and death.** The drop also coincided with the end of social distancing measures in Israel.
 - The story gained traction within mainstream US and foreign media as [reputable sources](#) shared the information. Many stories suggest that the delta variant is partially evading existing vaccines.
 - Anti-vaccine influencers shared the news alongside misleading claims about the inefficacy of vaccines, or more conspiratorial claims about planned recurrent COVID-19 variants. Some popular content also referenced a potential [booster shot](#) for the delta variant, which anti-vaccine influencers [folded into narratives](#) about COVID-19 fear mongering and ineffective vaccines.
 - A [technical briefing](#) from Public Health England is also being used on Twitter to claim that vaccines do not protect against the delta variant. The briefing, which has been circulating since the end of June but gained more traction in early July, has amassed around 17K total interactions.

- Viral tweets assert that the variant’s effect on England shows that vaccination is “useless,” has “made things worse,” and that infection rates are higher among people who received two shots rather than one.
- These tweets were also posted on Chinese-language Twitter ([1](#), [2](#)) from accounts that regularly post vaccine disinformation.
- **Key Takeaway: Widespread skepticism about the delta variant is of serious concern to the health of the general public, both domestically and globally.** In this case, variant narratives lean on older tropes about vaccine inefficacy and mistrust of pharmaceutical companies by skews official information from public health institutions.

Preliminary responses to FDA’s recent announcement that J&J vaccine can lead to increase in Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS)

- Prior to the FDA’s announcement, previous chatter about GBS recorded by the Virality Project centered around the AstraZeneca vaccine. On May 6, the European Medicines Agency Pharmacovigilance Risk Assessment Committee [announced](#) it would look into a possible risk of GBS from the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- Since May 6, our analysts have seen minimal leveraging of the EMA’s announcement to undermine other vaccines and few online connections being made between that incident and the J&J vaccine.
- However, on July 12, [The New York Times](#) reported that the FDA issued a warning that the J&J vaccine can lead to an increased risk of GBS. The likelihood of developing the condition is still very rare: J&J recipients are 3-5x more likely to develop GBS than the general population in the US, but only 100 cases of GBS have been identified.
- As of writing, online discussion of this news is just beginning to rise. Mainstream media sources, including NYT, CNN, and the Washington Post, have received viral traction, but no anti-vaccine rhetoric has surpassed 1K interactions.
- **Key Takeaway:** The Virality Project’s ongoing research has surfaced only isolated incidents regarding discussion of neurological disorders as a possible adverse side effect of the COVID-19 vaccine. However, given this new official update and that concerns about neurological effects are always particularly worrisome to the public, information about the update must be conveyed thoughtfully, honestly, and quickly by public health officials. The Virality Project will continue to monitor the spread of this narrative, as our analysts anticipate that it will be leveraged to undermine the J&J vaccine and COVID-19 vaccines more generally.

“Fact check” website and podcast aggregates popular anti-vaccine content

- A podcaster and a website called FactCheckVaccine.com have been aggregating popular online anti-vaccine content and repackaging it with their own branding.
- The site and podcast include content from known anti-vaccine influencers, including [Judy Mikovits](#), [Byram Bridle](#), [Joseph Mercola](#), [Robert Malone](#), and more.
- Spread is limited to a few thousand shares on Telegram, but the methods are noteworthy. The website **co-opts fact-checking language to create an impression of legitimacy** and to degrade the validity of legitimate fact-check organizations.

- Conspiratorial content on the site includes theories previously reported on by the Virality Project: [historical analogies](#) about the Nuremberg code; [“fishy” timelines](#) of COVID-19 vaccine patents; and [faulty links](#) between the deaths of airline pilots and the vaccine.
- The podcast is currently available on [Google Podcasts](#), [Amazon Music](#), [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), and [Overcast](#).
- **Key Takeaway:** This website is part of a broader trend to co-opt and delegitimize the “gatekeepers” of truth online, which include fact-checking organizations, tech companies, subject matter experts, and others.

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

Content in additional languages and content spread by foreign media. The non-English content and foreign state targets users in the US, though may also have international spread.

RT partners with American conservative talk show to share video alleging that “anti-vaxxers” will be forcibly vaccinated

- RT, the Russian state-controlled television network, spread a video titled “Warning! Countries Are Pressuring Anti-Vaxxers To Get Vaccine!!” The video, posted on July 6, states that a “growing number of countries” are “forcing people” to be vaccinated.
- The video is an apparent partnership with the [Wayne Dupree show](#), a conservative American talk show, and also appears on the show’s [website](#).
- The video garnered over 14K views across multiple posts, as well as 8K views on Youtube, and pushes various conservative talking points which include vaccine skepticism and government overreach.
- **Key Takeaway:** RT continues to add to online anti-vaccine discussions in the US by echoing anti-vaccine talking points. This is a concrete instance of RT working directly with right-wing influencers to further their respective online reach.

Chinese-language tweets claim paper warns against organ donations from vaccinated people

- A Chinese-language Twitter account that claims to be based in Germany and often tweets anti-vaccine misinformation recently shared a [letter to the editor](#) published in the American Journal of Transplantation.
- The tweet, which calls vaccination the “global genetic vaccine experiment,” claims that anyone who has been vaccinated should be precluded from organ donation. The tweet cites a risk of passing on vaccine-induced thrombosis and thrombocytopenia (VITT) to an organ recipient.
- The letter’s authors – members of the UK Donor VITT Transplant Study Group – *do* suggest that “liver, lung, pancreas and small bowel transplants from donors with VITT should only proceed in urgent situations.” **Their letter does not, however, state that COVID-19 vaccine recipients should generally be excluded from donation.**
- **Key Takeaway:** The Virality Project has [previously reported](#) on claims that vaccine recipients are subject to a deferral period before donating blood or are barred from donating blood entirely. **This narrative uses similar falsehoods around blood “contamination” to create a similar false**

medical concern. In this case, legitimate sources of information are used to promote anti-vaccine narratives.

Private vaccination centers in India distribute fake vaccines, fomenting distrust

- Local and mainstream media posts, including via [CNN](#), went viral last week after confirming that over a dozen private centers distributed vaccines with salt water and antibiotics to more than 2,500 people in India.
- Mumbai’s local government suspended a hospital’s license in connection to the massive vaccine scam, which is suspected of obtaining around \$35,000 USD from fake shots.
- Media – including viral posts from Russian-state media outlet [RT](#) – reported that both arrests and a police investigation of the situation are ongoing.
- The story was picked up by [The Epoch Times](#), a far-right international newspaper, in a piece that also linked to [CNN’s coverage](#). The Epoch Times’ coverage was also [shared](#) on Twitter by [Pam Long](#) from the popular anti-vaccine parenting group, Children Health Defense.
- The posts peaked with about 23K interactions. Some posts lament the situation, while [others](#) suggest that people injected with fake vaccines are “lucky.” Some [assert](#) this incident was an example of a previously alleged, widely persistent phenomenon.
- **Key Takeaway:** Fraudulent vaccination schemes are extremely rare but can take place, particularly in regions where vaccines are scarce and vulnerable people seeking vaccines are more easily exploited. In the US, where this exploitation is less likely, **legitimate coverage of these incidents of fraud or impropriety can nonetheless serve to reinforce anti-vaccine narratives that we do not know what we are getting in vaccines – especially within audiences predisposed to such narratives because of their shared online networks.**

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.

Vaccine ingredients: narrative spreads suggesting vaccines contain a toxic compound called graphene oxide

- Despite persistent fact-checking in the last several months focused on debunking claims that the vaccines contain dangerous materials – or that they are magnetic or related to 5G conspiracies – a falsified study released by a fringe Spanish research organization, [La Quinta Columna](#) (Fifth Column), has prompted **a new wave of claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain toxic chemicals.** In early June, the group began claiming that they identified a chemical compound called *graphene oxide* in vaccine doses.
- Many of the articles discussing graphene oxide feature prominent Spanish-speaking COVID-19 influencers – some of whom are affiliated with the [Medicos Por La Verdad](#) (Doctors for the Truth) network – explaining that graphene oxide is activated by 5G to produce the COVID-19 virus.

- **The claims were also spread in English-language channels.** A viral segment from the [Stew Peters Show](#) features Dr. Jane Ruby, who makes similar claims that scientists identified that the Pfizer vaccine is 99.9% graphene oxide. Ruby claims graphene causes toxic inflammation, strokes, heart attacks, and blood clots.
- The video has garnered 133K views across platforms and languages, including [Rumble](#) and [BitChute](#). It is receiving [high engagement across social media](#), including on Facebook, where it was mainly shared by medical freedom and anti-vaccine groups.
- Dr. Sherri Tenpenny, a frequent spreader of vaccine disinformation, also shared the video on Gabb.
- **Key Takeaway:** Claims that the vaccine contains poisonous chemicals – now, including graphene oxide – have been debunked by multiple mainstream [organizations](#) and [fact-checkers](#). But they have continued to circulate in multiple languages, including Spanish, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish, throughout anti-vaccine and conspiracy circles online that claim they have new “proof” the vaccine is toxic.

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 a video by the World Health Organization sharing a press conference intervention by Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove. The speech emphasizes the dangerous situation of the pandemic globally and outlines four drivers of transmission, including vaccine inequity. The post received 825.3K interactions (731.9K reactions, 21.1K comments, 72.3K shares).
- This week’s top **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” is by Indonesian media platform Folkative, sharing that the Sinopharm vaccine is available at the Kimia Farma Clinic in Denpasar for 879,140 IDR, or about 60 USD. The post received 172.4K likes.
- This week’s top **post** with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** sarcastically shares a message claiming that vaccines “can be passed on (...) through bodily fluids...like aids” (sic). The post received 36.9K upvotes.
- This week’s top **post** from a **recurring anti-vaccine influencer on Facebook** is by physician Joseph Mercola, D.O, sharing a BBC article about children being at “extremely low risk” for COVID-19. The article relies on findings by University College London, and the Universities of York, Bristol and Liverpool. The post received 4.8K interactions (3.6K reactions, 258 comments and 1K 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), sharing evidence of pro-vaccine bots on Twitter. The tweet received 25K interactions (915 replies, 8.8K retweets and 15K 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>FactCheckVaccine.com, an aggregate site of anti-vaccine content</p>	
<p>Dr. Joseph Mercola's tweet of a meme depicting armed forces as vaccine agents</p>	
<p>SITE Intelligence Group's fact-checking graphic for content spreading about graphene oxide</p>	