Virality Project Weekly Briefing #5

January 20, 2021 - January 26, 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 disinformation. The Virality project aims to support information exchange between public health officials, government, and social media platforms through both 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.

Key Narratives

- California’s pause on using a batch of Moderna vaccines has fueled both the anti-vaccine online community's concerns over the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and foreign state media’s efforts to undermine confidence in US vaccination efforts.
- Currently, the most vocal group driving concerns about receiving a COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant are health freedom Facebook Groups who are using the lack of data about pregnancy and mRNA vaccines as their loudest argument against vaccine mandates.
- The high profile death of Hank Aaron, who received the vaccine 2 weeks prior, as well as detailed descriptions of nurses experiencing paralysis and anaphylaxis after receiving COVID-19 vaccines were used to sow doubt about the vaccine’s safety in wellness and anti-vax groups.

California Moderna Allergic Reaction Story

- Reports from health officials about a cluster of allergic reactions associated with a batch of Moderna COVID-19 vaccines have received attention among anti-vaccine influencers and groups, who perceived the event as validating their claims that the Moderna vaccine is experimental and unsafe.
- Foreign state media outlets have leveraged the event to undermine confidence in the vaccines and processes in place in the United States, in contrast to alleged successes in China, Iran, and Russia. However, this content did not seem to have received high engagement nor was it shared widely outside of their own Facebook Pages.
- Expected Impact: Thus far, the California Moderna narrative has had medium engagement (around 10,000 cumulative likes, comments, and shares on Facebook and Instagram); its spread peaked around January 18th and has mostly been contained within anti-vaccine communities, with some continued spread on Instagram. We expect similar narratives around vaccine safety to surface in the future.
mRNA Vaccines and Pregnancy Concerns

- Producers of accurate information about mRNA COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy are receiving the highest engagement on FB, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.
  - Notably, ACOG’s recommendation has been cited in these posts as reason to believe that receiving the COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant is safe.
- Currently, the most vocal group driving concerns about receiving the vaccine while pregnant are health freedom Facebook Groups who are using the lack of data about pregnancy and mRNA vaccines as their loudest argument against vaccine mandates.
- Two specific VAERS anecdotes of pregnant women having pregnancy complications after receiving the vaccine had high engagement in the last week in natural parenting groups on Facebook and from an anti-vaccine account on Instagram.
- **Expected Impact:** While individual, unverifiable anecdotes of pregnancy will continue to drive vaccine safety concerns in health freedom and anti-vaccine online communities, the successful spread of accurate information among mainstream channels on Facebook and Instagram is an optimistic finding.

Hesitancy in Tier 1 Populations

Among groups included in Tier 1 vaccination programs, stories of individual adverse events continue to be used by anti-vaccine groups to push doubts about safety, however this content has stayed mostly in wellness and anti-vax communities.

Healthcare/Essential Workers

- As in previous weeks, personal anecdotes of healthcare workers having adverse reactions to vaccination continued to spread in wellness and anti-vax communities.
- An article about health care worker vaccine hesitancy has been shared by high profile anti-vaccine Facebook accounts in efforts to legitimize COVID-19 vaccine safety concerns.
- Positive stories about the vaccine on medical Facebook pages received high engagement.
- The most visible content around essential workers and vaccines discuss the speed of the vaccine rollout. This includes posts from official sources communicating local vaccine rollout plans. We did not observe much negative or false content about the vaccine and essential workers.

Seniors

- The death of MLB star Hank Aaron weeks after his high-profile publicized vaccination was used by some prominent anti-vaccine influencers to cast doubt on the safety of the vaccine for African-Americans and seniors.
- The announcement of dozens of deaths in Norwegian nursing homes following vaccination subsequently led to the Norwegian government recommending “frail” citizens hold off on getting a vaccine. This was spun by some in the anti-vax community to cast doubt on vaccine safety for seniors.
- However, counter-narratives dispelling this doubt received high engagement, such as the Mayor of Atlanta’s post on Instagram.
Key Statistics

One key piece of understanding the above narratives is putting them into context of the wider information ecosystems. We hope this section provides some context about vaccine conversations more generally, along with some reference for the relative scale of different narratives.

- Top post on Facebook this week containing the word “vaccine” was from UNICEF, with close to 500k interactions (likes, comments and shares). The post encouraged people to share a photo of themself receiving their COVID-19 vaccine with #Vaccinated. We intend to track the success of this hashtag.

- Top posts on Instagram this week containing the word “vaccine” were from Potus, followed by a video of Arnold Schwarzenegger receiving the vaccine, followed by Bill Gates receiving the vaccine. The posts received 743.5k interactions, 3 million views and 459.9k interactions, and 409k interactions, respectively.

- Top post on Reddit this week containing the word “vaccine” was a post on r/politics about how the Biden admin discovered that “Trump had zero plans for the COVID-19 distribution.” It received 126.3k upvotes and 8.3k comments.

- Top post this week from a known anti-vax influencer on Facebook, Erin at Health Nut News, was a post asking people if they will receive the vaccine. The post shared a CBS News article about health care workers refusing the vaccine. The post received 7.3k interactions (likes, comments, shares).

- Top post this week from a known anti-vax influencer on Twitter, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., was a post about Hank Aaron’s death after he received the Moderna vaccine as part of a “wave of suspicious deaths among elderly.” The post received 19.5k interactions (likes, comments, shares).
### CA Moderna Pause

- **Examples of state media using to highlight US failure.** Articles from state media emphasize adverse effects from Moderna/Pfizer vaccines, such as the California incident, and high number of US COVID-19 cases.
  - China Daily on Facebook
  - RT on Facebook
- **Foreign state media outlets are simultaneously publishing articles on the successes of their own state’s vaccination efforts.**
  - China state media article on Serbia using Sinopharm vaccine.
  - Iran state media describing Iranian and Cuba vaccine efforts despite US sanctions.
- **This content did not seem to receive high engagement nor was it shared widely outside of the state media’s own Facebook Pages.**
Pregnancy Concerns

- Accurate pregnancy info receiving high engagement.
  These cite the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in their recommendations.
  - Facebook
  - Instagram
  - Twitter
  - Reddit
Health freedom Facebook groups push “unknowns” about pregnancy and COVID-19 vaccine as reasons against vaccine mandates.

- Georgia Coalition for Vaccine Choice
  - Minimal engagement (10 reactions, 6 shares)

VAERS instances of fetus death and early delivery after vaccine received high engagement in anti-vax parenting accounts.

- Facebook
- Instagram

Tier 1 Hesitancy

- Personal accounts continue to drive safety concerns.
  - This week, a number of long form stories went viral
    - Instagram - anaphylaxis
    - Instagram - paralysis
- Concerns about Hank Aaron's death after receiving the vaccine
  - **Facebook** Black author and influencer arguing this reinforces racial concerns
  - **Facebook** Robert Kennedy J. (6.7K reactions); Facebook has applied a fact check label to the post.

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Dr. Wesley Muhammad
January 22 at 10:36 AM

Our Brother Hank Aaron - RIP - wanted to be an example and an inspiration to Black People by taking the COVID-19 vaccine. Unfortunately, he may have become a clear example to Black People of why this vaccine CANNOT be trusted. On January 6, Aaron received the first of his two shots of the Moderna mRNA vaccine. In order to overcome Black People's strong "vaccine hesitancy," the Vaccine Mafia hoped to use Aaron (and others) to "send a message to Black Americans that the shots are safe." However, the OPPOSITE message is conveyed. Two weeks after receiving his first Moderna shot, Hank Aaron died in his sleep. No cause of death is given, but you do the math.

#FarrahAnnWarnedUs

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Hank Aaron, baseball legend and former home run king, dies at 86
January 26, 2020

Hank Aaron, baseball legend and former home run king, died at 86.
Robert F. Kennedy, Jr
January 22 at 2:38 PM

Hank Aaron's tragic death is part of a wave of suspicious deaths among elderly closely following administration of COVID vaccines. The baseball legend received the Moderna vaccine on Jan. 5, in an attempt to inspire other Black Americans to step up to the plate and get the vaccine.