



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #9

February 17, 2021 - February 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 disinformation.

This week, we welcome the [National Conference on Citizenship \(NCoC\)](#) and [Graphika](#) to our research coalition. The NCoC team brings a group of Ethnic Media Fellows, bolstering the partnership's ability to identify non-English language vaccine-opposed content. The Graphika team greatly expands the partnership's technical and analysis capacities, and will specifically lead upcoming deep dives into understanding the success of counter-narratives.

Key Narratives and Updates

- The Virality Project released an [analysis of the White House Vaccine Communication Plan](#).
- [Russian state media amplified online discussions](#) about “vaccine passports”. These discussions were mostly centered in the U.K. and Europe and gained little attention in the US, but are related to broader narratives about mandates and the vaccine as a requirement for public participation.
- NBA players’ [hesitancy to participate in a vaccine public service announcement](#) gained widespread attention. Commenters on these posts largely supported the players’ hesitancy.
- Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY) [accused the CDC of misreporting](#) vaccine efficacy for COVID-19 survivors. Now, anti-vax pages are using this to [sow doubt in the CDC and misinform](#) COVID-19 survivors about the benefits of receiving the vaccine.
- As platforms remove vaccine misinformation, right-wing commentators and other anti-vax users [claim censorship](#). After [Reuters reported on the White House’s efforts](#) to curb online misinformation, actors [accused President Biden of colluding](#) with Big Tech for political aims.
- Moderna’s website, which tries to explain its mRNA vaccine technology [via an analogy to “software platforms,”](#) is fueling conspiracy theories about [microchips and DNA altering](#).
- A New York City [waitress was fired after not getting a vaccine](#). The story has spread virally [fueling concerns](#) about vaccine mandates and inflating the possible risk of receiving a vaccine.
- Content in Mandarin and Spanish has promoted [conspiracy theories about Bill Gates’ involvement](#) in vaccine development, equated vaccine distribution with [violating the Nuremberg Code](#), and [raised safety and efficacy concerns](#).

Published this Week: Analysis of White House Vaccine Communication Plan

- This week, we released an [analysis of the White House Vaccine Communication Plan](#). The post reviews the public health and vaccine communication plan laid out in chapter one of the Biden Administration’s [COVID-19 national strategy](#) released in January.
- Drawing on the expertise of government officials tasked with countering election misinformation, and with public health communicators in mind, we analyze the White House’s plan to counter

vaccine misinformation, identifying potential pitfalls and recommended action to effectively empower public health communicators.

- This is part one of our **upcoming series of blog posts written for public health communicators**, focusing on what they can expect regarding COVID-19 vaccine mis- and disinformation on specific platforms as the rollout continues, and how to most effectively “pre-bunk” the most common anti-vaccine narratives.

Foreign State Media Spotlight: Online Concerns over Vaccine Passports

- This week in Europe there was significant debate around “vaccine passports,” documents by which vaccine recipients can prove vaccination, following comments on February 14th from a member of the U.K. government [suggesting they may be implemented for domestic travel](#). Both [Denmark](#) and [Iceland](#) have broached this subject in the past two weeks.
- Although U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson [later clarified](#) that the U.K. was **not** considering vaccine passports for domestic activities, online discourse on the topic has centered around fears that governments would require vaccination to enter supermarkets or other domestic destinations. First Draft News has more information on this debate [here](#).
- Discourse on this topic was mainly centered in Europe, however, a [few posts](#) by [domestic right-wing political influencers](#) in the U.S. echoed the conversation.
- This topic has seen **amplification by Russian state-backed media**, namely RT. These [posts amplified vaccine passport debates](#) while framing the conversation misleadingly, suggesting requiring vaccination for travel or employment “effectively mak[es] them compulsory” and would “create a permanent precedent for state-backed snooping.”
- Russian state media content focused on the debate in the [UK](#), [Denmark](#), [Israel](#), and [France](#), and on Facebook had a combined total of **more than 100k views**, seeing engagement that was **considered “overperforming”** by Facebook’s metrics.
- [Chinese state media also covered this debate](#) but in a more neutral manner.

Safety Concerns from Prominent Groups: NBA Player and US Service Member Hesitancy

- On February 17, news broke that the National Basketball Association (NBA) had reached out to a number of their top players about participating in a public service announcement to promote acceptance of the COVID-19 vaccine. However, [many players have declined to participate](#) and are wary of the vaccine.
- There are currently PSAs with [Hall of Famers Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul Jabbar](#) and San [Antonio Spurs coach Greg Popovich](#), but NBA commissioner Adam Silver believes that the league's top players, who are primarily Black, can better promote the vaccine to Black communities. Players [have not yet agreed](#) and some are hesitant to promote the vaccine due to a range of concerns including about the vaccine's safety (and dissatisfaction with the NBA’s decision to host an additional post-season game this year despite the pandemic).
- Articles from Sports Illustrated and ESPN have spread widely on sports accounts across [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Reddit](#), and [Instagram](#) where posts have received up to 130K views. While the posts themselves are not anti-vaccine, their comments mostly support the players' reluctance,

noting the death of Hank Aaron, referencing the history of medical abuse of Black Americans, and expressing general vaccine hesitancy. (See appendix Images 2 and 3.)

- Just days later, news broke that [a third of US service members declined a COVID-19 vaccine](#), which is not compulsory at this time. Similar to the story of NBA players refusing to participate in a PSA, this story spread widely online with comments on these posts often supporting service members' decisions not to receive a vaccine.
- **Takeaway:** Stories of vaccine hesitancy, especially among high-profile and well-respected groups, **may further legitimize vaccine hesitancy within the general population.** This is of note given [research showing the benefit of emphasizing coverage of vaccine acceptance rates](#), rather than hesitancy rates, in public health messaging.

Rep. Thomas Massie Accuses CDC of Misreporting Vaccine Efficacy in COVID-19 Survivors

- Since December, Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY) has [promoted claims](#) that **COVID-19 vaccines are not effective in people who have previously been infected with SARS-CoV-2**; these claims have been discussed in [right-leaning media](#).
- This week, attention was again drawn to Massie's claims following a [Facebook post](#) sharing a podcast that discussed Massie's investigation into CDC data. It received over 1.5K interactions on a page that often shares COVID-19 misinformation.
- According to the podcast, Massie contacted officials at the CDC to suggest that the [Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' Interim Recommendation](#) remove its statement that the COVID-19 vaccine is effective regardless of previous SARS-CoV-2 infection. A CDC official allegedly [thanked Massie](#) for identifying the misleading statement and said it would be corrected. On January 29, the CDC issued an [erratum](#) that clarified the statement but maintains that the vaccine is effective regardless of previous infection.
- The podcast **accuses the CDC of obfuscating data to mislead the public.** The host argues that the CDC is putting individuals who have had COVID-19 at risk because they are more likely to experience severe side effects from the vaccine. Listeners are encouraged to contact the directors of the CDC and the HHS to demand that the recommendations for individuals who have had COVID-19 be changed.
- **Takeaway:** Since at least 28M Americans have been infected with SARS-CoV-2, **this misinformation could dissuade a significant portion of the population from receiving the vaccine.** Future statements made by the CDC, WHO, or other public health officials reflecting new findings could additionally exacerbate concerns if they are interpreted as contradicting previous recommendations.

As Platforms Remove Vaccine Misinformation, Backlash Among Right-Wing Commentators and Vaccine-Hesitant Users Claiming “Censorship”

- Virality Project researchers continue to see accounts promoting claims that they are being “censored” by social media platforms for discussing the COVID-19 vaccines.
- A TikTok user [discussed having a video banned](#) for questioning the COVID-19 vaccine. The new video received half a million views. The TikTok post also highlighted the vaccine skepticism

from the previous video, which was taken down, demonstrating that **posts discussing censorship can also revive the false information previously actioned on.**

- This week we saw **the censorship discussion take a partisan turn.** [Breitbart News](#) and Fox News host [Tucker Carlson](#), prominent anti-vaxxer [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#), and [foreign media outlets](#) RT pushed similar stories about [the White House's relationship with social media platforms and fact-checkers](#), describing it as a political move to destroy "[free thought](#)" and censor "[factually accurate information](#)."
- [James O'Keefe](#), known for his role in spreading election misinformation with Project Veritas, posted a "leaked" video showing Mark Zuckerberg questioning the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine. The video is strategically cut to show Zuckerberg claiming that the vaccine modifies people's DNA and RNA, a statement that would violate his own Facebook policies. The video was also posted to Instagram where it [received half a million views](#).

Case Study: Moderna Website mRNA "Software Platform" Analogy Fuels Existing Conspiracy Theories about Microchips and DNA Altering Vaccines

- One of the metaphors that Moderna is using to describe its mRNA vaccine is a "technology platform that functions like the operating system on a computer." Beginning in January 2021, Moderna's [analogy of mRNA technology as a "software platform"](#) has been incorporated into social media posts arguing that Moderna's vaccine is not actually a vaccine. The link has been shared hundreds of times on Facebook and Twitter again in the past week and has amassed over 25,000 interactions on Facebook.
- One particular [viral post from Pastor Farag from January 2021](#) with thousands of shares on Facebook argued that Moderna's vaccine is a "software platform" and thus taking the vaccine makes you no longer human. This post is driving the [spread of the software analogy amongst religious communities](#) online which are arguing that the vaccine is incompatible with faithfulness.
- **Takeaway:** Moderna's analogy of their platform as an "operating system" for the body fuels conspiracy theories that vaccines implant microchips in humans. **While the public may still be confused about how mRNA vaccine technology works, using this "software platform" metaphor increases conspiratorial concerns.**

Ongoing Theme: Vaccine Mandates Discussion Continues, Driven by a Story of an NYC Waitress Losing Job after not Getting a Vaccine

- Bonnie Jacobson, 34, [was fired from her job](#) as a waitress in New York City on February 15 for not receiving a vaccine. While she was not opposed to the vaccine, she wanted more information on the vaccine's impact on fertility.
- The story was first published on February 17. Since then, the story has been [published by the New York Times](#), [Good Morning America](#), and other news outlets. Facebook posts mentioning "Bonnie Jacobson" have received close to 150K interactions in the past week, a level of engagement we consider high.
- This story has been framed as confirming the fears of "health freedom" groups who [advocate against vaccine mandates](#). There has been high engagement on this story on [anti-vax Facebook Pages](#) and [local news Facebook Pages](#).

- **The majority of comments across these posts appear to show outrage for vaccine mandates even by private employers and cite vaccine safety and fertility concerns** as reasons she should not have been fired.
- **Takeaway:** Discussions opposing vaccine mandates often highlight and distort the safety risks of receiving a vaccine.

Ongoing Theme: Notable Vaccine Side Effect/Adverse Event Stories

- In a viral TikTok video posted on February 9th, a nurse shows her [Bell's Palsy symptoms after receiving a Pfizer vaccine](#). The video has received 1.3 million views and 145.1K likes. The comments with the most likes **express concerns over the possible connection between the vaccine and Bell's Palsy**.
- The New York Post published an article with the provocative headline "[CA woman, 78, gets COVID-19 vaccine, then suddenly dies of something else](#)." It has received 1,203 interactions [on Facebook](#), which is not particularly high. The story has also been reported on in other major news outlets (NBC News, Mercury News), which have collectively received over 44K interactions on Facebook.
- A New York school district closed on February 11 after several school staff [became sick from vaccine side effects](#) as they received their second dose. A Facebook post by the anti-vaccine page Earthly that saw over a thousand interactions [implies that both COVID-19 and the vaccine cause illness](#), so readers should not get vaccinated.

Non-English Content, Ongoing Narrative: Conspiracies about Bill Gates' Vaccine Motives

- **Multiple conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and his involvement with vaccines** have spread in both [Mandarin](#) and [Spanish](#). These include the conspiracy theory that Gates sees vaccines [as a way to reduce the global population](#), the false rumor that [Gates did not vaccinate his children](#), and that Microsoft has a patent (see appendix Image 8) to mine bitcoin using microchips implanted in humans via vaccines.
- [Tierra Pura published a translated](#) version of a [NewsPunch](#) article and promoted it via [Telegram](#), quoting Gates' CBS News interview in which he says [people may need a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine](#). Gates answered the question in the context of discussing virus variants and different approaches to slowing their spread.
- Many of these same rumors have spread previously in English. Some content being spread in Mandarin and Spanish is partially in English or has been translated from English.

Non-English Content, Ongoing Narrative: Claims that Vaccine Distribution Violates the Nuremberg Code

- Two posts warn health care workers that **giving the COVID-19 vaccine violates the Nuremberg Code**. First, a conspiratorial [Spanish blog post](#) is accompanied by a video from British conspiracy theorist Vernon Coleman (subtitled in Spanish). Coleman falsely states, "Legally, all those people giving vaccinations are war criminals...This is genocide."

- Second, Dr. Kalcker, a Spanish-speaking German researcher with [no medical qualifications](#), has also spread the false rumor that healthcare workers who vaccinate “under duress” are violating the [Nuremberg Code](#). This video has spread on Telegram and Instagram. Kalcker became known earlier in the pandemic for pushing Miracle Mineral Supplement as a cure for COVID-19.

Non-English Content, Ongoing Narrative: Safety and Efficacy Misinformation

- In a video with Spanish subtitles, conspiracy theorist Vernan Coleman [claims that PCR tests are dangerous](#) and can be used to vaccinate unsuspecting patients.
- A blog post from [TierraPura](#) surfaced via their [Telegram channel](#), states that countries are declining the AstraZeneca vaccine due to adverse events and side effects. However, the post lacks important [context](#): “AstraZeneca caused more side-effects than the Pfizer vaccine,” said Melanie Cotigny, communications manager at Saint-Lo hospital in Normandy. “Between 10% and 15% of those vaccinated may have side-effects from this vaccination, but it is only a feverish state, fevers, nausea and within 12 hours it goes away.” There has also been uneven mainstream [news coverage](#) of the AstraZeneca vaccine and its effectiveness.
- VAERS: Spanish language posts surfaced on [Facebook](#) and [Telegram](#) use data from VAERS to spread misleading information about deaths allegedly caused by COVID-19 vaccines. A post in a [Facebook group](#) for Korean immigrants in Mississippi shared similar statistics about deaths from [Children’s Health Defense](#).
- Four posts shared in Mandarin Telegram groups (See appendix Image 9) **claim that DNA and mRNA vaccines are “gene therapies”** that will alter recipients’ DNA. These posts reference known bad actors, including Dr. Judy Mikovits and [Dr. Carrie Madej](#).
- A since-removed Facebook [post](#) in a group for Korean immigrants shared a post from an [acupuncture blog](#) warning, “nobody knows who will be the next victim” of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Key Statistics

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

- The top public **Facebook post** from this week containing the word “vaccine” was from the WHO, which includes a video affirming the safety of the vaccine and explains what to expect if side effects occur. It has received over 770K reactions.
- This week’s top public **Instagram post** containing the word “vaccine” was from the @POTUS account. The post shares a video of Biden answering questions from Twitter, including about his plans to increase vaccine production. It has over 1.64M plays and 219K likes.
- The top [post](#) with the word “vaccine” on **Reddit** is from [/r/news/](#). The post links to a [CNN article](#) reporting on a Florida county commissioner who prioritized residents from wealthier areas in vaccine distribution. The post has received over 40K upvotes.
- The top [Tweet](#) from a **recurring anti-vaccine activist**, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, criticizes Bill Gates for censoring “vaccine safety advocates” and for his suggestions that a third vaccine might be needed to provide immunity against the new coronavirus variants. The Tweet, which has received 12K interactions, links to a Children’s Health Defense [article](#) attacking Gates for focusing too heavily on a vaccine as the solution to the pandemic.

- The top [post](#) from a **recurring anti-vaccine activist on Facebook** was from [Erin at Health Nut News](#). The post shares a link to a [CBS News](#) article about statements made by Bill Gates suggesting that further vaccines might be needed for the new coronavirus variants. It has received 11K interactions.

Appendix

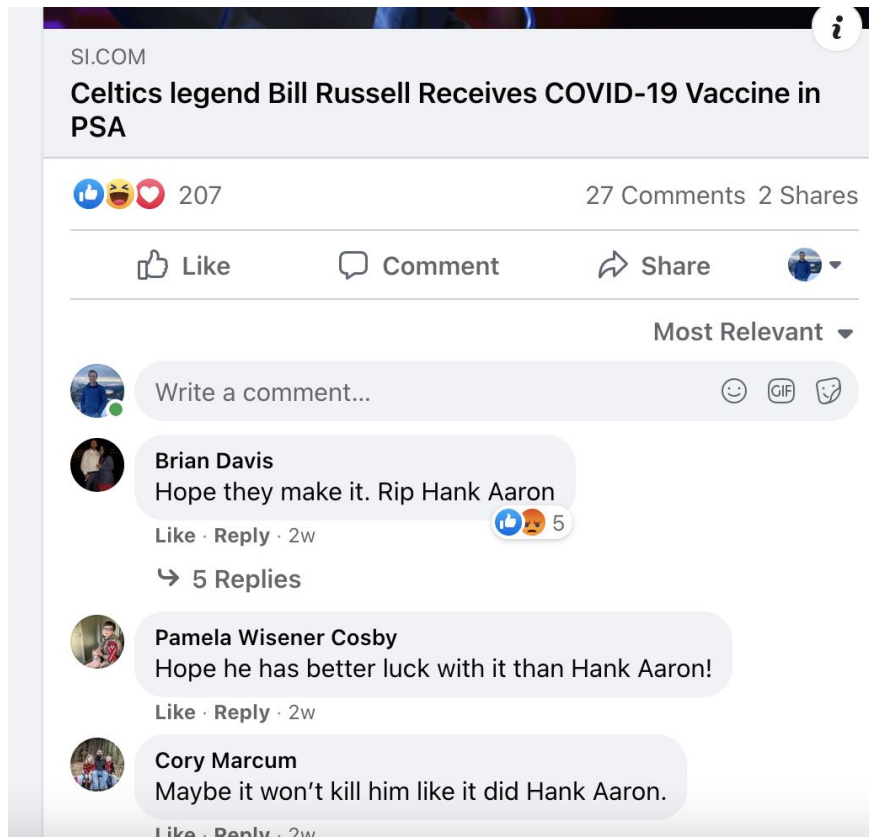
We have included some notable screenshots from the above incidents. More screenshots and assets can be made available, upon request and as needed!

Links	Screenshot
<p>1. Vaccine Passport discussions were amplified by Russian state media.</p> <p>While these discussions focused on Europe, US right-wing commentators also promoted the discussion. These posts emphasized potential violations of freedom.</p>	

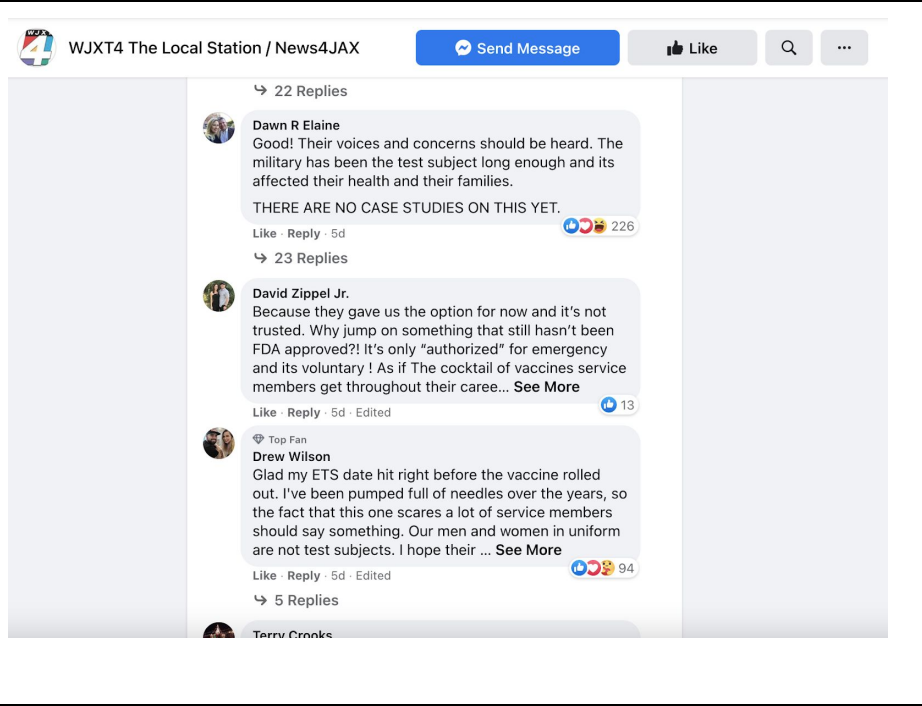
2. News of NBA players' reluctance to participate in COVID-19 vaccine PSAs created space for people to express vaccine hesitancy in the comments. Here, [one user mentions the Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#).



3. Other comments [referenced baseball star Hank Arons](#), who died seventeen after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. Before his cause of death was announced, [some online linked his death to the vaccine](#).



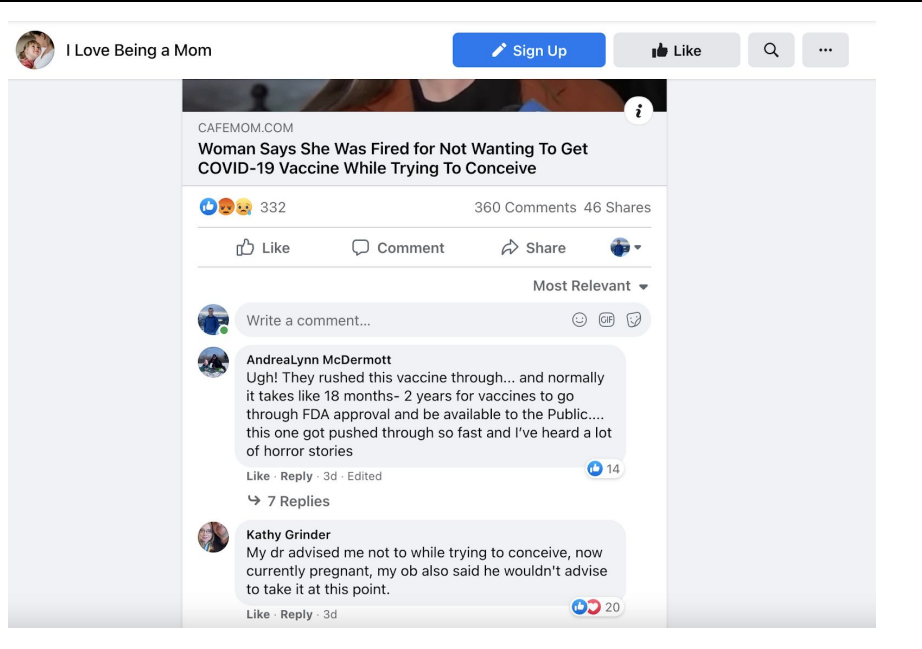
4. Similarly, [comments on an article about service members refusing the vaccine](#) expressed safety concerns given a perceived lack of testing. Here, users support service members' decision not to receive the vaccine commenting "the military has been the test subject long enough" and "the fact that [a COVID-19] vaccine scares a lot of service members should say something."



5. Rep. Thomas Massie's claims that CDC is wrong about vaccine effectiveness in COVID-19 survivors are [being used to sow doubt in the CDC and misinform](#).



6. Bonnie Jacobson's story about getting fired for not getting a COVID-19 vaccine angered many across the internet. Fears of vaccine mandates often lead to the risks of receiving a vaccine getting elevated. Here, a user commented, "[they rushed this vaccine through](#)".



<p>7. A viral TikTok of a nurse experiencing Bell's Palsy supposedly after a COVID-19 vaccine fueled safety concerns. In one comment with thousands of likes, a user notes “Exactly why I won’t be taking an experimental vaccine...”</p>	
<p>8. Non-English Content: Multiple conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and his involvement with vaccines have spread in both Mandarin and Spanish.</p>	
<p>9. Non-English Content: Four posts shared in Mandarin Telegram groups claim that DNA and mRNA vaccines are “gene therapies” that will alter recipients’ DNA.</p>	