



Virality Project Weekly Briefing #26

June 16, 2021 - June 22, 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

- **Safety concern stories were prominent across platforms this week.** Some called attention to concerns around blood clots by falsely stating that airlines have warned vaccinated people not to

take airplanes due to a risk of clots, while others emphasized ongoing concerns of myocarditis in young people.

- The Cleveland Clinic study ([covered in last week's briefing](#)) that shows the vaccine does not significantly reduce the risk of COVID-19 for those previously infected with the virus was shared by Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY) to further claims about “natural immunity”, potentially delegitimizing CDC guidance.
- A **tweet from NFL player** Cole Beasley and, separately, the **rollout of California's vaccine verification** system, each reignited discussions about vaccine choice and medical freedom. These discussions continue to connect vaccines with the limiting of personal freedoms.
- A new set of terms has [popped up on Instagram](#) to label pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine users, co-opting the language of “body confidence.”

Events this week:

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

NFL player Cole Beasley posts viral personal statement about his choice not to get vaccinated

- In a series of [Twitter posts from June 18](#), Buffalo Bills wide receiver Cole Beasley took a strong stance against the National Football League and the NFL Players Association's [updated COVID-19 protocols](#), which now allow vaccinated players to go back to pre-pandemic activities while unvaccinated players must continue playing under restrictions from the 2020 season.
- Beasley said he would rather retire than get vaccinated. He drew on common **medical freedom language**: “That is MY CHOICE based on MY experiences and what I think is best... I'll get to live freely.”
- He alluded to the belief that immunity conferred by the vaccine is not as protective as “natural immunity,” stating that he would prefer to “take my chances with Covid and build up my immunity that way.”
- Beasley's Twitter statement has received over 115K engagements, with primarily critical comments.
- A Fox News repost has been met with a different response: their Instagram post has over 118K engagements, with most commenters supportive of Beasley's decision and some expressing that they wish other athletes would take the same stance publicly.
- Beasley [states](#) that other players agree with him, but are unable to speak out in the way that he can as a veteran player entering his 10th season.
- **Takeaway:** Prominent athletes have the potential to influence public opinion, and the speaker's perception of a lack of risk to himself as a healthy man may resonate with his fan base. Beasley frames what is a broader statement about the league as a personal statement describing his own views and experiences. **Regardless of intention, he employs language used in both the medical freedom community and the “natural immunity” narratives to make his point.**

Representative Thomas Massie uses Cleveland Clinic study to allege, counter to CDC guidance, that previously-infected people do not need the vaccine

- Last week, the Virality Project [reported on a new Cleveland Clinic study](#) which found that previous infection with COVID-19 confers the same level of immunity as vaccination.
- Citing the [Cleveland Clinic's findings](#), Rep. Massie (R-KY) went on [Fox News Primetime](#) to discuss the topic. Massie stated that the CDC knew the information six months ago and has been giving “bad advice.” He claims that even the director of the CDC personally agreed when Massie told him that there was “no benefit from the vaccine to those with prior infection.”
- Massie also calls the vaccination of children “[a sacrifice to save older adults.](#)” stating without evidence that the vaccine is “more likely to harm young children.”
- Massie’s Fox News interview has gone viral, with 393K Facebook views amongst right-leaning circles.
- At a press conference days later, Massie [scolded a reporter](#) who asked him if he was vaccinated and also stated [he would not get vaccinated](#) until there is evidence the vaccine improves immunity after COVID-19 infection.
- **Takeaways:** For months, Dr. Anthony Fauci and the CDC have recommended that even those previously-infected with COVID-19 should receive the vaccine, but there is little information articulating why the vaccine would confer benefits to that group. New scientific findings are being leveraged to deepen mistrust in public health experts and to advocate for certain people not to get the vaccine. Massie’s comments are also significant because he frames **children as symbolic pawns in the vaccination campaign.**
- Whether or not this is a case in which scientific consensus is changing, “**natural immunity**” is a **key narrative and source of uncertainty not only among anti-vaccine activists but also among the questioning and hesitant.** That uncertainty must be addressed by experts and openly and responsibly communicated to the public.

California introduces digital vaccine verification system, igniting pushback from online medical freedom groups

- California Governor Gavin Newsom announced the state [would roll out a new “vaccine verification system”](#) called the Digital COVID-19 Vaccine Record.
- A CrowdTangle keyword search for “California vaccine verification” shows over 24K engagements on Facebook. Some posts call the system a “violation of constitutional rights,” and claim this is another way for the government and Big Pharma to obtain personal information and bioinformation.
- Others are concerned that businesses could enforce requirements related to the vaccine verification system.
- **Takeaway:** With California joining New York in introducing vaccine verification systems, **we can expect pushback from anti-vaccine influencers to any form of vaccine verification**—anything that seems like it may share qualities with a “passport” system. There will likely be more news and rhetoric as California releases more information about the state-developed digital card and people begin to sign up.

Far-right media personality coins terms “body confident” and “pharma-philes” to support anti-vaccine movement online

- A [June 12 Instagram post](#) by Katie Hopkins, a British media personality and far-right political commentator, suggests obscure labeling for anti-vaccine communities.
- Hopkins states, “you’re not an anti-vaxxer, you’re **body confident**.” She suggests that people who do not take the vaccine “trust in the body’s ability to take care of itself”, while people who “love the COVID jab... could be called **pharma-philes**, because they love big pharma.”
- Hopkins then goes on to equate pharmaceutical companies with pedophiles. “Just like the word pedophiles,” she says, “these pharma-philes also want to fiddle with our children.”
- The video garnered over 113K views.
- **Takeaway:** New language and phrasing helps anti-vaccine narratives take off, as users identify with the language and use it in their own posts. Here, we see an influencer like Hopkins using her platform to **parrot older tropes** like “terrain theory” (trusting in the body’s ability) while also coining new terms that analysts will be looking out for in the coming weeks or months.

Non-English and Foreign Spotlight:

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

NOTE — Foreign Language Fellows at NCOF following foreign language content have found that the volume of anti-vaccine content in both Spanish and Chinese has **slowed in recent weeks**. While content continues to spread, our partners have recorded **significantly less novel material**.

False article furthers ongoing safety concerns by stating airlines have warned vaccinated people not to fly due to potential blood clotting

- A widely-shared [article](#) from this week claims airlines in Spain and Russia have warned vaccinated people not to travel because vaccines lead to blood clots—also known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT).
- DVT is a [known risk of long-haul travel](#).
- Fact checks from [Reuters](#) and [the Associated Press](#) fact-check concluded there is **no evidence that airlines met to discuss any risks associated with carrying vaccinated passengers** and there is **no evidence to show flying increases vaccine-induced blood clot risk**.
- The claims may have originated from a May 27 tweet, which spread to Facebook and Instagram. The tweet, which comes from an “anti lockdown” and “freedom of speech lover” account, has since been flagged by the platforms as misleading.
- Another Tweet also added that flying after taking the vaccines could lead to paralysis.
- These posts have accumulated several thousand interactions across the three platforms (7.8K on Instagram, 8K on Facebook, and 1K+ on Twitter).
- Chinese language [Twitter accounts](#) reshared the [news stories](#). The stories appear to have been aggregated by an [independent blog](#) that often spreads misinformation. The blog’s stories were picked up by Sky News (UK) and spread on social media, including at least one [version](#) subtitled in Chinese with more than 7K views.

- **Takeaway:** Anti-vaccine narratives around blood clots and neurological disorders, like Guillain-Barre Syndrome and paralysis, are seeing traction across multiple platforms in multiple languages. In this case, the narrative is used to stoke fears around air travel.

Spanish-language video claims vaccines are the “mark of the beast” because they contain material from abortions

- A [video](#) spreading on Facebook in Spanish claims that COVID-19 vaccines are the “mark of the beast” because they contain material from aborted fetuses.
- The cell lines mentioned in the video are HEK-293, MCR-5, and PER.C6, all of which derive from aborted fetuses.
- The video acknowledges that the **Vatican has deemed the COVID-19 vaccine morally acceptable**. However, it shows other faith leaders in the Catholic and Episcopal churches referring to the fetal tissue as “niños asesinados” (murdered children).
- The video has been viewed more than 771K times and has more than 31K additional engagements.
- The video was shared by Facebook page [FProphecy](#), which has 49K followers and often shares religious and conspiratorial content.
- **Takeaway:** In April, the Virality Project [reported](#) on this popular and conspiratorial anti-vaccine narrative, which equates vaccination (and vaccine passports) with the religious concept of a “mark.” In English, **fears have also been stoked around the vaccine containing toxic materials or materials from aborted fetuses**. Here, we see the narratives being combined to become even more inflammatory, especially when directed towards Spanish-speaking, pro-life, and religious communities.

Bolsonaro supporters share misleading vaccination claims to push back against vaccine passports

- On June 10, the Brazilian Senate [unanimously approved a bill](#) which would allow for the creation of a vaccine certificate, called the **Certificate of Immunization and Health Security**.
- The bill will be voted on by Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies in coming days, despite President Jair Bolsonaro’s [explicit statement](#) that he would veto the bill if it were approved by Congress.
- Bolosonaro supporters used the hashtag #PassaporteDaVacinaNao (#NoToVaccinePassports) to criticize the bill and spread general anti-vaccine narratives.
- Their videos included [claims](#) that health certificates would harm the constitutional freedom of movement, give the government [too much control](#) over people’s bodies, or create “[vaccine apartheid](#)” between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. Others claimed this was the government attempting to [force](#) people to take “[experimental](#)” vaccines.
- **Takeaway:** Brazilian President Bolsonaro continues to wield considerable influence online, and his supporters are a powerful vector for amplifying COVID misinformation.

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.

VAERS data continues to be misconstrued as video claims CDC removed 150K deaths from website

- This week, a video quickly spread that claimed the CDC had removed evidence of 150K COVID-19 vaccine-related deaths from the VAERS database, declaring this so-called removal “vaccine genocide.”
- The video primarily spread on alternative platforms, including [Brighteon](#) (over 77K views) and [Telegram](#).
- The video shows apparently-missing entries in the VAERS database. It shows a list of historical records of vaccine injuries before running a live search of those same records in the VAERS database, which returns empty results.
- Screen recordings of VAERS queries also attempt to show that authorities are scrambling to cover up evidence by replacing records of deaths with records of non-lethal reactions.
- Despite alternative platforms being used as the primary vectors for spread, the video can also be found on [Reddit](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [elsewhere](#).
- **Takeaway:** Due to the **perceived legitimacy of the VAERS platform, despite the issues with the crowd-sourced data it uses**, VAERS continues to be a rich source for anti-vaccine activists to draw on to erode confidence in vaccines.

Parents using limited number of myocarditis cases to spread vaccine hesitancy through the personal story of Simone Scott, a young woman who died from causes unrelated to her vaccination

- The CDC is currently [investigating a small number of myocarditis cases](#) in young men who received Pfizer or Moderna vaccines.
- Anti-vaccine groups are **using this investigation to legitimize broader claims about vaccine safety** through [lawsuits](#) calling for the FDA to suspend vaccine emergency use authorizations.
- This week, our analysts found that content was often presented from the **perspective of parents** who regret allowing their children to be vaccinated, claiming their children experienced heart inflammation.
- Much of this recent content has centered the [story of Simone Scott](#), a college freshman who died from heart transplant complications on June 12. Her transplant was [necessitated by pneumonia](#), and Northwestern University confirmed the virus Scott had was not COVID-19.
- A local article from June 15 misleadingly states that Simone Scott’s cause of death remains a [“medical mystery.”](#)
- Anti-vaccine and COVID-skepticism influencers, including Alex Berenson, have [suggested](#) that Scott’s death was caused by her second dose of the Moderna vaccine. In a Twitter thread about Scott that received over 14K interactions, Berenson points to Israel’s “high rates of cases of mRNA vaccine-related myocarditis in young people” to blame the vaccine for Scott’s illness and death.

- Scott's story has been exploited by other anti-vaccine activists such as influencers like [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#) Right wing pundits including [Charlie Kirk](#) have also contributed to the staying power of this narrative. [RFK Jr's Tweet](#) about Scott's death received 4K interactions while Kirk's Tweet received over 20K interactions.
- **Takeaway:** Despite a lack of underlying data and the need for conclusions and evidence from expert health sources, personal testimony around the myocarditis narrative has been amplified by influential individuals and organizations, sustaining the popularity of the narrative. Simone Scott's death has also been utilized as a **sensational "medical mystery" story, overdramatizing concerns.**

Key Statistics

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

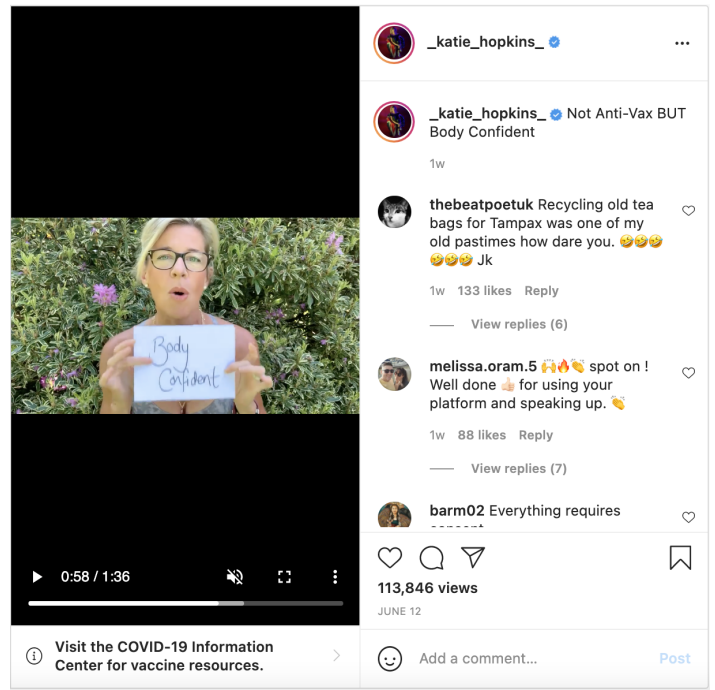
- The top COVID-19 related English-language **Facebook post** containing the word "vaccine" this week is a communication by the World Health Organization, highlighting the importance of getting all recommended vaccine doses. The post received 183.6K interactions (146.3K reactions, 12.5K comments, and 24.8K shares).
- This week's top **Instagram post** containing the word "vaccine" is a parodic meme shared by Donald Trump Jr., representing actress Rachel Dratch in Saturday Night Live's skit "The Siamese Twins," with an arm sprouting out of her head. The caption reads "Raise your hand if you got the vaccine." The post received 202.1K likes.
- This week's top **post** with the word "vaccine" on **Reddit** is a photo testimony of a man sharing his decision to get vaccinated despite having been previously "misinformed" about the vaccine. The post received 63.5K upvotes.
- This week's top **post** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook** is by physician Joseph Mercola, D.O., sharing his article titled "Fear is Contagious and Used to Control You", claiming governments have fostered fear of the COVID-19 epidemic to control populations. The post received 4K interactions (2.9K reactions, 176 comments and 943 shares).
- This week's top **Tweet** from a **recurring anti-vax influencer on Twitter** is by Dr. Simone Gold, founder of America's Frontline Doctors (AFLDS), condemning the moderation of her accounts by major platforms and sharing a link to the AFLDS website. The tweet received 24.7K interactions (554 replies, 6.9K retweets and 17.2K 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>Replies to NFL Player Cole Beasley's Tweet about not getting a vaccine largely criticized his claims. However, his comments were well received in anti-vaccine and right wing communities online.</p>	

British media personality Katie Hopkins posted a video on Instagram to rebrand her anti-vaccine views as being “body confident.”



A video spread this week claiming that the CDC removed 150K deaths from VAERS. The video has gained traction on Telegram.

