Virality Project Weekly Briefing #32

July 27, 2021 - August 3, 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.

Please note that this is our last official briefing. Our analysts will be continuing internal monitoring and sending out newsletters and blog posts with some of our analysis.

In this briefing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events This Week</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online discussion of breakthrough cases and vaccine efficacy</td>
<td>confounds and worries the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Media coverage lacking accompanying health guidance leaves</td>
<td>room for anti-vaccine influencers to use leaked CDC internal</td>
</tr>
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<td>slides to undermine confidence in vaccine efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gab CEO Andrew Torba claims military members are being</td>
<td>forced to take the vaccine or court-martial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leaked Pfizer contract prompts decontextualized claims regarding</td>
<td>Ivermectin and vaccine injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivermectin and vaccine injury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ongoing Themes and Tactics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A small number of NFL players opposing vaccines are driving</td>
<td>online debates about vaccine mandates among sports fans and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online debates about vaccine mandates among sports fans and</td>
<td>right wing accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right wing accounts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Key Statistics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appendix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Takeaways

• Online discussion heavily featured confusion around the Delta variant, the efficacy of vaccines against it, and popular breakthrough case stories.
• Internal document leaks – from both the Centers for Disease Control and Pfizer – were once again manipulated to suggest the government is involved in cover-ups around vaccine development, efficacy, and distribution.
• Military officials weighed imposing a COVID-19 vaccine mandate after President Biden ordered the forces to begin developing a plan to make the vaccine mandatory. In response, the CEO of the alt-social media platform Gab, Andrew Torba, spread misinformation-laden documents for vaccine exemption.
Events this week:

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

Online discussion of breakthrough cases and vaccine efficacy confounds and worries the public

- Reports of vaccinated people contracting the virus, including a widely-reported outbreak in Provincetown, Massachusetts, have helped aid the rise of an anti-vaccine narrative that breakthrough cases mean the vaccine is not working, which is not true.
- Mainstream coverage of superspreader events and stories of celebrities contracting or spreading the virus despite full vaccination have gotten attention. These are often pro-vaccine stories that urge additional caution because of the high infectiousness of the Delta variant.
- Major anti-vaccine influencers, including Earthly and Joseph Mercola, have used the opportunity to shed doubt on vaccine efficacy.
  - Mercola implied that breakthrough cases are actually “vaccine failures,” and that health communicators are using the term “breakthrough case” to prop up COVID-19 vaccines and pharmaceutical companies’ reputations.
  - Mercola’s posts regularly go viral; this one likewise received high traction, with a collective 4K interactions on Facebook and Twitter.
- With new information coming out regularly about the Delta variant’s effect on vaccine efficacy, different studies and news outlets have chosen to emphasize different numbers about efficacy: some efficacy rates show symptomatic infection, others show hospitalization, and others show severe illness. The overall “efficacy” of a vaccine can thus be confusing to the public.
  - Anti-vaccine accounts have picked up these varying numbers to highlight the ones that look the worst, using them to prove the vaccines are not effective whatsoever or not worth getting.
- In at least one conspiratorial Chinese-language Telegram channel that has repeatedly spread anti-vaccine content, users attacked Dr. Fauci and the CDC’s updated mask guidance, claiming that the Delta variant is a “fictional” ploy to mandate vaccines. The post was seen by at least 5.4K users.
- **Key Takeaway:** Breakthrough cases are happening, and they are of serious concern. Though they represent an important reason to get the vaccine, anti-vaccine activists use the term to suggest the opposite: that the vaccine is ineffective and that major public health institutions are deceiving the public about it. **Public health communication must include clear statistics and guidance around the Delta variant, its level of infectiousness, and rates of breakthrough cases broken down by symptoms, illness, and hospitalization.**

Media coverage lacking accompanying health guidance leaves room for anti-vaccine influencers to use leaked CDC internal slides to undermine confidence in vaccine efficacy.

- On July 29, internal slides from a CDC meeting, which were obtained by NBC and first published by The Washington Post, contain still-unpublished data that reveals vaccinated people who
contract COVID-19 may have a similar viral load compared to unvaccinated people who contract the virus. The slides give a justification for the agency’s change in mask guidance last week. The agency now recommends unvaccinated and vaccinated people wear masks indoors in areas with high transmission rates.

- The data has been reported within both mainstream and alt-social media platforms. On the alt-right platform Gab, some users have suggested that the COVID-19 vaccine itself spreads COVID-19.
- This has also gotten attention on anti-vaccine and right-leaning conspiratorial Telegram channels in Spanish. Their posts reached at least 100K users.
- Anti-vaccine channels and publications are using this data to undermine confidence in the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines by leaving out important context that vaccinated individuals still have a much lower likelihood of getting infected. Right-leaning Facebook accounts reshared a screenshot of a USA Today article that leaves out the same important context.
  - The screenshots also circulated on Instagram, where two posts re-sharing them amassed over 20K engagements.
- Key Takeaway: Leaked public health information lacks trustworthy accompanying health messaging, and mainstream media reporting on the leaked information can likewise fail to include crucial guidance. Anti-vaccine accounts can then more easily characterize the information as evidence that COVID-19 vaccines do not work.

Gab CEO Andrew Torba claims military members are being forced to take the vaccine or face court-martial

- The posts come at a sensitive time for the military’s vaccination plan. Military leaders are racing to vaccinate troops without issuing an order, while the White House called on the Defense Department to look into “how and when” it might mandate a vaccine for military members.
- Torba’s post claims he is “getting flooded” with text messages from military service members who are being forced to take the COVID-19 vaccine or else face court-martial as a consequence of their refusal.
- The main post has amassed around 10K engagements, which is very high for the platform. Subsequent posts containing screenshots of text messages also have engagement in the thousands.
- Torba also wrote a post on Gab’s news site with links to a variety of documents to help service members request vaccine exemptions on religious grounds, citing the use of aborted fetal cell lines in the development of the “experimental” vaccines – an old, common anti-vaccine talking point.
  - The documents include misinformation about the vaccines.
  - This post garnered around 10K interactions on Facebook.
  - The documents are being shared in the QAnon community.
- Key Takeaway: Torba uses his position to combine anti-mandate rhetoric with vaccine misinformation for a large and dedicated audience. His posts are especially significant given the mainstream media’s concurrent coverage of the unfolding debate and announcements about a potential vaccine mandate within the military.
Leaked Pfizer contract prompts decontextualized claims regarding Ivermectin and vaccine injury

- Excerpts from a Pfizer purchasing agreement were leaked via a viral tweet “exposing” the company. Posts were often accompanied by the hashtag #PfizerLeaks.
- The documents appear to have been originally shared by Ehden Biber, who allegedly obtained the document from the Albanian government. It is unclear how the documents were obtained. The original thread was removed, although a URL of an archived version of the thread has also circulated among anti-vaccine accounts.
- Joseph Mercola shared the excerpts in two tweets that emphasized two parts of the contract: the company’s indemnification from harm and that long-term efficacy and adverse effects of the vaccine are unknown. The tweets received over 3K engagements, with most comments discussing that the vaccines should not be mandated.
- **Key Takeaway:** Vaccine purchasing agreements, including price per dose, have long been the subject of anti-vaccine scrutiny. This leak, though new, does not represent a major shift in discourse.

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.*

A small number of NFL players opposing vaccines are driving online debates about vaccine mandates among sports fans and right wing accounts

- The Virality Project has repeatedly reported on stories of professional athletes, particularly Cole Beasley of the NFL, whose reluctance to get vaccinated has sparked online conversation.
- This week, tweets from Arizona Cardinals wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins and the announcement of the Minnesota Vikings assistant coach stepping down due to vaccine requirements both received significant attention online.
- Facebook posts about the NFL’s vaccine policies have received over 767K engagements in the past week.
- Online debate over vaccine mandates is mainly political in nature, and often emphasizes vaccination as a personal choice. Professional athletes have contributed to this culture by remaining secretive about their vaccination disclosure.
- This debate also can provide a platform for misleading or false information about COVID-19 vaccines, including vaccine safety.
  - Hopkins tweeted that his girlfriend’s brother experienced heart problems after receiving a vaccine.
- **Key Takeaway:** The ongoing amplification of news around athletes refusing to be vaccinated contributes to the framing of vaccination as a political issue rather than a health issue, ultimately giving way to more online space for vaccine safety misinformation and debates about “medical freedom.”
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 UNICEF, celebrating vaccinations in Haiti made possible by U.S. donations. The post received 438K interactions (422K reactions, 10.5K replies and 5.3K shares).
- This week’s top Instagram post containing the word “vaccine” is by pop star Ariana Grande, encouraging her followers to get the vaccine to protect themselves against the Delta variant, and sharing links to medical resources. The post received 4.48M likes.
- This week’s top post with the word “vaccine” on Reddit shares an article by NBC retelling the story of a 39 year-old father who died of COVID-19 and reportedly regretted not getting the vaccine. The post received 75.9K upvotes.
- This week’s top post from a recurring anti-vax influencer on Facebook is by Joseph Mercola, D.O., advertising his book untitled “The Truth About COVID-19.” The post received 1.3K interactions (847K reactions, 316 comments and 87 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), who called on her followers to boycott fast food chain Shake Shack after its founder Danny Meyer announced they would require proof of vaccination for employees and indoor diners. The tweet received 31K interactions (1.5K replies, 7.1K retweets and 22.3K 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!*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Links</th>
<th>Screenshot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example Facebook post that uses NBC News reporting about vaccinated people spreading the virus.</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com" alt="Example Facebook post" /></td>
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Joseph Mercola’s viral Facebook post calling breakthrough cases “vaccine failures”

Tweet about a breakthrough case that includes information about heart problems