

How major media outlets screwed up the vaccine 'breakthrough' story | Columbia Journalism Review

By Jon Allsop

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Late Thursday, the Washington Post landed what looked like a big scoop: the paper obtained an unpublished slide presentation from inside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggesting that the Delta variant of the coronavirus spreads as easily as chickenpox, and that fully vaccinated people who become infected with the variant may be able to pass it on in a way similar to unvaccinated people who become infected. (The slides were based in part on data about a COVID outbreak linked to Provincetown, Massachusetts; on Friday, the CDC published that data.) Although “breakthrough” infections in vaccinated people are rare, and it’s even rarer that they result in hospitalization or death, major news organizations sometimes missed this crucial context as they rushed to confirm the Post’s story and spit it out via headlines and push alerts. A tweet from the New York Times—“The Delta variant is as contagious as chickenpox and may be spread by vaccinated people as easily as the unvaccinated, an internal CDC report said”—came in for particularly sharp criticism. “VACCINATED PEOPLE DO NOT TRANSMIT THE VIRUS AT THE SAME RATE AS UNVACCINATED PEOPLE,” Ben Wakana, a communications staffer for the White House’s coronavirus response team, shot back. “IF YOU FAIL TO INCLUDE THAT CONTEXT YOU’RE DOING IT WRONG.”

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