

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts: Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine does not contain fetal cells, contrary to online claims CLAIM: Newly leaked emails among Pfizer employees show that the company's COVID-19 vaccine contains fetal cells. THE FACTS: A widely shared video by the group Project Veritas has led to a false claim online that purported emails among Pfizer officials show that the pharmaceutical company's COVID-19 vaccine contains aborted fetal cells. But the video â€” an interview between Project Veritas founder James O'Keefe and a self-identified Pfizer employee who claims to show internal emails from the company â€” does not support that erroneous conclusion. Instead, it shows that the company used a fetal cell line when testing the efficacy of its vaccine. Cell lines, which are key to medical research, are cloned copies of cells from the same source that have been adapted to grow continuously in labs. Nevertheless, users spread the falsehood about the contents of the vaccine widely on social media. "You are mandated to inject dead babies into your body," one Twitter account sharing the video falsely claimed. "Fetal cells in the vaccines yet they are denying people religious exemptions." At the heart of the widely shared video spurring the false claims are purported emails among Pfizer officials from early 2021. The messages displayed show an alleged conversation about the company's reluctance to publicize that testing of its vaccine â€” not production â€” used a cell line that was originally derived from fetal tissue. One of the main emails cited specifically says, "Human fetal derived cell lines are not used to produce our investigational vaccine, which consists of synthetic and enzymatically produced components." It adds: "One or more cell lines with an origin that can be traced back to human fetal tissue has been used in laboratory tests associated with the vaccine program." The video also shows an email referencing the HEK293T cell line â€” or Human Embryonic Kidney 293 â€” which was first established in the early

1970s using cells from a kidney of a fetus. What's not made clear in the video is that it is already public record that Pfizer's vaccine was tested using such cells. In a paper published in September 2020 detailing the vaccine's development and success in mice and monkeys, Pfizer and BioNTech scientists said that the vaccine had been tested using the HEK293T cell line. And the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in a January document about the COVID-19 vaccines noted: "Neither Pfizer nor Moderna used an abortion-derived cell line in the development or production of the vaccine. However, such a cell line was used to test the efficacy of both vaccines."

The conference recommended that, in the absence of a vaccine with no connection at all to such a cell line, vaccines that use them "only for testing would be preferable to those that use such cell lines for ongoing production." Dr. Saahir Khan, an assistant clinical professor of infectious diseases at the University of Southern California, said about the Pfizer shot, "There are no components of fetal cells in the vaccine, and none used in manufacturing." Khan said it is very common to use such cell lines somewhere along the way in the research or development of vaccines and other medicine for humans. He said such cell lines, started decades ago, are grown in labs — so the cells being used for research are not the original cells. One COVID-19 vaccine used in the U.S., from Johnson & Johnson, is produced by using an adenovirus that is grown using retinal cells that trace back to a fetus from 1985, according to the Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Vaccines for chickenpox and other diseases also use this type of process. But none of these vaccines contain fetal cells. Pfizer did not respond to questions about the Project Veritas video, but a spokesperson pointed out that information about the testing has been publicly disclosed through a number of sources and news reports.

— Associated Press writer Angelo Fichera in Philadelphia contributed this report. The FBI is not targeting opponents of critical race theory CLAIM: "Attorney General Merrick Garland has instructed

the FBI to mobilize against parents who oppose critical race theory in public schools, citing 'threats.'" THE FACTS: A memo Garland issued on Monday to address a rise in criminal conduct targeting school personnel is being misrepresented online. Garland did not single out opponents of critical race theory. Rather, he stated the FBI would work with U.S. attorneys and federal, state and local authorities to develop strategies to combat what he called "a disturbing spike" in violent threats facing educators, administrators and school boards. The trend was highlighted in a Sept. 29 letter from the National School Boards Association to President Joe Biden requesting federal assistance to investigate mounting threats and crimes against educators and school officials. Following Garland's memo, an activist known for speaking out against critical race theory "a way of thinking about America's history through the lens of racism" shared the erroneous claim that the FBI was specifically targeting public school parents who oppose such race education. Wyn Hornbuckle, the Justice Department's deputy director of media affairs, told The Associated Press the claim was misleading and stated that the Attorney General's guidance and the Justice Department's efforts are focused on rooting out criminal threats of violence for any reason, not targeting a particular ideology. "There has been misinformation circulated that the Attorney General's directive is an effort to silence those with particular views about COVID-related policies, school curricula, or other topics of public discussion. This is simply not true," Hornbuckle wrote in an email. Critical race theory, developed by scholars during the 1970s and 1980s, centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions and that they function to maintain the dominance of white people in society. The concept has drawn condemnation by conservative commentators, lawmakers and former President Donald Trump. The NSBA's letter did not specifically focus on threats surrounding critical race theory. It asked for the federal government to investigate any cases where threats or violence could be handled as violations of federal civil rights laws "no matter what prompted them. "NSBA and school board members don't want to stop parents from expressing their First Amendment rights," the NSBA said in a statement

emailed to the AP. "We want to stop the death threats, threats to family members, and other harassment and acts of intimidation that school board members are facing."

The group documented more than 20 instances of threats, harassment, disruption and acts of intimidation across multiple states. While the letter did cite several threats it had flagged in response to false assertions that school boards were adopting critical race theory curriculum, the majority of the threats it documented were in response to coronavirus-related restrictions, including mask and vaccine requirements in schools. "Associated Press writer Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed this report, with additional reporting from Terrence Fraser in New York. Infrastructure bill doesn't include tax on cows CLAIM: Under the proposed infrastructure bill, farmers will be taxed for each cow, including \$6,500 a year for dairy cows. THE FACTS: The infrastructure bill, a \$1 trillion package that was approved in August by the Senate, does not include such a provision. Yet in a tweet shared by thousands that also circulated on Facebook, a conservative commentator falsely claimed the legislation would impose taxes on cows that would cripple American agriculture. "Just one example cattle farmers have to pay \$2600 PER COW a year," Melissa Tate wrote. "Dairy cows \$6500 a year. This will put millions of cattle farmers out of business." Tate did not respond to a request for comment. The erroneous claim follows a congressman's false assertion about a separate, \$3.5 trillion reconciliation bill, referred to as the Build Back Better Act, that is supported by many Democrats. In a statement criticizing that bill, Oklahoma Rep. Markwayne Mullin said the legislation "would impose a 'fee' on all methane emissions, including in our agriculture industry. "The tax is estimated to cost \$6,500 per dairy cow, \$2,600 per head of cattle, and \$500 per swine each year." But the reconciliation bill as currently drafted includes taxes on methane emissions relating to oil and gas production "not from livestock. A spokesperson for Mullin acknowledged that the bill does not currently contain those provisions. "This is what could happen if the methane fee were applied to agriculture," Meredith Blanford said in an email. She said that

while the text of the bill only specifies the oil and gas industry, it also references the Environmental Protection Agency's greenhouse gas inventory "and leaves too much room for the EPA to expand its regulatory reach." Blanford said the numbers were derived from an analysis by the American Farm Bureau Federation, a lobbying group. The organization's vice president for public affairs, Sam Kieffer, said in a Sept. 30 statement that the group's economists over the summer conducted an analysis of potential costs on agriculture using proposals relating to the methane tax on oil and gas. "To clear up any confusion, I want to make clear that the current language of the reconciliation bill does not impose a methane tax on agriculture," Kieffer said. "â€" Angelo Fichera

Parents don't need to be vaccinated to take their newborns home in New York

CLAIM: New York hospitals, including NYU Langone Health, will not release newborn babies or infants in neonatal intensive care units, frequently referred to as NICUs, to parents who

have not been vaccinated. THE FACTS: No such restrictions exist. The false information, which claimed to stem from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, circulated widely on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. "New Forced Control: NYU Langone and other Hospitals in New York and Long Island are Forcing that if the parent is not VAXXED they

will not release Babies from the NICU to Parents or after birth as per

CDC Guidelines. You Need to Show VAX-Passport to see your own New Born Baby,"

the false post states. State health officials said there was no truth to the

claim. "The New York State Department of Health is deeply disturbed by the grossly

inaccurate messages being spread on social media regarding the false claim that there's a

prohibition on parents/guardians taking a baby home from the hospital based upon vaccination status,"

Jill Montag, director of communications at the state Department of Health, told the AP

in an email. NYU Langone Health addressed the baseless claims on Twitter last week.

"In response to the false & completely unfounded post circulating on social media: NYU

Langone DOES NOT prohibit a parent/guardian from taking a child home from the NICU

due to their vaccination status â€” we vehemently discourage the spread of this inaccurate, harmful information," the statement said. â€” Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report. Teen's death in England misrepresented by vaccine opponents CLAIM: Adam Ali, a high school student from Solihull, a town in West Midlands, England, died from the COVID-19 vaccine. THE FACTS: Ali, a 17-year-old student who died in September, had not been vaccinated against COVID-19. His death was misrepresented online. The actual cause of Ali's death is unknown, according to a spokesperson from the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS. One false tweet claimed, "Adam Ali 17 years old from Alderbrook school, had his first jab, had instant adverse reaction, convulsing, blood clots," adding "he died the other day within two weeks and not a word from the media." Ali, a student at Alderbrook Sixth Form in Solihull, died at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital on Sept. 19. "We can confirm that Adam did not have a COVID-19 vaccination; the cause of his tragic death is currently unknown," a spokesperson for the Birmingham and Solihull vaccination program at University Hospitals Birmingham NHS said in an emailed statement. â€” Arijeta Lajka Posts falsely claim sex offenders don't carry identifying cards for privacy reasons CLAIM: Sex offenders are not required to carry cards identifying them as sex offenders because it is an invasion of their privacy. THE FACTS: Several states require registered sex offenders to carry special identification, and when states have rejected such laws, it has been based on the First Amendment, not privacy. Social media users are misrepresenting sex offender laws as they criticize requirements to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination, and incorrectly compare the two. "So we need a vaccine card to drink a beer at a bar, but sex offenders don't need to carry anything?" reads the text on one widely shared TikTok video. "The U.S. has over 750,000 registered sex offenders and NONE of them are required to carry a passport because it violates their privacy," another video's text read. Those claims rest on the false premise that privacy protections prevent sex offenders from being required to carry special identification. But experts on sex

offender laws confirmed that in at least nine states, sex offenders do have to carry a state ID card with a special label. "In some states this says Sex Offender while in others the designation is a code that is known to law enforcement," said Elizabeth Jeglic, a professor and psychologist at John Jay College in New York who researches sexual violence prevention. Courts in some states have struck down laws requiring sex offenders to identify themselves in this way, but judges have not cited privacy reasons. Instead, they have pointed to the First Amendment's compelled speech doctrine, which says the government can't force an individual or group to convey a certain message. The claims spreading online this week also fail to recognize that registered sex offenders have limited access to privacy as it is, according to Alissa Ackerman, an assistant professor of criminal justice at California State University, Fullerton. When sex offenders are required to register, they must upload their full name, demographic information, aliases, birthday, address and other information to a public database, Ackerman said. "So they don't have a lot of privacy," she said. "This claim that is being made online is just asinine." "Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report. ***