

Satirical Comedy Does COVID-19: John Oliver as Science Journalist

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes selected segments of John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, which were dedicated to conveying accurate COVID-19 information, debunking coronavirus falsehoods, addressing pandemic-related sociocultural issues, and exposing conspiracy theories. In these videos, John Oliver corrects the commercial press while adopting several science journalist roles: that of explainer, investigative, and civic educator journalists. Oliver's videos, whose reach extends far beyond his original audience, are valuable resources for conveying accurate information and teaching critical thinking.

Keywords: John Oliver, *Last Week Tonight*, satirical comedy, satire, science journalist, science journalism, explainer journalism, investigative journalism, Fox News, conspiracy theories

La comedia satírica hace COVID-19: John Oliver como periodista científico

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza segmentos seleccionados de *Last Week Tonight* de John Oliver, que se dedicaron a transmitir información precisa sobre el COVID-19, desacreditar falsedades sobre el coronavirus, abordar problemas socioculturales relacionados con la pandemia y exponer teorías de conspiración. En estos videos, John Oliver corrige a la prensa comercial mientras adopta varios roles de periodista científico: el de pe-

riodista explicativo, de investigación y educador cívico. Los videos de Oliver, cuyo alcance se extiende mucho más allá de su audiencia original, son recursos valiosos para transmitir información precisa y enseñar el pensamiento crítico.

Palabras clave: John Oliver, *Last Week Tonight*, comedia satírica, sátira, periodista científico, periodismo científico, periodismo explicativo, periodismo de investigación, Fox News, teorías de la conspiración

讽刺喜剧聚焦2019冠状病毒病：约翰·奥利弗担任科学记者

摘要

本文分析了约翰·奥利弗（John Oliver）主持的《上周今夜秀》的部分视频，这些视频聚焦于传递准确的2019冠状病毒病（COVID-19）信息、揭穿关于冠状病毒的谎言、应对与大流行相关的社会文化问题、以及揭露阴谋论。在这些视频中，约翰·奥利弗纠正了商业媒体，同时担任了几个科学记者的角色：解释型记者、调查型记者和公民教育记者。奥利弗的视频影响范围远远超出了他的原始受众，并且这些视频是传递准确信息和教授批判性思维的宝贵资源。

关键词：约翰·奥利弗，《上周今夜秀》，讽刺喜剧，讽刺，科学记者，科学新闻学，解释新闻学，调查新闻学，福克斯新闻，阴谋论

On March 11, 2020, in a speech on the coronavirus outbreak, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that “pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.” In the United States, both *pandemic* the word and *pandemic* the phenomenon would soon spark fear, uncertainty, acquiescence, anger, and political polarization—both about the severity of the coronavirus as well as the strategies for preventing it. Very shortly, in fact, there would be an infodemic characterized by various kinds of circulating untruths: misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, which have different purposes. According to Benkler et al., disinformation is the intentional “dissemination of explicitly false or misleading information” often for political purposes (32), whereas misinformation is the de-politicized circulation of lies and fallacies, often from the result of bad facts and misunderstandings (24). Propaganda, on the other hand, is “designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with [the] political goals of the propagandist” (29) or to create “controversy where none previously existed” in order to stall progress and undermine democracy (Rabin-Havt 6). These circulating untruths would soon permeate the mediasphere, creating an infodemic that confused already panicked publics.

Stepping in to respond to this infodemic was comedian and satirical commentator John Oliver. That is, between March 2020 and November 2020 (Season 7), and again in Season 8, Oliver dedicated several episodes of his program *Last Week Tonight* to communicating accurate coronavirus information, analyzing coronavirus-related issues, and debunking various

types of incorrect information. These efforts were not the first time that Oliver used his program, for which he has full “creative freedom” (Guthrie) to expose issues and intervene on incorrect information. Almost immediately after launching *Last Week Tonight*, Oliver tackled controversial issues and stories underplayed by other news outlets, such as the General Motors’ ignition recall, the tax-free status of churches, food waste, unethical election policies, and backwards American sex education. He also enlivened dry, but confusing technological subjects (debt-buying, Bitcoin, multi-level marketing, and net neutrality); and informed viewers about complicated global issues ignored by traditional news programs (the growth of authoritarian leaders and the threat of Vladimir Putin).

Despite Oliver’s satirical approach, various award-granting agencies began recognizing his work on *Last Week Tonight* as journalism. In his first Peabody Award (for the original net neutrality segment), Jeffrey Jones commended Oliver for his “resolve not simply to explore headline news, but to pull back the proverbial curtain and show us the subtle mechanics at work in our nation’s democracy and culture . . . For bringing satire and journalism even closer together.” Soon after, online writers, such as Suebsang and Poniezowik, began qualifying Oliver’s method as investigative journalism as well as explainer journalism, which, according to Zhang, summarizes complex stories or dry technical topics, unpacks key terms, and deconstructs any spin, so that readers/viewers may best understand future developments. Some, such as Victor Lucker-son, also began speaking of the John Oliver effect: the comedian’s talent of setting the news agenda and drawing renewed attention to an underplayed or forgotten issue, often sparking public outrage and then action. The earliest example of the Oliver effect was the conclusion of his June 1, 2014, segment

on preserving net neutrality. Alarmed that the FCC was not taking this matter seriously, Oliver urged his viewers to go to the internet and focus their “indiscriminate rage in a useful direction.” “Seize your moment, my lovely trolls, turn on caps lock, and fly my pretties! Fly! Fly!” Viewers responded by flooding the usually underused (and buried) FCC website with 45,000 comments, slowing it to a crawl. Eventually, Kastrenakes notes, the FCC received 3.7 million comments on net neutrality. This video, which still attracts attention with over 16 million YouTube views, demonstrates the longevity and virality of Oliver’s satirical messaging.

Along with commenting on current affairs, Oliver and other late-night hosts have dedicated considerable time and effort to discussing scientific topics and their related sociocultural and political issues. The author’s previous research noted how Seth Myers, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, and Jimmy Kimmel have all addressed contentious scientific topics, such as the climate change crisis, distrust in scientific authority, and vaccine hesitancy. And media critics have taken notice of their efforts, too, analyzing the affordances and constraints of late-night celebrities delivering science news. Feldman and Young, for instance, have weighed in on how satirical television programs, such as *Last Week Tonight*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, which have more latitude than the legacy press in selecting and covering issues, often explain complex scientific topics and by extension, improve scientific literacy (2008). Instead of 30-second soundbites wedged between more important stories, hosts of these programs can aggregate rich content about the sociocultural issues affecting science; they responsibly represent complicated scientific subjects (climate change, the GMO controversy) without falling into the journalistic trap of balance as bias. And satirical comedy has the advantage

of getting people watching and listening; that is, Brewer and McKnight contend that the comedic affordances of these programs—frequent jokes, a sarcastic tone, ample popular culture references—may reinvigorate stale subject matter and draw previously detached viewers to scientific subjects (651). This writer, for instance, has used satirical comedy as a pedagogical resource for depicting the logical fallacies associated with vaccine hesitancy.

The efforts of these late-night hosts are but one example of the transformation of the science journalism mediasphere;¹ that is, there has been a dramatic expansion online in both participatory science reporting and accommodated online science-related information (tweets, blogs, social media, popular science websites). According to science journalism scholar Trench, these trends have created an “overlapping information and communication space” in which audiences can receive scientific content from various online contributors and in both formal and informal ways (cited in Nisbet “Online”). Recognizing these changes, many science historians have expanded the definition of science journalism to include all news “related to science in the broadest sense of the word, including, but not limited to science as a process, scientific findings, science institutions (or individuals), and encompassing all kinds of science, including humanities and

1 “Applying this idea, the evolving science media ecosystem consists of legacy media in their print and online formats, including the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*; science blogging and aggregation sites, most notably Scienceblogs.com; the news and blogging communities formed by journals such as *Science*, *Nature* and *PLoS*; the news and blogging communities formed by legacy science magazines including *Discover* and *Scientific American*; ideologically-driven advocacy blogs and sites such as *Pharyngula*, *Climate Progress* and *Climate Depot*; and reflexive and meta-discussions of science journalism at MIT’s *Knight Science Journalism Tracker* and the *Colombia Journalism Review*.”

natural sciences” (Korthagen and Wormer, cited in Bos and Nuigens 121). These changes have been accompanied by a reduction of science journalists in legacy media outlets and the creation of different kinds of scientific authority. Late-night comedy and satirical programs, because of their significant viewers and virality, should also be added to this list of viable science journalism sources.

In the changing online media ecosystem, science reporters have adapted by taking on different professional roles and routines. To categorize these, Nisbet interviewed several science journalism professionals—those from legacy news outlets, popular science magazines, journals, and online science mags, and one science book writer. He classified their roles as conduits, information curators, civic educators, public intellectuals, agenda-setters, watchdogs, and conveners. In Nisbet’s interview, only a few identified as civic educators or agenda setters. Some envisioned themselves as watchdogs, standing over and critically evaluating “scientific institutions and the scientific community, but also over individuals or groups making false scientific claims, and over social actors intervening in science policy discussions”; and as conveners, who connect scientists with their publics to discuss science. However, the majority of those interviewed considered their main roles to be conduits, curators, and public intellectuals. As conduit or explainer journalist, one’s job is summarizing and explaining science understandably to non-specialists. Second to this role is that of the curator, who aggregates science-related content to evaluate it so that publics can make informed opinions. This role also encompasses teaching others about the scientific process. Those interviewed said they sometimes adopt the role of public intellectuals, which is similar to traditional newspaper commentators or columnists; they present topics from their specific worldview. Public intellectuals also

function as critical debunkers, calling out exaggerated or false claims about science. In taking on these roles, journalists aim to improve scientific literacy, the understanding of the scientific process, and trust in scientific authority.

Oliver has previously adopted these science journalism roles in *Last Week Tonight*. For instance, acting as conduit and aggregator, Oliver has dissected and collected sources about scientific and technical topics ignored and/or misinterpreted by the commercial press: nuclear waste management, forensic evidence, CRISPR, sexism and racism in medicine, the accommodation of scientific articles, and the regulation of compounding pharmacies. Taking on the public intellectual role, he has also exposed manufactroversies—those science issues that are “manufactured in the public sphere when an arguer announces that there is an ongoing scientific debate in the technical sphere about a matter for which there is actually an overwhelming scientific consensus on the corresponding issue” (Ceccarelli 269). Oliver’s earliest dismantling of a manufactroversy was his 2014 “Statistically Representative Climate Change Debate,” which was lauded by several (Fung; Galliah; Mooney; Nuticelli) for its clear visual representation of false balance. (Oliver has also addressed the spurious connection between vaccines and autism; the lack of safety of genetically modified foods; and the Paris Agreement as a global plot against American interests.)

Science communicators, regardless of their role, also regularly draw attention to or use framing devices, which according to Cormack are one of the most important tools (100). Drawing upon Goffman, Lakoff describes frames as mental schema or structures that “shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of

our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies” (1-2). Or to put it another way, frames are “the interpretive storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating about how an issue might be a problem, who or what is responsible for it, and what should be done about it” (Nisbet, “Communicating” 15). Frames provided by the media often act as interpretive shortcuts or mental heuristics. Although frames determine what should be talked about and what questions can be asked, they are a “valence-neutral organizing device for audiences and interpretations” (Nisbet, “Framing” 45); that is, they may be used for pro-issue, anti-issue, and neutral positions. Nisbet, extended Gamson and Modigliani’s original list, has summarized eight basic frames in communicating science policy issues: social progress; economic development /competitiveness; morality/ethics; scientific/technical uncertainty; Pandora’s box/ Frankenstein’s monster/runaway science; public accountability/governance; middle way/alternative path; and conflict/strategy (“Framing” 50-51). John Oliver is quite familiar with framing; in previous episodes, he has exposed how the framing of climate change in terms of both scientific uncertainty (the climate change debate is still open) and conflict (the economy versus the environment; the U.S. versus the world; and European elitism against American values) has warped the public’s understanding of the climate crisis. In his 2015 segment on President Trump’s “Paris Agreement,” Oliver focused on the president’s use of the conflict frame in depicting this agreement (the U.S. against the world), which allowed him to make base appeals to ethnocentrism, American exceptionalism, and fear.

Science journalism may have evolved, and the roles of science journalists may have changed, but the need for science

news is as important as ever. And in a pandemic characterized by misinformation and disinformation, accurate news is even more crucial in informing publics and mitigating a health crisis. In his coronavirus segments (see Table), which ran between March 2020 and May 2021, Oliver stepped in to confront the faulty coverage of the pandemic by the commercial press and by other less reputable news sources. In most of these monologues, Oliver acts as a conduit science journalist, explaining the most recent coronavirus developments. He summarizes the facts about the coronavirus and translates (and supports) advice from relevant health officials. He also takes on the role of information curator, collecting stories about the coronavirus, in order to put them into perspective and comment on them. As the series progresses and the comedian becomes more concerned about the pandemic and vulnerable populations, his tone becomes more urgent and he slides into the watchdog and public intellectual roles, distinguishing truths from falsehoods and debunking scientific conspiracies. Secondly, in these coronavirus episodes, Oliver not only adopts these journalistic roles but also draws attention to how the facts (or myths) about the coronavirus are being framed. Additionally, he employs these frames himself to persuade his audience of the coronavirus crisis and the importance of personal and public responsibility in preventing the disease's spread. Due to the constraint of length, this paper will focus only on Oliver's 2020 coronavirus episodes. It will analyze a selection of those from the beginning of the crisis (March 2020) to the first major spike in cases (July 2020).

OLIVER AS EXPLAINER SCIENCE JOURNALIST

Before an analysis of Oliver's journalistic roles, it is important to say something about his method, which distinguishes his work from that of other late-night hosts. Instead of including

short comic segments in his program, Oliver delivers long satirical monologues, which average around twenty minutes. Though his satirical monologues look effortless, they are crafted of four different components (Gallia): comic segments, satirical targets, snippets of information, and calls to action. In the comic segments, the glue holding the various pieces together, Oliver makes jokes (both low and high), states ridiculous comparisons, raises his voice, uses exaggerated gestures and bodily movements, and shows silly visuals. In the satirical components, Oliver aims his arrows at media coverage, media figures, political elites, events, fabrications, misrepresentations, and so on, which are then ridiculed and then corrected. It is in the other components of his monologues (snippets of information and calls to action) that Oliver drops his persona (mask) and earnestly takes on the roles of journalist and public intellectual concerned about delivering accurate news, correcting falsehoods, and informing his viewers. Oliver's monologues always consist of well-researched evidence drawn from very credible sources: government reports, newspaper and scientific articles, televised news segments, and experts. These sources are accompanied by both references and images so that audiences may then visualize and verify them, continuing their learning after the episode is done. Oliver often concludes his monologues with calls to action, such as imperatives to contact your local politician, donate to a cause, research a subject, or, simply, *think*.

In his first three coronavirus episodes, Oliver acts as conveyor journalist using several science communication strategies—frames, allusions, and analogies—to communicate his subject matter. His very first episode, “COVID-19 Pandemic and Governmental Response in the US” (7.3, March 11, 2020) offers an eerie snapshot into the innocuous beginnings of the coronavirus epidemic: the first dozen infec-

tions and the first death in the United States; 2700 deaths in China; the coronavirus in 60 countries. (At the time of this writing, according to *The New York Times* and Our World in Data, the number of cases in the United States is 93.9 million, whereas the death toll stands at 1.04 million.) Oliver's main objectives in this episode are communicating accurate coronavirus information while assuaging his audience's fears. Although he expresses deep concern about the coronavirus, overall, his mood is still positive, his monologue upbeat, and his jokes silly: allusions to *Sesame Street*, comments about dirty cruise ships, and jibes about Mike Pence. He announces that he wants to get "the very basics down here straight away" (1:49), which, for Oliver, is explaining the origin of the virus (deaths in China and the appearance of the coronavirus in 60 other European countries), defining virus statistics (the 2% mortality rate and the easy spread of the disease), critiquing China and Japan's original inept handling of the virus, and effusively praising Vietnam's effective hand-washing campaign. As for satire, his main target is a familiar one—the bungled information disseminated by the Trump administration. However, there is a greater sense of urgency now—the president's actions and inactions are a matter of life and death.

In his messaging, Oliver blends his satirical science communication with two frames: the Pandora's box frame and the public accountability and governance frame. The Pandora's box/Frankenstein monster/runaway science frame involves framing facts in terms of "a need for precaution or action in face of possible catastrophe and out-of-control consequences; or alternatively as fatalism, where there is no way to avoid the consequences or chosen path" (Nisbet, "Communicating" 18). In its positive valence, this frame motivates action on an issue; in its negative valence, it promotes fear, pessimism, and acquiescence—a sense that it is too late to

stop the runaway train of catastrophe. Communicators often invoke the public accountability and governance frame when they discuss “research or policy either in the public interest or serving public interests [while] emphasizing issues of control, transparency, participation, responsiveness, or ownership; or debate over proper use of science and expertise in decision-making” (Nisbet, “Communicating” 18). When science journalists use this frame, they are focusing on how government officials are communicating about an issue transparently, handling scientific research accurately, guarding public interests, and using their leadership responsibly. This is also the frame used to politicize science issues for both positive and negative ends.

Right at the beginning of the episode, Oliver employs yet tempers the catastrophe frame. That is, in the segment’s first 26 seconds, he flashes upsetting clips about the pandemic from several respected news sources (*World News Tonight*, CBS, *Good Morning America*). On the screen are disturbing images of people in Hazmat suits, frantic healthcare workers, and public panic while the hurried soundbites mention “global hot zones,” “fears of coronavirus spreading,” “spike in cases,” and a “race to contain the outbreak.” After aggregating these stories, Oliver stands over the news with this warning from the CDC: “It is not a matter of if, but when.” However, almost immediately, he deflates this grim news by using two popular culture allusions demonstrating what “not if, but when” means—it is not a matter of “if, but when” Saoirse Ronan will win an Oscar and Henry Kissinger will die. (Henry Kissinger, at the age of 99, is currently ranked #2 on the celebrity death list.) Throughout his entire monologue, in fact, Oliver artfully balances disturbing COVID facts with jokes. For instance, after introducing the startling prediction that, in only one year, 40-70% of the world will be infected,

Oliver jokes that the only disease that should be infecting the world at that rate is “Adam Driver fever.” And after relating how the Chinese government enforced the Wuhan lockdown by putting suitcase-sized speakers on sidewalks, Oliver says he much prefers the American nightmare of having small talking boxes in our homes and being told by Jeff Bezos to buy underwear. In short, throughout this episode, Oliver tries to keep his audience listening by keeping them laughing.

At the same time, Oliver assures his audience that the coronavirus pandemic *is a crisis* by invoking the catastrophe frame himself. First, he stresses the 2% mortality rate, a stat being (ab)used in certain media circles to demonstrate that fears about the coronavirus are exaggerated. At 2:37, Oliver targets both Chuck Todd’s comments that COVID-19’s 2% mortality rate is “not that bad” and social media is depicting the virus as more dangerous than it is. To further discredit Todd’s comments, Oliver uses a popular cultural allusion to remind his audience that a 2% mortality rate was “basically the entire plot of *The Leftovers*” before flashing an image of a despairing Justin Theroux. This HBO series, almost unrelenting in its darkness, showed characters unwilling and unable to move past the loss of their loved ones and accept the enigma of the departed. Oliver continues to put facts in perspective by reminding everyone that “a 2% mortality rate, if true, would be about 20 times higher than the seasonal flu” (3:05). What Oliver is doing here is a potent science communication strategy—using creative ways, such as analogies and visuals, to make numbers more comprehensible. His analogy is appropriate because a sizable portion of the American population struggles with numeracy, the ability to access, use, and interpret mathematical information. According to a report from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), almost one in

three U.S. adults (30 percent) has difficulty calculating whole numbers and percentages, estimating numbers or quantity, and interpreting simple statistics in text or tables. Or to put it another way, 62.7 million U.S. adults possess low numeracy skills. What this deficiency translates to, among other things, is an inability to conceptualize the significance of a 2% mortality rate. Oliver, then, is not only putting this mortality rate into perspective, but also targeting the media's irresponsible use of this heuristic to deflate the pandemic's seriousness. In a much later episode (7.10), Oliver uses a similar tactic to put a human face to the numbers. That is, rather than announcing that the coronavirus death total has just reached 65,400, he explains that in just three months, this disease has killed more Americans than those in the Vietnam War, an event cemented in the American cultural consciousness.

In critiquing the current administration's response to the coronavirus, Oliver keeps the focus on the response to the pandemic. That is, instead of making *ad-hominem* attacks against President Trump, Oliver invokes the public accountability frame for governmental leaders, using comparison and causal analysis to make his case. He first compares the current administration's fumbling COVID-19 response to those in other countries, such as Vietnam, which quickly rolled out an effective and catchy public health handwashing campaign. In contrast, Oliver positions President Trump as a leader who is not effectively using science in his decision-making, particularly by appointing Vice President Mike Pence, who has no medical training, as leader of the coronavirus task force. Oliver remarks that this decision is "more than just a lack of leadership, it is also concerning that Trump's main focus when discussing this virus seems to be downplaying any potentially bad news," such as his recent tweets that the coronavirus was under control, that it will recede in the warm

weather, and that it was caused by the consumption of bat soup (14:00). A frustrated Oliver exclaims, that, for a public official, there is a grave difference between “lying about something that means nothing and lying about the spread of a deadly disease” (14:39). Oliver’s point is that the president’s irresponsible messaging and lack of leadership are creating an atmosphere where both the pandemic’s seriousness and scientific authority are questioned. In doing so, the president is setting the stage for the acceptance of pseudoscientific explanations and the mainstreaming of dangerous alternative remedies (Jim Bakker’s miraculous colloidal silver), which will exacerbate the current health crisis, if not create a new one. Oliver makes the case that both “trust in institutions” and medical authority, which are crucial to contending with the coronavirus, are being undermined by the Trump administration. At the end of the monologue, the host, acting as an explainer journalist, steps in to reenforce the authority of the CDC and his own version of public health messaging: “Don’t be racist; Don’t hoard masks; Check the CDC Website; Wash your hands regularly.”

After this episode, unfortunately, the pandemic escalated. That is, by the filming of 7.5 (March 15, 2020): “COVID-19 Pandemic and the Prevention of COVID-19” (Coronavirus II), there were 3,000 new cases and 10 deaths in the United States, Europe was continuing to lock down cities and close borders, and airports were in chaos (Boschen). Oliver himself has been affected—confirmed cases in both his office and studio resulted in closing both locations. At the beginning, Oliver announces that his “staff has been working from home and we’re currently taping this somewhere else with a very limited crew on this white void set . . . It kind of looks like the place movie characters go when they’ve just died.” And, by the airing of the third segment of this series,

episode 7.6 (March 29, 2020): “COVID-19 Pandemic Related Shortages and Social Distancing,” there were at least 900 deaths in the United States (*The New York Times* and *Our World in Data*). The country was also at the beginning of a steep spike in cases, which would result in 2,289 deaths by April 17.

In 7.5, responding to the exigency of the situation, Oliver makes his message more urgent, his tone more somber, the pacing less frantic, and his content more focused. Even the comedian’s crude homoerotic jokes involving actor Adam Driver fall flat, coming across as weak attempts at humor in an unbearable situation. Acting as an explainer journalist once again, Oliver summarizes the various coronavirus developments in the last few weeks, such as the cancelling of sports events and the stories of celebrities catching the virus, before offering his perspective: “We are clearly in the middle of a rapidly escalating outbreak” (3:24).

Relying on the public accountability frame, Oliver contrasts the pandemic crisis with the commander-in-chief’s frequent inability (or reluctance) to communicate clearly: President Trump’s mistaken claims that imports from Europe are being cut off, that insurers would waive copays for tests and treatment, and that Americans visiting Europe could not return home. Oliver is not just name calling here but framing the president’s actions in terms of public accountability. Although President Trump, as the commander-in-chief, is responsible for messaging and action related to COVID-19, he repeatedly lies, denies knowing anything, and rejects responsibility. The president’s irresponsible behavior, as well as that of other important public figures, is contrasted with effective examples of coronavirus messaging from both high and low: Fauci’s honest testimony that the U.S. is failing at testing; and

a video from a humble TikTok hamster. In the 12-second video that Oliver plays, a hamster advises people to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds, cough away from others, disinfect surfaces daily, wear a mask if you are sick, and stay at home. Oliver's satirical point is biting: this Tik-Tok hamster is a more responsible public health communicator than the president himself. Makers of homemade popular culture are doing a better job at covid communication than the White House administration and press office.

Understanding the communication crisis, Oliver implores his audience to be science communicators themselves. That is, to counter and compensate for both the president's lack of concern and "the harmful bullshit flying around," he invokes the personal and civic responsibility frame. He first humanizes the practice of social distancing, which is not just about protecting ourselves, but doing our civic responsibility to protect others. It is also about "slowing the spread of the virus so that it doesn't peak all at once and overwhelm the health care system" (14:40). Comparing spreading disease to disseminating disinformation, Oliver asks his audience to compensate for the president's lack of accountability. That is, if the president isn't going to be diligent when it comes to discounting lies and protecting the nation from the coronavirus, it is up to Americans to be responsible. Therefore, he asks for viewers' caution before "forwarding or retweeting stuff that you do not know to be true" (18:00). He also asks for their empathy and common sense: "You don't just get a flu shot for you; you get it for everyone else. We all have a real responsibility to one another right now because the choices we make in the coming days and weeks will contribute directly to how bad this crisis gets (18:30). His final message ties together personal and public responsibility: our small actions can, for better or for worse, affect the course of the pandemic.

The critique of president's contradictory messaging contradictory messaging continues in the next episode (7.6, March 29), such as his claims that the U.S. is fighting a war with this virus but there are plans to open up the country by Easter Sunday. However, here Oliver pivots to target both the president and conservative media's framing of the pandemic, which is acting as a red herring and impeding strategies to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Framing the pandemic in terms of conflict (the health of the economy versus the health of the American population); and dire economic risk and catastrophe (quarantining will effectively close off the economy and cause escalating negative effects) is exacerbating the public health crisis. He targets those Republican pundits who question mask-wearing and store closures because they prioritize economic security over public health. For example, Oliver includes Tucker Carlson's interview with Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who whines that no one reached out to him "and said, as a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children" (7:01). This complaint is followed by a video of an angry Glenn Beck exclaiming, "I am not afraid to die; I am afraid that our nation might die" (8:28). Oliver reminds viewers that the attitude of Beck and others is selfish; they might think that by advocating to "open up America," they are preserving the future of their children and American life. However, they are actually volunteering American citizens to die. Oliver is effectively dissecting their propaganda here: messaging "designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with [the] political goals of the propagandist" (Benkler et al. 29). By threatening that the economy will crash if people continue to isolate and businesses remain closed, these pundits are using fear to persuade people to drop preventative measures.

By analyzing the selfishness of these pundits, Oliver is again focusing on public accountability: many Republican political leaders and pundits, by pushing harmful propaganda, are rejecting their duty to fellow citizens. In contrast, Oliver implores viewers to ignore this “death cult” and follow protocols as strictly as possible to ease the burdens of healthcare workers and to protect human lives.

OLIVER AS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: ADDRESSING COVID-19'S SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES

Along with being an explainer journalist who communicates essential information about the coronavirus, Oliver acts as an investigative/watchdog journalist when he analyzes pandemic-related sociopolitical issues. In other episodes, Oliver draws attention to how the pandemic revealed weaknesses in the United States: a healthcare system that operates on efficiency and scarcity; states' rights that create a patchwork pandemic policy; and the country's obsession with the economy. In *Coronavirus IV* (7.8, April 12, 2020), *VIII* (7.16, June 21, 2020), and *IX* (7.17, June 28, 2020), Oliver addresses other systemic inequities and injustices in American society: the lack of respect for essential workers, the minimal unemployment safety net, the inhumane conditions in America's crowded prison system, and the lack of affordable housing and increased evictions. The pandemic, Oliver contends, has thrown a spotlight on the defects of various systems that are central to American life.

This section will analyze only one episode that addresses sociopolitical coronavirus issues, which is also a very emotional segment: Episode 7.16 (June 21, 2020): “COVID-19 Pandemic in Prisons and Jails.” Here, Oliver shines a harsh light on how the inhumane conditions of American prisons

have accelerated the spread of the virus. His highly organized monologue is divided into three sections: the mechanisms that allowed the coronavirus to spread so rapidly behind bars; the effects of the prison pandemic; and solutions for this crisis. This episode begins by following up a recent *New York Times* story about the alarming spike of cases in prisons: 68,000 infected inmates (a number that had doubled in the last month) and a 73% increase in coronavirus-related prison deaths. Oliver then announces that the five largest “clusters of the virus are in correctional institutions” (:46); and that there are 2.2 million people held in prisons, many of them in poor health (1:38), which makes this population especially vulnerable to infection. And in assuming the investigative science journalist role who recruits both the morality/ethics and public accountability frames, Oliver uses comparably dissimilar sources. He does cite legacy news stories, but he relies most heavily on *The Marshall Project*: an online, non-profit journalism organization that focuses on issues related to American criminal justice. This organization, which has won the Pulitzer Prize twice, has a goal to “create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. prison system.”

Demonstrating this urgency himself, Oliver embeds several interviews revealing the conditions in prison (tiny cells), the unhelpful social distancing advice (telling prisoners to sleep head to foot in their bunks) (4:10), the rationing or lack of soap (story from the Brennan Center for Justice) (4:54), anguished (and angry) reports from prisoners themselves (5:28), and a *ProPublica* article on a prison having 2,000 coronavirus cases (5:55). Along with critiquing poor hygienic conditions, Oliver targets the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), minimal tests, and improper quarantining locations (Those who test positive go not to a hospital ward but to isolation). His main goal, then, is exposing that the in-

frastructure of jails and prisons, which make them incapable of protecting people from disease, is worse than unethical: *it is a human rights disaster*. Despite our opinions of those residing in prisons and jails, we “don’t punish people by giving them diseases” (2:18).

After highlighting these atrocities, Oliver provides sensible and moral solutions to this crisis: reduce the number and/or furlough prisoners, especially those who are near the end of their sentences or immune-compromised. He admits this solution is imperfect, but “the risks of carefully letting people out are vastly outweighed by the risks of leaving everyone inside” (13:32). Understanding resistance to this solution, he reaches out to those Americans who recruit the morality/ethics frame when justifying the existence of prisons. He understands that many hold the sentiment that “You shouldn’t do the crime, if you can’t do the time” (17:43). However, in “our current system, you’re never being sentenced to time. You’re being sentenced to a lifetime of social stigma, futile job interviews, and roadblocks to necessities like housing” (17:55). Because all this treatment is immoral enough, we shouldn’t “be sentencing people to die from a virus. Because that’s not justice, it’s neglect” (18:03). In other words, the punishment of contracting COVID-19 while in prison is out of proportion to the original crime.

Further anticipating any objections to treating prisoners more humanely, Oliver blends matters of morality and public health. He stresses that the poor hygiene and crowded conditions of prisons are not only unethical, but also dangerous to the entire population. To make this claim, he targets the erroneous thinking that prisoners are outside the population, such as a California county’s decision to exclude prison infection rates in its COVID count; and a re-

vealing clip from the director of the Arkansas Department of Health (Nate Smith) who refers to prisons as high-infection settings that are fortunately “closed systems” (8:26). Oliver lets Smith hang himself on his own words, such as his assertion that it is not difficult to contain coronavirus outbreaks in prison “because people aren’t going out and about. They’re not leaving the prison” (8:18-8:43). Acting as investigative science journalist, Oliver corrects Smith’s faulty messaging with facts. Prisons are not closed systems; people are definitely emerging from them (9:33). There are, in fact, 445,000 prison workers, who have reported 9,180 cases: “we might as well be handing them coronavirus gift bags as they leave work every day and head back out into the community” (9:54). Then the mechanism of disease is explained: unlike what Smith asserted, the virus *can* hop from prison to prison as inmates are transferred around, to rural hospitals that treat prisoners, and jails, which, in a typical week, book 200,000 people. Prisons are not only permeable, but also epicenters of outbreaks that infect surrounding communities—for instance, Cook County was the source of 15.7% of all Illinois COVID-19 cases.

In the conclusion, these two parts of the story—the immoral treatment of prisoners and the public health threat of prison outbreaks—are linked in Oliver’s final claim that prisoners are *STILL* members of this society and that “We’re all on this death cruise ship together” (18:22). The morality/ethics frame (prison conditions are especially inhumane in a coronavirus crisis) is united with the public accountability frame (we must act to amend these conditions and condemn officials who don’t recognize that prison conditions can create a public health crisis). Also, in all three of these episodes on coronavirus-related sociopolitical issues (renters, prisoners, front-line workers), Oliver analyzes how the pandemic con-

tinues to reveal the inequities disproportionately faced by women, lower-income Americans, and people of color.

OLIVER AS WATCHDOG SCIENCE JOURNALIST: DEBUNKING CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACIES

Throughout the entire COVID-19 series, Oliver regularly exposes and then corrects coronavirus-related information and disinformation, which was rampant during the pandemic. In February 2020, Christian Paz began compiling President Trump's biggest coronavirus mistruths. Almost immediately, there were false claims about the transmission and decline of the coronavirus, such as the announcement that the coronavirus would weaken in warmer weather (Feb. 7); assertions that the outbreak was only temporary (Feb. 27); claims that 99% of Covid cases were harmless (July 4); and statements that children were "virtually immune" to this disease (several times). The president also miscommunicated that coronavirus cases were decreasing (when they were actually increasing or spiking) (multiple times) and that hydroxychloroquine (a potent antimalarial) was a coronavirus cure.

Exacerbating the effects of the president's unscientific and irresponsible messaging were circulating global conspiracy theories. Probably the most ridiculous, yet dangerous nonetheless, were disseminated by QAnon, who used the pandemic as a wedge issue to promote their propaganda, such as further distrusting the "lamestream media," targeting minority communities, critiquing government overreach, and calling for extreme violence and civil war (ISD Global 1). Using the internet as its far-right megaphone, QAnon spread several coronavirus conspiracy theories: that it was an incurable bioweapon created by a secret government cabal to restrict personal freedoms and to institute martial law; it was

manufactured and then dispersed by George Soros to destroy Republicans; and the virus was a ploy to destroy their hero, President Trump, and ruin his stellar economic record (ISD Global 9-10). Whereas President Trump had previously called climate change a “hoax,” he did not overtly repeat these conspiracy theories. However, he made little effort to distance himself from this extremist group’s messaging. In fact, LaFrance tabulated that President Trump, without confirming conspiracy theories, still retweeted 145 messages about them.

This polluted media environment correlated with intensifying political polarization about the severity of the virus as well as the strategies for mitigating it. A CBS News-YouGov poll found that 57% of Republicans surveyed believed that the death count (which at that time was 176,000) was acceptable whereas 43% said it was unacceptable. In contrast, 90% of polled Democrats stated that these deaths were not at all acceptable. Even more disparate were fears about contracting the coronavirus—with 89% of Democrats expressing mild to serious concern but only 49% of Republicans doing so. The majority of Republicans polled were also more likely to believe the conspiracy theory that the mainstream media was actually over-reporting the death toll. Many Republicans, as they had done before with climate change, began to perceive the pandemic crisis as exaggerated and the coronavirus rhetoric as alarmist. These same people began to paint scientists as politically biased, on the side of liberals.

Responding to the accelerating infodemic, Oliver assumes the watchdog science journalist role and targets disseminators of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories in episode 7.9 (April 19, 2020): “Misinformation related to the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic; episode 7.10

(May 3, 2020): “COVID-19 testing” (“Coronavirus VI”); and episode 7.18: “Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19.” Nisbet defines the watchdog role as one in which the journalist “holds scientists, scientific institutions, industry and policy-oriented organizations to scrutiny.” This role can also involve critiquing “scientific institutions and the scientific community” as well as “individuals or groups making false claims, and over social actors intervening in science policy discussions.” Oliver takes on all these tasks here.

Both episodes 7.9 and 7.10 target the purveyors of coronavirus dis and misinformation. In Episode 7.9, released about the same time as the first major COVID-19 spike (an average of about 2,000 deaths a day in the last week), Oliver announces the effects of circulating coronavirus myths: 40% of Americans now believe the coronavirus is “less deadly than or just as deadly as the flu.” This attitude, Oliver advises, is self-defeating; it will extend the pandemic and keep us at home longer. Thus, this episode is dedicated to dissecting one of the main causes of disinformation: those various right-wing bubbles who are using the uncertainty frame and spreading coronavirus conspiracies. In the uncertainty frame, communicators describe science issues in terms of contradictory messaging or gaps in research. Certain Republican messengers, for instance, have regularly framed the climate change crisis in terms of uncertainty: the research is questionable, all the facts are not yet in, and there is no scientific consensus. As a result, they then argue, the reality of anthropogenic climate change remains a debate, so policies to address it are unnecessary. For Mooney, wielding the uncertainty frame amounts to political science abuse, which is “any attempt to inappropriately undermine, alter, or otherwise interfere with the scientific process, or scientific conclusions, for political or ideological reasons” (*War* 17). As the

coronavirus pandemic raged on, certain commentators continued to question the severity of the disease, the accuracy of the science, the efficacy of vaccines, and the timeline of their administration. Framing the coronavirus in terms of uncertainty allowed interested parties to question the legitimacy of its science, opening the door to pseudo-scientific explanations, conspiracy theories, and alternative cures.

Appropriately, Oliver's biggest targets in this episode are pillars of the rightwing media ecosphere who are exaggerating uncertainty about the coronavirus. He first aims at Limbaugh, who, in labeling the coronavirus the 19th version of the common cold, folded the pandemic into his own personal narrative: the four corners of deceit (government, academia, science, and the media). Or to put it another way, there is a vast conspiracy in which these four groups are lying about the state of the coronavirus science to restrict American freedoms. Fox News' hypocritical use of the uncertainty frame is exposed: while instituting preventative measures at their own studios, network hosts continued to push the narrative that the science was unclear and that deaths were exaggerated. Even worse than the effects of these conspiracy theories on the American people, Oliver warns, are the effects on the president himself, who regularly receives his talking points from Fox News. Noting that the "feedback loop between Fox News and Trump has run way ahead of the science here" (13:44), Oliver points out that the network's various hosts dangerously promoted the alternative cure of hydroxychloroquine over 300 times. Invoking the president's lack of accountability once again, the host exclaims that what the nation has is "a network and a president who thrive on division feeding on one another at a time when we desperately need a unified response to a public health crisis" (17:58).

What Oliver is brilliantly explaining in this segment, in lay-person's terms, is Fox's role as the main player in a radicalized right-wing media ecosystem that "differs categorically from the rest of the media environment" (Benkler et al. 13). According to these authors, the right-wing media ecosystem is more susceptible to lies and mistruths because of a) the amplification effect of Fox News, which repeats and circulates questionable stories and conspiracies, or "fertilizes and distributes the lies" (Rabin-Havt 5) such as the "deep state"; and b) the lack of internal mechanisms that correct and retract faulty journalism. That is, in isolated right-wing media ecosystem, there is no motivation for its inhabitants to check partial truths or halt the dissemination of fake news. Because of this media ecosystem's low journalism standards, which contribute to its popularity, viewers are encouraged to believe ludicrous and bizarre conspiracies, such as Obama's death panels—but also dangerous ones, such as taking untested coronavirus treatments (from bleach to antimalarial drugs) as opposed to wearing masks or getting vaccinated. These conspiracies flourish because of the dynamic called "the propaganda feedback loop" (Benkler et al. 33) that names, confirms, and delivers identity-confirming news to audiences as well as the corresponding politicians, elites, and reporters who align with and then reaffirm these views. Furthermore, all the players in this loop rarely move outside it to seek alternative viewpoints. In this episode, and in 7.10 (May 3, 2020): "COVID-19 Testing," Oliver shows this propaganda feedback loop in action—in hope that his viewers will take on the role of science communicators themselves, exposing this loop to those trapped in and by it.

Oliver takes a slightly different approach in Episode 7.18 (July 19, 2020), dissecting conspiracy theories with the intent of turning his audience members into science commu-

nicators themselves. Beginning by citing *The Atlantic's* claim that "COVID-19 has created a perfect storm for conspiracy theorists" (1:13), Oliver shows footage of the most prevalent coronavirus myths (the virus was created in a lab as biological warfare, invented by the pharmaceutical industry to create a market for vaccines, or invented to control the American people). Despite their ridiculousness, these theories are dangerous. For instance, after being released online and shared via social media platforms, the 26-minute documentary video *Plandemic* was viewed over 8 million times (2:35). *Plandemic*, an example of skilled social engineering (Nazar and Pieters), manipulated "low-reach social media users to mass share the documentary, effectively subverting efforts to gatekeep its information. Second, the campaign amplified negative sentiments regarding vaccination and containment measures among conspiracy theorists" (Nazar and Pieters). Some of *Plandemic's* conspiracy theories were that the outbreak was planned, the virus was not deadly, mask-wearing activated our own virus, and beaches contain healing microbes. The rapid dissemination of this documentary impacted attitudes toward preventing the coronavirus and trusting health authorities. For instance, Oliver highlights how this film sparked the trending hashtag "filmyourhospital," which encouraged people to enter hospitals looking for infected patients. "Even if only a fraction of Americans succumbing to them ignore best practices, such as social distancing," Oliver explains, there will be consequences. However, rather than blast conspiracy-believers, he tries to build a bridge to them, even admitting his own weakness to one—that the royal family murdered Lady Di.

Assuming the roles of both explainer and watchdog science journalist, Oliver summarizes scientific research on the appeal, identification, and refutation of conspiracy theories. Af-

ter citing a study that over half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory, Oliver explains their mechanism. First, conspiracy theories not only help explain a chaotic world but also appeal to proportionality bias (4:47) —the tendency for people to believe that big effects must have big causes. For instance, a tragic phenomenon like a pandemic is easier to attribute to massive causes (a devious plan involving hundreds of global elites, for instance) than to the combination of an evolved, contagious virus and poor preventative health measures. Conspiracy theories are also attractive because they are self-sealing (10:33); any criticism of the theory becomes evidence that the conspiracy is even larger than imagined.

Oliver also addresses the historical basis of these theories and their connection to global health crises (the bubonic plague, the Spanish flu), referencing sources from *Vox*, *Forbes*, and the *History Channel*. Although pandemic-related conspiracy theories are not novel, what is new, thanks to the internet, is the rapidity of their spread and the breadth of their influence. Instead of satirizing these conspiracies, which is what Oliver would normally do, he requests that his viewers be patient when confronting them and their believers; that is, “[i]t’s going to be incumbent on us as individuals to spot these theories and treat them with a skeptical eye before we believe them. Or, indeed, before we spread them around” (5:00). He provides viewers with three basic questions to debunk conspiracy theories: Is there a rational non-conspiracy explanation? Has this theory been held up to scrutiny by experts? How plausible is this conspiracy as a practical matter? To illustrate the first question, Oliver uses a striking visual—a map showing the seeming correlation between 5G maps and coronavirus outbreaks. Critical thinking, however, reveals that in these maps, the third underlying factor is population density. Rather than use the term “spurious correlation,” Ol-

iver simply shows how charts can lie. Personal and public accountability frames regularly merge in this monologue—in our individual communications, we are all responsible for recognizing and defusing conspiracy theories to prevent the worsening of the pandemic crisis.

Compared to other segments, Oliver’s call to action here is lengthier and more involved, one that matches the gravity of the subject. He reminds his viewers that the popularity of *Plandemic* proved that social media companies can only intervene so much, so we must take it upon ourselves to communicate with conspiracy-theory believers so that coronavirus containment efforts are not derailed. Referencing science communication experts John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, Oliver asserts that the most effective way to reach conspiracy theorists is not to shame or insult them, but to practice empathy, meet them where they are, and “nudge them to think more critically” (18:18). To demonstrate this strategy, he pieces together messages from approachable celebrities (Alex Trebek, John Cena, Paul Rudd, Catherine O’Hara, Billy Porter), who building bridges to conspiracy holders in different population groups. Together, they all gently and humorously provide advice on investigating sources before forwarding them to friends and family. Paul Rudd adds that you can recognize a truthful story if “a majority of trusted sources agree on it.” “And finally,” chimes in Billy Porter, “Think critically.” Then, all the celebrities offer versions of this positive affirmation: “You’re smart!” Indeed, Oliver has always motivated his viewers to act, but this segment marks one of the few times he provides them with resources (a reference to Lewandowsky and Cook’s *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* and a link to the True True Truth, which contains longer versions of these celebrity videos) so that they can be empathetic, public science communicators themselves.

**OLIVER'S SCIENCE JOURNALISM AS A RESOURCE
(REVISE BUT DON'T MAKE LONGER!)**

In 2020, then, corrupted presidential messaging, misinformation, disinformation, and circulating conspiracy theories contributed to significant numbers of people resisting public health measures, such as refusing to wear masks, practice social distancing, and avoid large crowds. The actions (and inactions) of certain Americans would eventually lead to the rapid spread of the coronavirus in the Northeast along with several surges, predominantly in Republican-dominated regions (Jones). In the early days of this crisis, John Oliver dedicated several Season 7 episodes of *Last Week Tonight*, adopting what the writer sees as various science journalist roles. Throughout these episodes, Oliver communicates accurate information, incorporates reputable sources, appropriately frames facts, exposes mental shortcuts that are distorting coronavirus communication, and builds bridges to his viewers. Admittedly, this writer is ascribing these roles to Oliver, who has not admitted he is a journalist, let alone a science journalist. But he has openly confessed his fears about the pandemic, such as in an interview with Seth Meyers shortly after his third remote show (March 26). When asked about his panic level, on a scale of Trump losing the 2020 election to Trump winning four terms, Oliver said “3.5” (3:43). Rather than dwell on these fears, however, I believe Oliver put them to work in his science communication efforts.

Why do his efforts matter? Despite the fact that Oliver's HBO program attracts a left-leaning audience who might not need persuading about the pandemic, and despite the risk of regularly targeting the Trump administration, the comedian is not merely preaching to his limited choir. That is, Oliver is a public intellectual with significant reach. Whereas his HBO audience averages about 1.0 million views in real time, his

Last Week Tonight YouTube channel, which had 6.6 million subscribers in 2020, now has 9.03 million. These coronavirus videos, which had between 5 million and 15 million views, spread accurate information far past the eyes and ears of his original HBO subscribers. Being on YouTube, which Burgess and Green appropriately describe as “post-television” (25), Oliver amplifies his messages and extends his audience. On this channel reside many fans who can watch Oliver’s program when it suits them and then actively share its content through social media, extending its influence, or reach. Although President Trump’s supporters, conspiracy believers, and vaccination opponents might never intentionally watch *Last Week Tonight*, they might stumble across Oliver’s videos on the internet or receive them from peers. Yes, they might be offended by the anti-Trump administration rhetoric, commenting angrily, but at least, in watching, they have momentarily left their echo chambers. Maybe, for even a few, these messages resonated, making a dent in that feedback loop.

Regardless, Oliver’s coronavirus videos offer helpful mental heuristics for framing the pandemic in terms of personal responsibility and ethics; and they promote strategies that encourage thinking critically and debunking conspiracy theories. In our post-truth world, then, Oliver’s coronavirus episodes remain invaluable resources for us to watch, to appreciate, to analyze, and to share.

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Table 1. John Oliver’s Coronavirus Segments

Season, Episode, Date of Video	Name of Video	Total views right after release	Total views on July 20, 2022
Episode 7.3 March 1, 2020	“COVID-19 pandemic and governmental response in the US”	15 million	15,676,334 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c09m5f7Gnic&t=418s
Episode 7.5, March 15, 2020	“COVID-19 pandemic and the prevention of COVID-19”	11 million	12,482,016 million https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_066dEky-cr4&t=93s
Episode 7.6, March 29, 2020	“COVID-19 pandemic related shortages and social distancing (“Coronavirus III”)	10 million	10,477,736 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElIf2DBrWzU

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Episode 7.8, April 12, 2020	“Essential workers and unemployment in the United States during the Coronavirus recession (“Coronavirus IV”)	8.3 million	8,752,227 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s4Bx7mzNkM&t=101s
Episode 7.9, April 19, 2020	“Misinformation related to the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic (“Coronavirus V”)	8.5 million	8,996,003 million https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRFbwjwQ4VE&t=592s
Episode 7.10, May 3, 2020	“COVID-19 testing” (“Coronavirus VI”)	7.9 million	8,337,015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rl4cjr7g0&t=26s
Episode 7.12, May 17, 2020	“Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports (“Coronavirus VII”)	7 million	7,674,922 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4gBMw64aqk&t=39s
Episode 7.16, June 21, 2020	“COVID-19 pandemic in prisons and jails” (“Coronavirus VIII”)	4.9 million	5,408,190 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuxnH0VakAM&t=41s
Episode 7.17, June 28, 2020	“Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on evictions” (“Coronavirus IX”)	6.6 million	7,664,546 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R652nwUcJRA&t=208s
Episode 7.18, July 19, 2020	“Coronavirus: Conspiracy Theories” (“Coronavirus X”)	6.7 million	12,007,315 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0b_eZLM6U&t=1012s

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Nov. 1, 2020	“Trump and the Coronavirus” 7.28	8 million	9,048,339 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuVo4fnpLC8
Feb. 14, 2021	“The Next Pandemic”	9.1 million	9,391,428 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_v-U3K1sw9U
Feb. 21, 2021	“Meat packing during the COVID-19 pandemic” 8.2		7,234,250 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhO1FcjDMV4
May 2, 2021	“COVID-19 vaccine and vaccine hesitancy”		7,827,749 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPHgRp70H8o&t=84s