

# Alternative Media Framing of COVID-19 Risks

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## ABSTRACT

Early media coverage of COVID-19, between 1 January and 31 March 2020, provided Alternative Media Personalities (AMPs) a chance to supply conspiratorial misinformation to their online audiences. Far-right AMPs may reframe socio-political aspects of risk to supply 'fake-news', amplifying future risks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) to define factors of risk amplification, this study conducted a framing analysis upon 1,895 minutes of streamed video content from a well-liked, far-right, AMP regarding COVID-19. Significant differences in frame expression suggested that AMPs hold greater value in specific frames when providing infotainment based upon authentic interpretations of risk. A scarcity of serious change in frame expression over time suggests that AMPs may depend on media templates when communicating risk to their audience. Qualitative data suggest that different aspects of risk amplification add concert to supply discursive contexts for far-right AMPs to define risks from their ideological standpoint. The info provided by this study better outline a number of the complexities facing scientific communications strategies which seek to directly address misinformation online.

**Keywords:** Amplification; Conspiracy; COVID-19; Framing

## INTRODUCTION

Initial media coverage of COVID-19 faced challenges of relaying uncertain facts of a completely unique disease to an information-seeking audience. Such media landscapes presented the chance for content creators to amplify fake-news and scientific misinformation, possibly influencing the perception of risk within ideologically aligned cultural sub-groups. Conspiracy theories around health risks have grown in popularity within online far-right communities, facilitating social organization around radical discourses like anti-vaccination and climate-denial. Alternative Media Personalities (AMPs) may have readily engaged during a conspiratorial framing of COVID-19 risk information, possibly providing their audience with a discursive foundation that encourages radical, anti-neoliberal, behaviours. This study seeks to analyse the framing of COVID-19 risk information by a well-liked, right-wing, AMP to probe the robustness of conspiratorial theorisation around emerging health concerns.

Mister Metokur may be a popular AMP within far-right communities online. His content usually offers commentary on pertinent sociopolitical issues by ridiculing, what he perceives as, and therefore the social degeneracy of Marxism, Transgenderism, and Globalism. Between 23 January and 30 March 2020, Metokur produced 12 video livestreams (streams) where he provided commentary on emerging COVID-19 information. The streams totalled 1,895 minutes of recorded content, and therefore the stream archives have and amassed around 1,033,000 views on

YouTube. By comparison out of 10 credible scientific platforms on YouTube, only four produced any video content on COVID-19. By offering early, long-form, and comparatively uncontested coverage, Metokur was privileged to present a far-right reframing of COVID-19 which will amplify perceptions of risk within an information-seeking audience.

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) may be a conceptual model which assists sociological researchers explain how popular media framing of risk information can produce wider sociopolitical impacts that inspire novel approaches to risk governance. Under SARF, media framing of risk information is broadcast as interpretive signals, which are decoded by audiences to tell public perceptions of risk that inform social organization. The ripple effects of SARF suggests that social reorganisation can occur thanks to widespread public risk perceptions that endorse specific sorts of risk governance, while rejecting others as dangerous or insufficient. However, SARF has traditionally been applied to mainstream media forms (e.g. newspapers), which has left a niche within the literature for research which explores risk amplification within contemporary sorts of popular information transfer (e.g. independent video content online).

Risk information can become amplified by media sources through two distinct, but interconnected, mechanisms. The knowledge mechanism suggests that systems of data transfer can influence public perceptions of risk by elevating discourses around risk information, spotlighting uncertainties around risk,

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and highlighting the degree of dispute over risk governance. The response mechanism suggests that media texts often hold affective value in justifying risk perceptions by outlining the boundaries of trust in institutions, dread of catastrophe, and therefore the stigmatisation of technology/people.

Framing may assist risk amplification as cognitive processes around specific phenomena are often influenced by how the 'reality' of risk information is communicated within media texts. Framing may be a media tool that reduces the complexities around risk by spotlighting certain aspects and omitting others. Framing identifies how the presentation of data resonates with underlying deciding schemata of audience members, while priming audiences to the agenda setting intent of media creators through salient information.

AMPs provide a stimulating site for SARF-based research; therein user generated video content doesn't need to adhere to journalistic

principles of balance. Journalistic balance helps guide journalism towards a good representation of conflicting perspectives within social discourse over risk. However, journalistic balance has been criticised for encouraging false balance, where legitimacy is conferred to radical perspectives being platformed by mainstream media outlets. This has resulted in mainstream news engaging with scientific balance of stories sources from within a long time scientific consensus, leaving fringe voices to capitalise upon internet technologies to broadcast their views. AMPs may eschew balance and specialise in providing authentic interpretations of risk information which appeals to the presumed worldviews of their audience. as long as Western media audiences are relatively distrustful of stories media to report on events accurately and fairly, it's going to be that folks are increasingly turning towards alternative media personalities to supply 'their truth' on risk events.