



# Alternative media framing of COVID-19 risks

Current Sociology

1–19

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00113921211006115

[journals.sagepub.com/home/csi](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/csi)**Martin Rooke** 

University of Kent, UK

## Abstract

Early media coverage of COVID-19, between 1 January and 31 March 2020, provided Alternative Media Personalities (AMPs) an opportunity to provide conspiratorial misinformation to their online audiences. Far-right AMPs may reframe sociopolitical aspects of risk to produce ‘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 popular, 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 lack of significant change in frame expression over time suggests that AMPs may rely upon media templates when communicating risk to their audience. Qualitative data suggest that different aspects of risk amplification work in concert to provide discursive contexts for far-right AMPs to define risks from their ideological standpoint. The data provided by this study better outline some of the complexities facing scientific communications strategies which seek to directly address misinformation online.

## Keywords

Amplification, conspiracy, COVID-19, framing, risk

## Introduction

Initial media coverage of COVID-19 faced challenges of relaying uncertain facts of a novel disease to an information-seeking audience (Brown, 2020; Dietrich et al., 2020). Such media landscapes presented the opportunity for content creators to amplify fake-news and scientific misinformation, possibly influencing the perception of risk within

## Corresponding author:

Martin Rooke, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF, UK.

Email: [mr526@kent.ac.uk](mailto:mr526@kent.ac.uk)

**Table 1.** Metrics of COVID-19 video content produced by reputable and popular scientific press outlets between 1 January and 31 March 2020.

YouTube channel	No. of subscribers	No. of COVID-19 videos	Total video length (minutes)	Total views
<i>Nature Video</i>	442,000	3	11	343,832
<i>Scientific American</i>	219,000	2	9	25,555
<i>Science Magazine</i>	197,000	2	39	20,515
<i>New Scientist</i>	195,000	1	2	19,298
<i>Popular Science</i>	56,800	0	0	0
<i>Science News Magazine</i>	24,900	0	0	0
<i>The Lancet</i>	17,200	0	0	0
<i>Cell Press</i>	12,600	0	0	0
<i>Discover Magazine</i>	4,550	0	0	0
<i>The Scientist Magazine</i>	2,670	0	0	0

Sources were obtained from a listicle titled 'top 10 science magazines': [https://blog.feedspot.com/science\\_magazines/](https://blog.feedspot.com/science_magazines/)

ideologically aligned cultural sub-groups (Huynh, 2020; Sommariva et al., 2018). Conspiracy theories around health risks have grown in popularity within online far-right communities, facilitating social organisation around radical discourses such as anti-vaccination and climate-denial (see Aligaier, 2020; Ekman, 2014; Riberio et al., 2020; Song and Gruzdz, 2017; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Alternative Media Personalities (AMPs) may have readily engaged in 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 popular, right-wing, AMP to probe the robustness of conspiratorial theorisation around emerging health concerns.

Mister Metokur is a popular AMP within far-right communities online (Riberio et al., 2020). His content usually offers commentary on pertinent sociopolitical issues by ridiculing, what he perceives as, the social degeneracy of Marxism, Transgenderism, and Globalism. Between 23 January and 30 March 2020, Metokur produced 12 video live-streams (streams) where he provided commentary on emerging COVID-19 information. The streams totalled 1,895 minutes of recorded content, and 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 (Table 1). By offering early, long-form, and relatively uncontested coverage, Metokur was privileged to present a far-right reframing of COVID-19 that may amplify perceptions of risk within an information-seeking audience.

### *SARF and media framing*

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) is 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 (Kasperson et al., 1988). Under SARF, media framing of risk information is broadcast as interpretive signals, which are decoded by audiences to inform public perceptions of risk that inform social organisation (Rosa, 2003; Wardman, 2008). The *ripple effects* of SARF suggests that social reorganisation can occur due to widespread public risk perceptions that endorse specific forms of risk governance, while rejecting others as dangerous or insufficient (Kasperson et al., 2003). However, SARF has traditionally been applied to mainstream media forms (e.g. newspapers) (Binder et al., 2014), which has left a gap in the literature for research which explores risk amplification within contemporary forms of popular information transfer (e.g. independent video content online).

Risk information can become amplified by media sources through two distinct, but interconnected, mechanisms (see Adekola, 2020). The *information mechanism* suggests that systems of information transfer can influence public perceptions of risk by elevating discourses around risk information, spotlighting uncertainties around risk, 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 the stigmatisation of technology/people.

Framing may assist risk amplification as cognitive processes around specific phenomena can be influenced by how the ‘reality’ of risk information is communicated within media texts (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Framing is a media tool that reduces the complexities around risk by spotlighting certain aspects and omitting others (Kapuściński and Richards, 2016). Framing identifies how the presentation of information resonates with underlying decision making schemata of audience members, while priming audiences to the agenda setting intent of media creators through salient information (Nisbet, 2009; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Moy et al., 2016; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

AMPs provide an interesting site for SARF-based research, in that user generated video content does not have to adhere to journalistic principles of balance. Journalistic balance helps guide news media towards a fair representation of conflicting perspectives within social discourse over risk (Clarke, 2008). 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 news sources from within an established scientific consensus (Cooper, 2011), leaving fringe voices to capitalise upon internet technologies to broadcast their views. AMPs may eschew balance and focus on providing authentic interpretations of risk information which appeals to the presumed worldviews of their audience (Lewis, 2018). Given that Western media audiences are relatively distrustful of news media to report on events accurately and fairly (Gallup, 2018; Ipsos MORI, 2019), it may be that people are increasingly turning towards alternative media personalities to provide ‘their truth’ on risk events.

## Method

### Research questions

This study identified two key research questions which were used to investigate the robustness of conspiratorial theorisation around COVID-19. Firstly, this study sought to

investigate the temporal variation in frame expression. It was presumed that observable differences in the expression of risk amplifying frames across the streams would indicate a shift in the overall discursive context. Secondly, this study sought to investigate the discursive link between risk amplification and conspiratorial theorisation by AMPs. By further exploring the coded instances within the text, it was possible to identify key narrative elements which embed COVID-19 risk information within extremist (and fantastical) sociopolitical frameworks.

### Study design

A framing analysis of risk amplifying frames was performed upon all 12 of Mister Metokur's COVID-19 streams published between January and March 2020. Videos and transcripts were accessed through YouTube. Transcripts were downloaded from YouTube and imported into NVivo 12 for analysis. To ensure accuracy, each video was played during analysis, using the transcripts' automatically generated timestamps as a guide. Frames identified within the transcript were coded as nodes within NVivo 12. Framing analysis was performed using a modified version of Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) codebook of scientific news frames to better reflect risk amplification (see Adekola, 2020) (Table 2). While the original codes hold longitudinal validity for media framing of health information (Nisbet, 2009), these frames are not specific to risk and may omit some of the intricacies of risk amplification. Modifications included: (1) changes to reflect the wider theorisation on Blame, Trust, Dread and Stigma; (2) changes to reflect the binary expression of frames within texts such as Uncertainty/Certainty, Low Trust/High Trust, Blame/Forgiveness, and Dread/Hope. Once the texts were coded, the count of frames were input into Excel in order to produce descriptive statistics regarding differences in levels of frame expression, both between individual frames and between streams. Data were then input into SPSS to permit a series of Kruskal–Wallis tests which sought to statistically confirm differences in frame expression. Following this, the text of coded frames was subject to a content analysis, so that characteristic profiles of individual frames and narrative techniques used to amplify risk information could be made apparent.

## Results

### General profile of frame expression

A total of 968 frames were identified across the 1,895 minutes of analysed streaming video content (Table 3). Frames were grouped into three categories, based upon overall frame expression, to assist further analysis. Frames which represented more than 10% of total observations were grouped into the *Common frames* category, and included: Certainty (28.5%), Blame (17.0%), Low Trust (15.5%) and Uncertainty (11.6%). Frames which represented between 5% and 10% of observations were grouped into the *Uncommon frames* category and included: Dread (9.7%) and Stigma (5.2%). Frames which represented less than 5% of total frames were grouped into the *Rare frames* category, and included Forgiveness (3.8%), Cope (3.1%), High Trust (2.4%) and Bargaining (1.5%). A

**Table 2.** Frames used within this study.

Original frame	SARF frame	Defines risk-related issues as . . .
Scientific/technical uncertainty	Uncertainty	. . . what is unknown; either invokes or undermines expert consensus; calls on the authority of ‘sound science’, falsifiability, or peer-review
Scientific/technical uncertainty	Certainty	. . . what is known; either invokes or undermines expert consensus; calls on the generalisability of lived experiences, social facts, or ‘common sense’
Conflict/strategy	Blame	. . . a game among elites and social groups; who is winning the debate; battle of personalities
Morality/ethics	Dread	. . . in terms of right or wrong; involuntary; crossing limits, thresholds or boundaries
Public accountability/governance	Low Trust	. . . responses which serve private interests; a matter of ownership and control; abuse of science in decision making
Public accountability/governance	High Trust	. . . responses which serve public benefit; a matter of solidarity and/or philanthropy; responsible use of science in decision making
Frankenstein’s monster/runaway science	Stigma	. . . calls for precaution in the face of possible catastrophe; out of control; unnatural
Social progress	Hope	. . . providing a solution to problems, or improving the quality of life
Economic development/competitiveness	Cope	. . . economic investment; market benefits; local, national or global competitiveness
Middle way/alternative path	Bargaining	. . . finding a possible compromise position, or a third way between conflicting/polarised views/opinions

Note: The modified SARF frames were adapted from Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) original codebook. The definitions have been modified slightly to reflect the newly constructed frames.

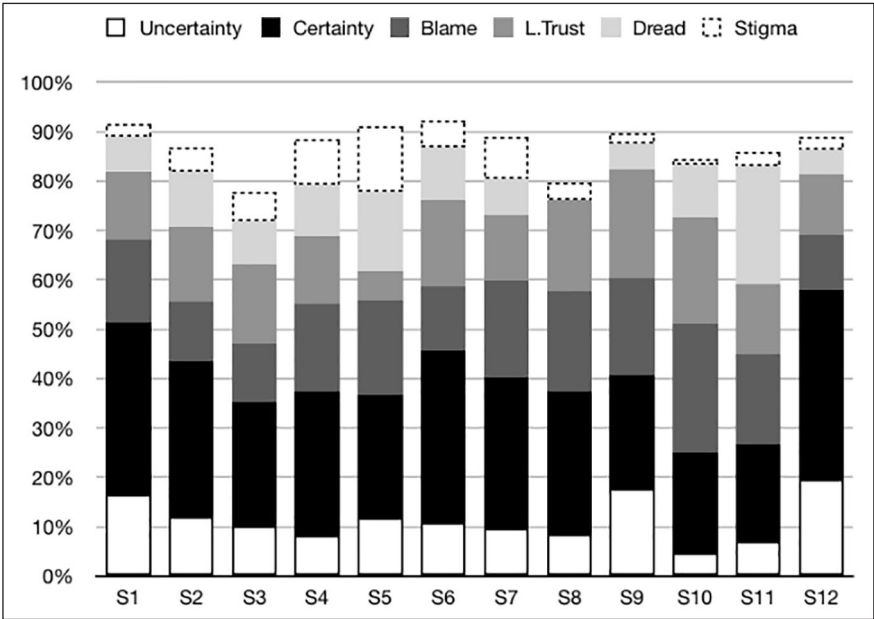
Kruskal–Wallis test confirmed significantly higher levels of expression for most *Common frames* compared to other frames. Certainty was expressed at significantly higher levels than Uncertainty ( $p = .001$ ), Dread ( $p = .000$ ) and Stigma ( $p = .000$ ) furthermore, both Blame and Low Trust were expressed in significantly higher levels than Stigma ( $p = .001$  and  $p = .007$  respectively). All frames across the *Common* and *Uncommon frame* categories were found to be expressed at significantly higher levels than *Rare frames* ( $p < .05$ ). Due to the significantly low expression of *Rare frames* and findings from the content analysis which suggested that these frames were employed as humorous non-sequiturs, all *Rare frames* were discounted from further analysis within this study.

*Temporal variation of frame expression*

There appeared to be little variation in frame expression between the 12 consecutive streams, published weekly between 23 January and 30 March 2020 (Figure 1). Within *Common frames*, the expression of Certainty and Uncertainty declined by 4.1% and

**Table 3.** Information, metrics and total number of observable frames for Mister Metokur’s COVID-19 streams on YouTube. Videos were accessed via two archive channels (Fullblast Forever and Rabbi Eldritchstein) as Metokur no longer uploads his own content to YouTube.

Stream no.	Date	Stream name	Time (min.)	Total views	Counted frames
S1	23/01/20	The Great Wu Flu	208	87,622	72
S2	25/01/20	Wu Flu: It’s Just A Cold Bro	184	93,812	99
S3	29/01/20	Wu Wu Goes The Achoo Train	104	66,334	68
S4	02/02/20	Peek a-Wu: I Sneeze on You	181	84,623	96
S5	06/02/20	Celebrating and Incubating Stream	149	92,288	68
S6	16/02/20	It’s Just a Wu Flu Bro	137	84,070	92
S7	22/02/20	Getting a Bit Batty	144	88,345	82
S8	25/02/20	This Empty Bun is a Nothing Burger	166	95,841	59
S9	29/02/20	The Red Coast	134	82,568	96
S10	10/03/20	Dipmageddon	154	90,164	84
S11	19/03/20	Metokur Vs Masterson	182	82,320	71
S12	30/03/20	Month Three and Counting	152	85,004	81
Total			1895	1,032,991	968



**Figure 1.** Proportional expression of Common and Uncommon frames observed with each of Metokur’s COVID-19 streams.

2.5% over time, while expression of Blame and Low Trust increased by 5% and 0.9%. Within *Uncommon frames* the expression of Dread and Stigma increased by 4.2% over time, while expression of Stigma increased by 4.6% across the January and February

streams before declining by 5% across the March streams. A Kruskal–Wallis test did not confirm any significant difference in frame expression between each month of streaming for frame categories or individual frames.

### *Frame construction: Common frames*

*The Certainty frame.* Metokur's framing of certainty seemingly amplified a narrative that the catastrophic death-tolls from COVID-19 were inevitable. Metokur often used the videogame *Plague Inc: Evolved* as an allegorical tool to support his interpretation of mainstream risk information which forecast the extinction-level threat posed by COVID-19. This strategy of using popular fiction as an interpretive tool seemingly enabled Metokur to contextualise risk forecasting for his audience, while also undermining risk attenuating interpretations of from mainstream information sources. This highlights the apparent value of doomsday representations in popular culture as cognitive benchmarks which may help guide interpretation of risk information by AMPs. Furthermore, by basing risk interpretations on mainstream information, AMPs may rhetorically construct a sense of empirical legitimacy to their forecasting.

Metokur also used videos from Chinese social media as social evidence in his risk forecasting. These videos often depicted Chinese social order breaking down over the impacts of COVID-19. Metokur contested that the (presumed) Chinese experience foreshadowed the spectacular impacts of COVID-19 in the West as people dropped dead in the streets. For AMPs, sensational video content may be sought for both the entertainment value and for permitting opportunity for risk interpretations which amplify the likelihood of anecdotal cases to represent an anticipated future. While some AMPs may question the legitimacy of social media videos as 'false flag' events, the ease by which additional content can be generated from such videos may outweigh concerns over authenticity.

*The Uncertainty frame.* Metokur's framing of Uncertainty seemingly amplifies a narrative that the scientific methods used to produce COVID-19 risk information are flawed and corrupt. Metokur contested that the accuracy of risk information produced by healthcare experts was likely manipulated by an array of interests and the original data were obscured from public view. Metokur placed specific emphasis on the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), asserting that the WHO should have challenged the CCP over the accuracy of their data as the CCP is presumed to have previously manipulated information to project strength upon the geopolitical stage. Metokur swiftly delegitimised other healthcare organisations who appeared to support WHO messaging on COVID-19 as being corrupted by CCP influence. Metokur also questioned the legitimacy of data from university researchers, suggesting that the lack of a consistently applied modelling method indicated that individual research teams were aiming to receive accolades for producing politically beneficial data.

Analysis of the Uncertainty frame seemingly indicates a locus for AMPs to express contentions around the sociopolitics of science and the manipulation of reality. AMPs may rely upon resonant cultural understandings of science as an objective methodology



which is designed to be systematically independent of social subjectivities. In situations where scientific actors are perceived as failing scientific ideals, this may provide AMPs the opportunity to establish where sociopolitical influence is built into scientific systems. This adopts a conspiratorial quality when potential sociopolitical influence is used within narratives to suggest the systematic manufacturing of a data-driven hyperreality that directly supports neoliberal policy goals. As AMPs are generally independent content creators, this may foster parasocial relationships with audiences where the perceived authenticity of risk interpretations becomes more valued than accurate predictions.

*The Blame frame.* Metokur's framing of Blame mostly focused on spotlighting cultural factors that assisted the COVID-19 outbreak in China and epidemic transmission in the West. Metokur contested that Chinese cultural approaches to health and safety were to blame if COVID-19 was accidentally released. Using video of the Wuhan wet-market, Metokur argued that a culture which permitted unsanitary, open-air, abattoirs would not be conditioned to take health and safety seriously. As such, biosecurity breaches by laboratory technicians or cleaners were seen as inevitable. Metokur also used contemporary stereotypes around China's economic competitiveness to suggest that Chinese biotechnology/pharmaceutical firms produced COVID-19 as an economic bioweapon. Metokur also blamed Western cultural elites for facilitating the spread of COVID-19 by suggesting that they held neoliberal ideals around racism/xenophobia which actively suppressed effective policy responses.

Analysis of the Blame suggests that AMPs may rely upon cultural stereotypes to blame general classes of social actor, rather than identify specific individuals. Where individuals are seen to be at fault, AMPs may presume that their motives were informed by abstract cultural values rather than personal deficiencies. This style of blaming may assist social mobilisation which supports risk management policies that punitively target a risky social class. Given that AMPs mostly operate outside of media regulation, or are mostly anonymous, they may be in a privileged position to blame identity groups in a manner that would otherwise be considered hate speech. However, there may be a novel appeal to hearing such brash and direct accusations which may assist in building audiences around a stance of political incorrectness.

*The Low Trust frame.* Metokur's framing of Low Trust further amplified the narrative that neoliberal institutions held secret agendas behind their management of COVID-19. Metokur's framing of Low Trust often sought to 'reveal' the connections between social institutions and hidden neoliberal agendas. Across his streams, Metokur frequently asserted that there was an improper financial arrangement between the WHO and the CCP, that Tedros Adhanom (WHO director general) is being blackmailed for covering up cholera outbreaks, and that social influencers were being funded to promote specific messaging. When associating these examples to a hidden neoliberal agenda, Metokur was inclined to state the likelihood of an agenda, rather than providing a concrete description of what the agenda could be. There were vague implications that the hidden agenda revolved around tricking the general public to rely upon ineffective risk governance policies that broadly invite personal surveillance technology, while increasing social reliance on corporate services.



The juxtaposition between clear assertions of institutional wrongdoing and vague suggestions of a hidden agenda perhaps best outline the origin point for conspiratorial theorisation. It may be that AMPs with decidedly low trust towards social institutions are more inclined to attribute a hidden motive to actions which are incongruous with their perception of good governance. When constructing Low Trust frames, AMPs may draw insights from historic injustices to speculate upon the likelihood that institutions are currently engaged in nefarious plots

### *Frame construction: Uncommon frames*

*The Dread frame.* Metokur's framing of Dread seemingly aimed to amplify the catastrophic impacts from government responses to COVID-19. Metokur asserted that national lockdowns would be the only effective form of risk management but would cause a cascade of second order effects that would disproportionately harm financially vulnerable individuals. It was suggested that the prolonged economic impacts of national lockdowns would result in suicides, exacerbate health issues, and trigger domestic violence as people struggle financially from loss of employment. Metokur stated that governments would resort to militarised enforcement of national lockdown measures to ensure public compliance. It was also suggested that governments would increasingly rely upon surveillance technologies built into consumer devices to monitor public actions, legitimising law enforcement interventions to limit potentially risky social organisation.

AMPs may be particularly likely to interpret public policy through a lens which presumes that government responses towards risk disproportionately harm the public. There may be ideological foundation to this perception which assumes that personal liberties, once surrendered to the government under the guise of ensuring safety, can never be regained. As such, there may be more enthusiasm for individualised risk management strategies which place the locus of control over risk management in the ability of individuals to protect their families/community. Metokur's anticipation of the COVID-19 death-tolls support this claim as he often exhibited enthusiasm towards potential survival scenarios. Using the *Fallout* videogame series as another contextual allegory Metokur described a possible future where neoliberal decadence subject to the effects of social Darwinism brought upon by traditionally masculine survival responses. As such, Metokur encouraged his audience to stockpile guns and ammunition, and engage with preparedness measures so that they could re-emerge into the COVID-19 post-apocalypse and (re)claim dominance within social hierarchies.

*The Stigma frame.* Metokur's framing of Stigma amplified the conspiratorial narrative that COVID-19 was developed as a bioweapon. Metokur's Stigma frame seemingly relies upon an ideological perspective where scientific technology is a tool for radical sociopolitical change to satisfy elite neoliberal agendas. While Metokur contends that COVID-19 was accidentally released, he does suggest that it was purposefully developed by the Chinese to engage in economic warfare with the US. Within Metokur's conspiracy theory, the economic destabilisation produced by COVID-19 lockdown measures would disembed Western societies from local support structures (local businesses/organisation) and re-embed them within cosmopolitan structures. While Metokur

was ambiguous when defining cosmopolitanism he appears to have viewed it as a dominant social order where self-identity is based upon political consumerism where personal needs (biological, social, spiritual) are fulfilled by revenue-seeking institutions. Thus, society is presumed to be organised around calculable losses that determine if an object is safe or risky. According to Metokur, the mainstream perceptions that COVID-19 was a unfortunate virological accident were manufactured by social forces with financial interests in pharmaceutical profits. As such, the value of COVID-19 as a bioweapon is in the ability to cause a short-term economic shock (through catastrophic loss of life) that improves future pharmaceutical profits by quashing political resistance to vaccine development, secures government contracts for research/vaccinations, and opens new markets within developing nations.

## Discussion

### *The rigidity of framing COVID-19 risk information*

The lack of temporal variation in frame expression is, perhaps, the most notable finding of this study. While the risk information used by Metokur within his streams varied considerably across mainstream news articles, publications from scientific institutions and social media posts, the relative consistency of frame expression was unexpected. The lack of significant variation in frame expression suggests that there was a formulaic structure to the streams, in which novel risk information was interpreted through a distinct ideological lens and produced for an intended audience. Such an approach to reporting on risk echoes Kitzinger's (2000) concept of media templates, where journalists rely upon previously established strategies to purposefully select aspects of risk which generate public interest by succinctly disseminating relatable information to news audiences. While there are major structural differences between mainstream news journalism and alternative media structures, evidence of AMPs developing their own media templates reinforces suggestions that the narratives which emerge from risk interpretations may hold value in amplifying public perceptions of risk (Burgess, 2019).

From the analysis of Metokur's risk amplifying frames, an overall narrative emerged where the risk of neoliberal social engineering in response to the pandemic was viewed as far more dangerous than the risk of death from COVID-19. Each of the constituent frames contributed to this overall narrative by amplifying different sociopolitical aspects of risk to varying degrees. Although there was little variability in frame expression between streams, the proportional makeup of frames perhaps indicate how the AMP content creation process can spotlight more performative discourses while the more ideological concepts remain shadowed.

### *Expression of Certainty and the value of authenticity*

The significantly high expression of Certainty within the streams was unexpected, mainly because the amplification potential of certainty appears to have been overlooked within SARF research. However, behavioural scholars have suggested that encountering certainty can influence risk perceptions by increasing resistance to persuasion and

reduces the need to acquire different interpretations of risk information (Glasman and Albarracin, 2006; Maheswaran and Chaiken, 1991; Tormala and Petty, 2002). For Metokur, the Certainty frame appears to be used to construct a sense of authenticity regarding his interpretations of risk information. Within the wider ecology of the internet, authenticity has emerged as a key social currency for social media influencers for audience building and facilitating strategic communication (Consalvo et al., 2020; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Metokur's appears to construct a sense of authenticity around his proclamations that the COVID-19 pandemic would result in catastrophic disruption to the established social order and facilitate new modes of living within a post-pandemic world. Authenticity, in this regard, is the ability for AMPs to establish their interpretations of information as being independent from direct institutional coercion.

Metokur's use of videogame analogies and Chinese social media video content developed a sense of authenticity by providing his online audience with relatable contexts and tangible examples for risk information which was largely absent from mainstream media coverage. Furthermore, embedded within the Certainty frame were performative aspects, such as edgy and politically incorrect humour, which may not be permitted on mainstream media platforms. In general, the Certainty frame may outline the 'draw' of risk-amplifying, conspiracy-laden, infotainment. AMPs may select this frame to present their content as the reality TV of scientific discourse; a raucously entertaining affair where technical nuance is discarded in favour of wild interpretations of risk information.

### *Uncertainty, Blame and organised irresponsibility*

The categorisation of Blame and Uncertainty as *common frames* was expected, as SARF research has previously identified such frames as crucial aspects of risk amplification (Burgess, 2012; Niu et al., 2020). Expression of Uncertainty may be elevated in situations where the anticipated harms from risk are expectedly unmanageable (Beck, 1992; Hope, 2003). Seemingly uncertain situations appear to influence public risk perceptions by encouraging broader contemplation of institutional honesty and incompetence (Johnson and Slovic, 1995). As such, elevated expression of Blame may be expected in situations where risk can be directly attributed to institutional failings (Burgess, 2012). In practice, Metokur weaved between both frames to construct discourses of organised irresponsibility over the inefficacy of neoliberal institutions to stop COVID-19 from becoming a global pandemic. Organised irresponsibility identifies a condition where institutional attempts to reduce risk in one sociopolitical domain are perceived (by the public) as producing risk in another sociopolitical domain (Mythen, 2018). As such, the public may confront a broad spectrum of complex social subjectivities which appear to temper and coerce the underlying rationale for institutional risk management strategies.

From analysis of the Uncertainty frame, Metokur develops discourses of organised irresponsibility by asserting that the messaging from the WHO had been coerced by the political interests of the CCP. Metokur further suggested that the information disseminated by the WHO would provide the evidential bases for pandemic management policies by national governments. From analysis of the Blame frame, Metokur further reinforced the concept of organised irresponsibility by relying upon stereotypes of Chinese cultural practices to illustrate how the CCP were uninterested in health protection of their public,

and that a lack of corporate governance encouraged Chinese firms to engage in risky scientific research projects. Furthermore, Metokur identified Western cosmopolitan populations as having a disproportionate influence upon Western policy design, contending that Western governments would not implement the necessary risk management strategies which could be perceived as negatively impacting Chinese, or East Asian, populations. It appears that organised irresponsibility holds some value in amplifying risk information by forming the foundation for conspiratorial theorisation. Where examples of organised irresponsibility are located, AMPs may feel that those institutions entrusted with healthcare protection are not operating for the direct public benefit but are more interested in retaining power and influence over decision making processes. AMPs may be inclined to view 'the general public' as a fragmented and tribal space, and that institutional messaging on risk is tailored to appease the political tastes of dominant sociocultural groups (Caulkins, 1999). Beck (1992) suggests that it is actors of the dominant sociopolitical groups who permit themselves to define risk objects and propose risk management solutions. As such, the white and male identity of many far-right AMPs appears to have helped develop a foundational worldview that neoliberalism has become the dominant social order, and that neoliberal institutions seek to oppress traditional (risky) Western identity groups to appeal towards cosmopolitan (neoliberal) sensibilities (Esposito, 2019; Phelan, 2019).

### *Imagineering catastrophe*

As aspects of risk amplification, Low Trust, Dread and Stigma have received quite robust theoretical development within SARF (Frewer, 2003; Kasperson et al., 2001; Renn et al., 1992). While expression of Dread and Stigma were comparatively low, the content analysis identified several narrative elements which aligned well with the more readily expressed Low Trust frame. It appears that Low Trust, Dread and Stigma frames may operate in concert to establish the complex ideological foundation that guides interpretations of risk information. Metokur's low expression of these ideological frames may have been a creative decision to avoid the perception that his streams were an ideologically inspired rant. From the content analysis, it appears that these frames might not neatly align with pre-conceived ideological structures (e.g. Libertarian, Fascist, neo-Nazi), but rather they assist with biased imagineering which helps to demarcate the boundaries of risk within Identitarian contexts (Douglas, 1999). Imagineering is a concept borrowed from computer science literature which outlines the human process of sensemaking from internet-mediated information (Bojanova et al., 2014). Imagineering contends that both digitally distributed narratives and virtually accessible knowledge contextualise 'real world' representations of an object within a range of possible future occurrences. Within imagineering, sensemaking occurs by explaining why future occurrences are possible, rather than highlighting which future occurrences are likely. Within risk amplification by far-right AMPs, the imagineering of catastrophe may begin with the presumption that whiteness is at risk of genocide (Baele et al., 2020). It then becomes incumbent upon the AMP to introduce overlapping discursive contexts which affirms a future of white genocide/without whiteness.

Using the Low Trust frame, Metokur introduces one discursive context of catastrophic imagineering by asserting that the intent of scientific labour is to amass political power

to inform policy decisions that encourage the growth of a cosmopolitan (anti-white) social identity. Within SARF, trust is envisioned as a form of social capital which helps mediate risk perceptions (Kasperson et al., 1999; Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003). While perceived expertise is a key factor for engendering public trust, other factors such as perceived objectivity, fairness, commitment and caring have also been suggested as trust modifiers (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Renn and Levine, 1991). The central focus of Metokur's Low Trust frames was upon the seemingly friendly and political relationship between the WHO and the CCP. Metokur did not appear to undermine the WHO in terms of its scientific expertise, but rather used the lack of institutional condemnation towards the CCP as evidence of corruption. Metokur presented an imagineered problem with this apparent relationship, suggesting that other national governments would base their COVID-19 risk response strategies on the faulty recommendations of the WHO derived from fictitious data supplied by the CCP.

Having used the Low Trust frame to seemingly establish the ideological bedrock of his risk interpretations, Metokur's use of the Dread frame better outlines a perceptive link between the COVID-19 pandemic and white genocide. Whilst there was some concern that the COVID-19 virus was a genocidal tool to eliminate older white populations, more emphasis was placed upon an imagineered future where the COVID-19 pandemic legitimised technocratic authoritarianism by neoliberal institutions to politically oppress non-cosmopolitan whiteness. Dread has been identified as a key affective factor in risk amplification, highlighting how the potential catastrophe of consequences better influences public risk perception than the likelihood of severe outcomes (Burke et al., 2011; Slovic, 1987).

Metokur suggested that changes to the US security apparatus following 9/11 served as an example for the scale of changes to social policy to come from the COVID-19 pandemic. Metokur further contested that new surveillance technologies would become integral to neoliberal post-pandemic precautions, and that the need to limit scientific misinformation would redefine non-cosmopolitan white discourses as a risk to the neoliberal social order. By introducing the discursive context that the 'real' harm from COVID-19 is the potential post-pandemic social engineering (and not the immediate deaths), Metokur seemingly broadens the time horizons beyond the traditional media focus of dread factors from immediate risk objects (Sjeemin, 2000). While the dread from temporally distal risk factors often forms the basis for speculative fiction, AMPs who provide such a broad view of dread may provide their audiences with a form of hyperreal infotainment that is largely unavailable from mainstream news reporting on risk (Lazaroiu, 2008).

Given Metokur's previous content focused almost exclusively on 'degenerate' social groups/actors, the expression of Stigma frames was significantly low. However, there may have been a creative decision for Metokur to attenuate stigmatisation to comply with YouTube's terms of service around bullying and hate speech. Metokur's frame construction corresponds well with previous theorisation under SARF, in that he signified specific scientific technologies and social identity groups as threat to social order (Gregory et al., 1996). Through suggesting that COVID-19 was designed as a specifically Chinese bioweapon, Metokur seemingly introduces a discursive context which juxtaposes disruption to social order alongside Chinese industrialism and capitalist pretences

of technological innovation. By identifying the apparent selfishness of cosmopolitans, Metokur stigmatises these identity groups as being the direct beneficiaries of the post-pandemic social order, asserting that multinational corporations would provide innovative technologies that largely satisfy cosmopolitan consumerist needs. Therefore, agents of neoliberalism are stigmatised as a threat to whiteness increasing society's reliance upon corporate hierarchies, and further diminishing the biopolitical power of local communities. Whilst Metokur does not offer particular narratives of resistance against such perceivably catastrophic futures, this may again be a strategy to circumvent YouTube terms of service around bullying and harassment. However, such framing may be used by viewers to legitimise behaviours which result in online harassment of individuals who are seen as cosmopolitans or neoliberal agents.

## **Conclusion**

Using the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, this study analysed the framing of COVID-19 risk information within over 1800 minutes of alternative media video content. This framing analysis provided empirical evidence to suggest that mechanisms of risk amplification are central to the development of far-right conspiracy theories around health risks. Significant differences in expression of risk amplifying frames emerged which suggested that AMPs may actively select risk amplifying frames which are expected to resonate better with their audience and facilitate the transmission of their interpretations of mainstream risk information. Data also suggested that the framing of Certainty may be integral to risk amplification within alternative media structures by helping AMPs to establish the authenticity of their interpretations of risk. There was also evidence to suggest that the framing of risk information by AMPs is temporally stable, and variance in frame expression is limited. This suggests that, although AMPs operate outside of established media structures, they may produce their own media templates when producing risk-based content. A reliance upon media demonstrates that AMPs may approach risk reporting with the intent of amplifying risk information and ensuring resonance of interpretations with their online audience.

The content analysis of frame construction provided data which suggest that AMPs may use risk amplifying frames in concert with one another to provide discursive contexts that establish, and reinforce, conspiratorial narratives around risk and institutional (neoliberal) power. Through imagineering processes, AMPs may rely upon ideological lenses to build conspiratorial narratives where perceived irresponsibility from institutional actors provides evidence of forthcoming technocratic authoritarianism and white genocide. Future SARF research should seek to better explore the interplay between risk amplifying conspiracy theories and the influence on risk perceptions within distinct political sub-cultures.

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges facing media strategies which seek to combat the spread of misinformation online. This study spotlights how scientific misinformation may be linked to wider conspiratorial concerns over sociopolitical issues, rather than a simple misunderstanding over facts. This raises questions over the impact of 'fact-checking' strategies conducted by media organisations and the potential to further drive conspiratorial amplification. Finding that perceived authenticity may



facilitate conspiratorial amplification provides another challenge, as mainstream media structures seemingly lack the personability of alternative media creators.

Finding that conspiracy theories are developed around a complex web of sociopolitical concerns regarding science poses another challenge to media strategies which seek to frame public discourse around a scientific consensus. There is, perhaps, a risk that if these challenges are not surmounted then those left feeling disenfranchised by mainstream media will resort to alternative media structures for information. They may be drawn in by, what appears as, rational and everyday interpretations of risk information, only to be left radicalised by ideological subtexts. COVID-19 might be a key moment that signifies a new mood for dialogue between news managers and sociologists who are able to contextualise resonant public concerns over power, control and the governance of health risks without necessitating conspiracy theories. In doing so, sociologists could be perceived as an appropriate proxy for legitimising public discontent and to help guide social discourse in a critical, but healthy, direction.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Martin Rooke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4581-6252>

### References

- Adekola J (2020) A critique of the social amplification of risk framework from the power perspective. In: *Power and Risk in Policymaking*. Cham: Palgrave, pp. 27–41.
- Allgaier J (2020) Rezo and German climate change policy: The influence of networked expertise on YouTube and beyond. *Media and Communication* 8(2): 376–386.
- Baele SJ, Brace L and Coan TG (2020) Uncovering the far-right online ecosystem: An analytical framework and research agenda. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Epub ahead of print 30 December 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1862895>
- Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Binder AR, Cacciatori MA, Scheufele DA and Brossard D (2014) The role of news media in the social amplification of risk. In: Cho H, Reimer T and McComas KA (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Risk Communication*. London: Sage.
- Bojanova I, Hurlburt G and Voas J (2014) Imagineering an internet of anything. *Computer* 47(6): 72–77.
- Brown P (2020) Studying COVID-19 in light of critical approaches to risk and uncertainty: Research pathways, conceptual tools, and some magic from Mary Douglas, *Health, Risk & Society* 22(1): 1–14.
- Burgess A (2012) Media, risk, and absence of blame for ‘acts of God’: Attenuation of the European volcanic ash cloud of 2010. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal* 32(10): 1693–1702.
- Burgess A (2019) Environmental risk narratives in historical perspective: From early warnings to ‘risk society’ blame. *Journal of Risk Research* 22(9): 1128–1142.
- Burke MJ, Salvador RO, Smith-Crowe K et al. (2011) The dread factor: how Hazards and safety training influence learning and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 96(1): 46–70.
- Caulkins DD (1999) Is Mary Douglas’s grid/group analysis useful for cross-cultural research? *Cross-Cultural Research* 33(1): 108–128.



- Clarke CE (2008) A question of balance: The autism-vaccine controversy in the British and American elite press. *Science Communication* 30(1): 77–107.
- Consalvo M, Lajeunesse M and Zanesco A (2020) The authenticity engine: Livestreaming on Twitch. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020*.
- Cooper CB (2011) Media literacy as a key strategy toward improving public acceptance of climate change science. *BioScience* 61(3): 231–237.
- Dietrich A, Keuster K, Müller GJ and Schoenle R (2020) *News and uncertainty about Covid-19: Survey evidence and short-run economic impact*. FRB of Cleveland Working Paper, No. 20-12.
- Douglas M (1999) Four cultures: The evolution of a parsimonious model. *GeoJournal* 47(3): 411–415.
- Ekman M (2014) The dark side of online activism: Swedish right-wing extremist video activism on YouTube. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 30(56): 1–21.
- Esposito L (2019) The Alt-Right as a revolt against neoliberalism and political correctness: The role of collective action frames. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 18(1–2): 93–110.
- Frewer LJ (2003) Trust, transparency, and social context: Implications for Social Amplification of Risk. In: Pidgeon N, Kasperson RE and Slovic P (eds) *The Social Amplification of Risk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 123–137.
- Gallup (2018) Indicators of News Media Trust.
- Gamson WA and Modigliani A (1989) Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology* 95(1): 1–37.
- Glasman LR and Albarracín D (2006) Forming attitudes that predict future behavior: A meta-analysis of the attitude-behavior relation. *Psychological Bulletin* 132(5): 778–822.
- Gregory R, Slovic P and Flynn J (1996) Risk perceptions, stigma, and health policy. *Health & Place* 2(4): 213–220.
- Hope OK (2003) Firm-level disclosures and the relative roles of culture and legal origin. *Journal of International Financial Management & Accounting* 14(3): 218–248.
- Huynh TL (2020) The COVID-19 risk perception: A survey on socioeconomics and media attention. *Economics Bulletin* 40(1): 758–764.
- Ipsos MORI (2019) Ipsos MORI Veracity Index 2018.
- Johnson BB and Slovic P (1995) Presenting uncertainty in health risk assessment: Initial studies of its effects on risk perception and trust. *Risk Analysis* 15(4): 485–494.
- Kapuściński G and Richards B (2016) News framing effects on destination risk perception. *Tourism Management* 57: 234–244.
- Kasperson JX, Kasperson RE, Pidgeon N and Slovic P (2003) The social amplification of risk: Assessing fifteen years of research and theory. In: Pidgeon N, Kasperson RE and Slovic P (eds) *The Social Amplification of Risk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kasperson RE, Renn O, Slovic P et al. (1988) The social amplification of risk: A conceptual framework. *Risk Analysis* 8(2): 177–187.
- Kasperson RE, Golding D and Kasperson JX (1999) Risk, trust and democratic theory. In: Cvetkovich G and Lofstedt RE (eds) *Social Trust and the Management of Risk*. London: Earthscan.
- Kasperson R, Jhaveri N and Kasperson J (2001) Stigma and the social amplification of risk: Toward a framework of analysis. In: Flynn J, Slovic P and Kunreuther H (eds) *Risk, Media and Stigma*. London: Earthscan, pp. 9–30.
- Kitzinger J (2000) Media templates: Patterns of association and the (re) construction of meaning over time. *Media, Culture & Society* 22(1): 61–84.

- Lazaroiu G (2008) Cybernews and hyperreality. *Economics, Management and Financial Markets* 3(2): 69–74.
- Lewis M (2018) From deception to authenticity: The rise of narcissism and the death of etiquette. *Research in Human Development* 15(3–4): 211–223.
- Maheswaran D and Chaiken S (1991) Promoting systematic processing in low-motivation settings: Effect of incongruent information on processing and judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61(1): 13–25.
- McCombs ME and Shaw DL (1972) The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(2): 176–187.
- Moy P, Tewksbury D and Rinke EM (2016) Agenda-setting, priming, and framing. In: Jensen KB, Craig RT, Pooley JD and Rothenbuhler EW (eds) *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*. Chichester: John Wiley, pp. 1–13.
- Mythen G (2018) Thinking with Ulrich Beck: Security, terrorism and transformation. *Journal of Risk Research* 21(1): 17–28.
- Nisbet MC (2009) Framing science: A new paradigm in public engagement. In: Kahlor L (ed.) *Communicating Science: New Agendas in Science Communication*. London: Routledge, pp. 40–63.
- Niu C, Jiang Z, Liu H et al. (2020) The influence of media consumption on public risk perception: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Risk Research*. Epub ahead of print 13 September 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1819385>
- Phelan S (2019) Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the disparaging of ‘social justice warriors’. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 12(4): 455–475.
- Poortinga W and Pidgeon NF (2003) Exploring the dimensionality of trust in risk regulation. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal* 23(5): 961–972.
- Renn O and Levine D (1991) Credibility and trust in risk communication. In: Kasperson RE and Stallen PJM (eds) *Communicating Risks to the Public*. The Hague: Kluwer.
- Renn O, Burns WJ, Kasperson JX et al. (1992) The social amplification of risk: Theoretical foundations and empirical applications. *Journal of Social Issues* 48(4): 137–160.
- Ribeiro MH, Ottoni R, West R et al. (2020) Auditing radicalization pathways on YouTube. In: *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, January, pp. 131–141.
- Rosa EA (2003) The logical structure of the social amplification of risk framework (SARF): Metatheoretical foundations and policy implications. In: Pidgeon N, Kasperson RE and Slovic P (eds) *The Social Amplification of Risk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheufele DA and Tewksbury D (2007) Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication* 57(1): 9–20.
- Sjöberg L (2000) Consequences matter, ‘risk’ is marginal. *Journal of Risk Research* 3(3): 287–295.
- Slovic P (1987) Perception of risk. *Science* 236(4799): 280–285.
- Sommariva S, Vamos C, Mantzaris A et al. (2018) Spreading the (fake) news: Exploring health messages on social media and the implications for health professionals using a case study. *American Journal of Health Education* 49(4): 246–255.
- Song MYJ and Gruz A (2017) Examining sentiments and popularity of pro- and anti-vaccination videos on YouTube. In: *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society*, Toronto, ON, Canada, July, pp. 1–8.
- Tormala ZL and Petty RE (2002) What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger: The effects of resisting persuasion on attitude certainty. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83(6): 1298–1313.

- Van Prooijen JW, Krouwel AP and Pollet TV (2015) Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6(5): 570–578.
- Wardman JK (2008) The constitution of risk communication in advanced liberal societies. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal* 28(6): 1619–1637.
- Woodcock J and Johnson MR (2019) Live streamers on Twitch.tv as social media influencers: Chances and challenges for strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13(4): 321–335.

## Author biography

Martin Rooke is a public health sociologist from Essex, UK. He received a BSc in Biomedical Science and MSc in Research Methods from Middlesex University (2012 and 2014). He received a PhD in Sociology of Risk from the University of Kent (2020). His research interests focus on hyperreality of risk communication and social organisation around risk. Presently, he is a research associate at Kingston University on an NIHR funded project.

## Résumé

Entre le 1er janvier et le 31 mars 2020, la couverture médiatique initiale de la pandémie de Covid-19 a fourni aux personnalités des médias alternatifs (PMA) une excellente occasion de produire un contenu en ligne reformulant les informations sur le risque et alimenté les théories du complot. Les communautés virtuelles de droite et marginales sont réceptives aux « fake news » qui combinent désinformation scientifique et récits de complot pour influencer la perception du risque par le public. Le Cadre d'Amplification Sociale du Risque (CASR) a identifié plusieurs aspects sociopolitiques du risque qui ont servi à amplifier ou à atténuer ces perceptions. Cette étude a mené une analyse de cadrage de douze vidéos YouTube dédiées à la Covid-19 et publiées par Mister Metokur, une PMA populaire de droite. L'analyse a utilisé un recueil modifié de codes de *Common Frame Science News* pour explorer les aspects sociopolitiques du risque. Les résultats ont indiqué une approche robuste et sélective du cadrage qui visait à amplifier l'authenticité des interprétations alternatives des informations sur les risques concernant la Covid-19 et à fournir des conseils idéologiques à un imaginaire de catastrophe. Les résultats de cette étude révèlent de sérieux défis pour les stratégies de communication scientifique et soulignent comment les tactiques actuelles peuvent amplifier davantage les théories du complot autour des informations sur les risques, en contournant toutes les préoccupations sous-jacentes concernant le néolibéralisme, le contrôle public et la gouvernance.

## Mots-clefs

Covid-19, risque, amplification, traitement, complot.

## Resumen

Entre el 1 de enero y el 31 de marzo de 2020, la cobertura inicial en los medios de la Covid-19 brindó a las principales figuras de los medios alternativos (AMPs) la oportunidad de difundir desinformación conspirativa a sus audiencias digitales. Las AMPs de extrema derecha pueden reformular los aspectos sociopolíticos del riesgo para producir “noticias falsas”, amplificando los riesgos futuros que surjan de la pandemia

de Covid-19. Mediante la definición de los factores de Amplificación Social del Riesgo (SARF), este estudio incluye un análisis de encuadre sobre 1.898 minutos de contenido de video transmitido por una popular AMP de extrema derecha sobre la pandemia. Las diferencias significativas en la expresión del marco sugirieron que las AMPs tienen un mayor valor en marcos específicos cuando brindan entretenimiento informativo basado en interpretaciones auténticas del riesgo. La falta de cambios significativos en la expresión del marco a lo largo del tiempo sugiere que las AMPs pueden recurrir a las plantillas de medios cuando comunican el riesgo a su audiencia. Los datos cualitativos sugieren que los diferentes aspectos de la amplificación del riesgo funcionan en conjunto para componer contextos discursivos y que las AMPs de extrema derecha redefinan los riesgos desde su propio enfoque ideológico. Los datos recogidos en este estudio señalan algunos problemas que las estrategias de comunicación científica han de sortear para confrontar la desinformación en línea.

**Palabras clave**

Covid-19, riesgo, amplificación, tratamiento, conspiración.